

PARADE

THE KEEPER

OF THE FLAME

Meet the man
who keeps
the torch bright

By Christopher Phillips



Two men from very different worlds are brought together by the risks and hazards of war

A FRIENDSHIP FORGED IN DANGER



Zalin B. "Zip" Grant and the author, Wallace Terry, today, at the Vietnam Memorial, Washington, D.C.

OVER THE YEARS, black friends and relatives who visited my home for holidays, birthdays, graduations and funerals would wonder who that white fellow was—sitting right in the middle of this family of black people and being treated like blood-kin. We call him Zip, and many an eyebrow would be raised when the Southern accent escaped his lips. Everyone would wonder, "What was this white Southerner doing in the Terry home?"

The answer lies in what happened in Vietnam on one day in May 1968. On that day—a few weeks after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. plunged black America into rioting and despair—one black American and one white American learned the meaning of

brotherhood and self-sacrifice in the streets of Saigon.

I first went to Vietnam on assignment for *Time* magazine in 1967; it led to a cover story dealing with the performance of the black soldier in our first fully integrated war. When I didn't wilt under fire, *Time* asked me to return. It was the war of my generation—the biggest story in the world then—so I said I would go.

Zalin B. "Zip" Grant first went to Vietnam in the mid-'60s with a military-intelligence unit, then stayed on as a correspondent for *Time*, one of the few newsmen who could speak Vietnamese.

In 1967 he came back home and, in one of his first stateside assignments, stood up to black rioters in Newark. That's when I met him—at the *Time* Washington bureau. "Gutsy little white dude," I thought. He wore handmade

Italian suits and drove a Porsche. "Cocksure of himself too," I thought.

Zip had picked up his nickname playing football. We played some touch together. He wasn't bad. But he couldn't play basketball worth a lick. And when he opened his mouth, out fell the grits. A Southerner! From South Carolina!

I had grown up in Indiana, afraid of the South. In Texas during World War II, my uncle—in the uniform of a second lieutenant—was dragged from his car and beaten by white men because my grandmother used the toilet at a service station. After I saw the former slave markets on a trip to Charleston, I had nightmares.

It was Zip's character, though, that made me forget his accent. He told me that when Harvey Gantt, the first black to enter Clemson, arrived on campus in 1963, he had gone to sit with Gantt in the dining hall when no one else would. "As far as many people were concerned," Zip told me, "I was the 'chief nigger-lover.' I was only doing what was right." That was Zip—tough, brave and fair.

Our friendship—between a white Southerner and a black man from the North—was daring for that time.

For many reasons, 1968 was not a good time for me. Eight years into my profession, I had seen too much death, covering the civil rights movement and the urban riots. Close friends like NAACP leader Medgar Evers and a white minister, Jim Reeb, had been murdered in the South. Dr. King, my son's godfather, would be next. Now I would be back in Vietnam. When, I wondered, would God lower the curtain on my play?

Saigon, 1968. I am living at the Embassy Hotel. I am hungry for a guide to Vietnamese culture, and I find one—John Cantwell, a *Time* correspondent from Australia. He loves Asia, its people, its languages. He can speak three dialects of Chinese. We are like roommates because we are the only *Time* reporters staying at the hotel.

One night, John and I take a bagful of

"John could be bleeding to death," Zip says to me. So we jump into a Mini-Moke and set out to find him. When we hear bullets whistling, we stop and get out, walking in a crouch...



John Cantwell, a fellow correspondent, was a sudden victim of a Viet Cong strike force.

B Y W A L L A C E T E R R Y



Zip Grant and Terry loaded the four correspondents into their vehicle. Terry held on to Cantwell as Grant drove them quickly away.

hamburgers up to the roof of the hotel to watch the rocket attacks and flare drops around the city. We decide this is one war we don't want to lose our lives in. "What would happen to my wife and kids?" John says to me. "It would be bloody stupid." For both of us, Vietnam is making less sense each day.

Once a champion weight lifter, John still stuffs himself with vitamins, drinks only fruit juice and carries around a portable chest expander. He relishes guns but not as much as the birds he keeps in our office at the *Time* villa. He loves to stand at the top of the stairs whistling at them, trying to coax them to sing.

May 4. The Communists have stopped shelling for a few days. In that brief respite, I decide it is safe enough for my wife, Janice, to make her first visit to Saigon from Singapore—where we've rented an apartment for her and our three children. Her plane arrives in the afternoon. John and I take her to dinner. John spins us tales of his journeys to Phnom Penh and Vientiane.

May 5, 4 a.m. Saigon is shaken by rounds of mortars and rockets. It sounds like the Tet offensive all over again. John and I agree there's nothing we can do while it's still dark. We decide to meet at 8 at the *Time* villa.

8 a.m. We don't have much time before the deadline on this story. One of us has to get to a military briefing at the

public-affairs office, and one of us has to see what damage has been done to the city. I tell John to go to the briefing. I will look around the streets.

"No, man," John says. "Janice is here. She'll be frightened. You should stay with her. I'll go out." He insists. "Okay," I say, "but whatever you do, stay away from Tan Son Nhut and Cholon" (the Chinese sector of the city). "Sure, sure, man," he says.

8:20 a.m. On his way out, John runs into another journalist, Frank Palmos. Palmos asks if he can come along. Then three more reporters—Bruce Piggot and Ronald Laramy of Reuters and Michael Birch of the Australian Associated Press—want to come too.

All five pile into the Mini-Moke (a small jeep) and set out, following the Saigon River. John drives straight into the Cholon sector.

9:30 a.m. Frank Palmos, visibly shaken, his clothes torn, staggers into the villa. "They're all dead!" he cries out.

I'm stunned. I call Janice. I need help. I can't find anyone to help me go get John. Worried, Janice puts in a call to Zip, who has just returned to Vietnam as a correspondent for *The New Republic*.

"Wally needs you," she tells Zip. "Something has happened to Cantwell."

"Where is he?" is all Zip says. **Palmos' story.** When Zip arrives at the villa, I pour some scotch into a

...We approach a group of Vietnamese. They offer us some tea. Yes, they say, the Viet Cong are in the area.

paper cup, put it in Palmos' hand and ask him to tell his story.

They had driven five miles from the center of downtown Saigon into Cholon, he says, after catching sight of two helicopter gunships rocketing against an enemy force. They left the main road, Tran Quoc Toan, for a side street, Minh Phung. John then turned off onto a dirt road, No. 46. There, they ran into scores of Vietnamese fleeing. "We drove against them," Palmos says.

An old lady shouted, "VC! VC! Go back." John drove 50 more yards. Two figures holding rifles moved to the center of the road. Another figure appeared from behind an oil drum with an AK-47

assault rifle. John stopped the Mini-Moke, turned off the engine and raised his hands in surrender. He kept saying, "Bao chi. Bao chi." Press. Press.

It was a Viet Cong suicidal strike force. They opened fire point-blank. Palmos says he jumped free and ran for cover. When he thought their clips had been spent, he leaped from his hiding place and ran for his life.

Zip and I exchange glances. We are thinking the same thing: How much did he really see?

Zip is not convinced they are dead. I don't want to believe it either. All I can think is, "I have to find John. I let him go there. If he is alive, or dead or captured, I have to know. I owe him that."

11:30 a.m. Zip and I climb into another Mini-Moke. We look for an Army unit that's supposed to be going into the Cholon area. We find it, but it's stalled. A tank had thrown a tread. It would be hours before it was moving again.

"We'll have to go it alone," Zip says.



Wallace Terry, who covered the war for *Time* magazine, in Bien Hoa, South Vietnam, 1969.

"John could be bleeding to death."

I think to myself, "I'm with the right man: Zip speaks Vietnamese. He can handle this."

We stop a few blocks from the intersection of Tran Quoc Toan and Minh Phung. We can hear bullets whistling close by. We get out, walking in a crouch. We approach some Vietnamese sitting on the sidewalk. They are very polite. They offer us a seat and some tea. Zip speaks to them in Vietnamese. Yes, they say, the Viet Cong are in the area.

Despite the gunfire, we are anxious to get through. Zip spots a police precinct station. He thinks they can help us. We are ushered into the commander's office. He is wearing a flak jacket and sitting down to breakfast. Zip loses his cool. How can this man be so nonchalant while his neighborhood is being overrun by Viet Cong? Zip curses the commander in Vietnamese and English.

continued

Amazingly, the commander does not get upset. He knows Zip is telling the truth. "I've got an armored car," he says. "I'll get my Jeep, and we'll go out and see what's happening." He seems almost friendly.

We follow his Jeep and the armored car like a convoy. But when we come to the intersection of Tran Quoc Toan and Minh Phung, the police dare not go farther. We are on our own again.

1 p.m. We hire a cab, a little yellow and blue Renault, and offer the driver \$10, a king's ransom, for each block he will drive us on Minh Phung. He drives two blocks into the sound of automatic-weapon fire, then waves us out of the cab.

We start walking down the street side by side, like gunslingers on the way to the O.K. Corral. Suddenly it becomes so damn quiet.

Along the sides of buildings and in doorways, South Vietnamese paratroopers smile knowingly at us. They aren't budging. We start walking past them. The street is absolutely deserted now.

We are walking to the edge.

Zip whispers, "This is impossible."

There is no way of getting to John and the others until the U.S. Army units move closer. The Viet Cong are everywhere. It would be suicidal.

We drive back to the *Time* villa. Central Saigon is surreal. There is fighting going on a few miles away, yet here it is absolutely calm—almost lovely.

3 p.m. Zip talks to some refugees who tell us that they have seen some bodies and are pretty sure the white men are dead. We are still hopeful that they are only unconscious. We climb back in the Mini-Moke.

The Americans are now pushing into the area. We are finally able to drive down Minh Phung. At road No. 46, we spot a demolition team. They tell us it is still too dangerous to go farther. When we say we are going to try anyway, they give us each a carbine. We walk down the dirt road.

There, we find them.

I am too overwhelmed to cry.

Laramy is sitting up in the Mini-Moke, his arms still upraised. The others are on the ground. Their bodies are full of holes. Caked in blood. Covered with flies. Bloated from the heat. John has been shot 12 times.

I want to touch John, but Zip waves me off. "Don't touch anything," he warns. "There might be booby traps."

We walk back to Minh Phung. The demolition team has called an ambulance, but the driver refuses to come closer. The area is still hostile. We are going to have to bring the bodies out ourselves.

Finally, the demolition team offers to drive us back in. But when we get there, they keep a safe distance. Only Smitty, a black sergeant, is willing to come up and check for booby traps. He pulls the bodies apart.

Zip and I start loading bodies into the back of the Mini-Moke. I raise John's shoulders gently. I don't want to hurt him any more than he has been hurt already. "This is no time for a show of reverence," Zip says. "We've got to toss them in there and get out of here as fast as we can."

Suddenly, nearly 30 young men about 16 to 25 years old, wearing black pajamas, run right by us, in formation. The look at us with pure hatred. They are clearly Viet Cong. Probably they are John's killers.

Why don't they kill us? Perhaps it is their rush to get out of the area.

Zip gets into the driver's seat. I slide in beside him, holding the bodies. We drive back to Minh Phung and load them into the ambulance.

5 p.m. Zip goes back to his hotel. There is blood all over his pants, but he doesn't care. He sits down at the bar to think over what happened.

I go to our hotel to meet Janice. All that I found on John's body was a whistle the Viet Cong had no use for; the one John played for his birds. It is all there is left of him. I slip it into Janice's hand. We cry together.

The next day, when I walk into the "5 o'clock follies," as we call the daily press briefing, the press corps bursts into applause. I look to see who is coming in behind me, but there is no one there. The applause is for me. And for Zip. And, I will always feel, for our four comrades who died doing their job.

Before that day, only 12 journalists had died in the Vietnam war. By the end of the war, 59 would lose their lives or be declared missing.

Today Zip lives in Paris with his wife, Claude. Having just finished his third book on the war, *Facing the Phoenix*, he is taking a place among the war's historians. I, too, still write about the war—from my home, in the South, a few blocks from the resting place of another American soldier, George Washington.

I know Zip took those risks that day as much for me as he did for John. And Janice believes that were it not for Zip, she would be a widow. That's why we love him. But I've never told our three children to love Zip because he kept me from getting killed. I've never told them to love this man despite all the absurd distinctions society would make between us—black and white, North and South. They love him because he has always been there for them. And whenever Zip is with us, John is with us too.

Zip and I found what many soldiers, black and white, discovered in Vietnam. A bonding took place, as much for us as it did for the soldiers who risked their lives to pull comrades out of the line of fire or out of burning helicopters.

As we commemorate this nation's birthday, July 4, we will recall the ideals of freedom and equality under which it was born—ideals we are, as a nation, still striving to make a reality. And when I think back to that sticky Sunday in Saigon, I no longer shudder. Back home we were tearing ourselves apart over the racial divide (and we still are), but in one solitary moment, in the horror of it all, we discovered what Dr. King dreamed of: The sons of slaves and former slaveholders could sit at the same table. We found a better vision of ourselves and of our nation. **EE**