

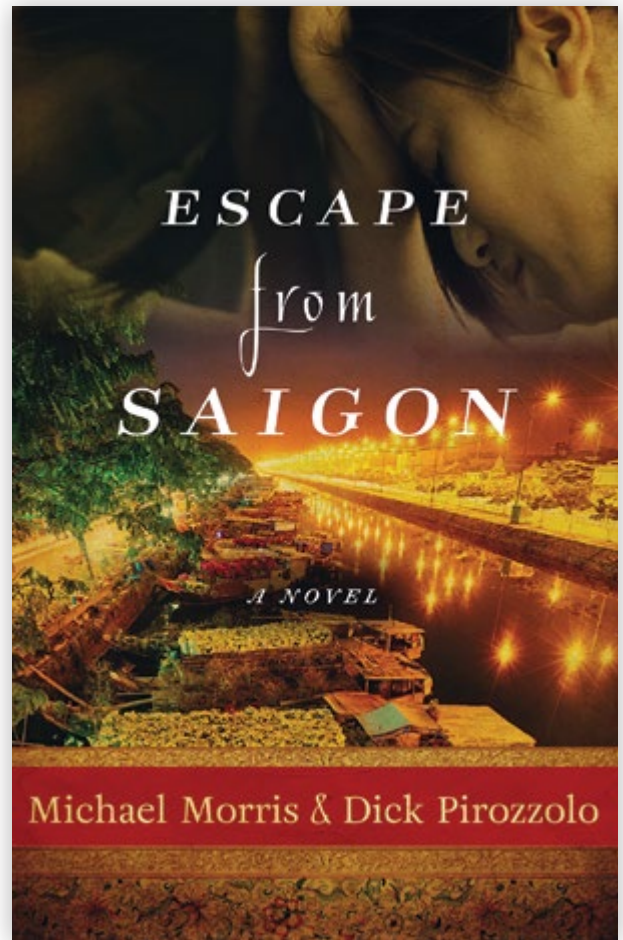
Escape from Saigon: A Novel

JANET MENDELSON **writer**

vietnam has been called “America’s first television war.” For two decades, beginning in 1955, people gathered nightly in their living rooms to watch network news anchors like Walter Cronkite and correspondents in the field bring war home in a way never before witnessed. Newspapers and magazines like *TIME* and *Newsweek* matched television coverage with in-depth accounts of the fighting and mounting casualties. Across the U.S., the stories reported by the news media were cited in arguments between those for and against America’s involvement in the war. The conflict was as divisive as any in our nation’s history. And long before cable TV, satellite news, and the Internet, broadcast television and print journalists were our eyes and ears on the scene.

Escape from Saigon (Skyhorse Publishing), a novel by Michael Morris and Dick Pirozzolo, follows the lives of two foreign correspondents among others in Vietnam’s former capital for 30 days, portraying the human side of the war at its end.

It is April 1975. The U.S. military has left. With the communist-supported North Vietnamese army advancing toward Saigon, refugees from the ravaged countryside are flooding into the city. The clock is ticking. Any day now, Saigon’s airfield will be destroyed. All remaining Americans, including diplomats, civilians, and journalists—anyone with a connection—are told to evacuate as quickly as aircraft can land, reload, and fly them out. South Vietnamese civilians, many of whom were translators and aides promised refuge by their American employers, are at the American Embassy gates, pleading to get themselves and loved ones on those flights or for safe passage to reach ships in the harbor. Seasoned war correspondents Sam Esposito and Lisette Vo know they should leave before it’s too late. Nonetheless, they continue



COURTESY OF SKYHORSE PUBLISHING



books “a war story in the traditional mode”

to produce eyewitness stories and film footage that they frantically rush to their respective editors stateside. And against the odds, an ex-Marine named Matt Moran returns to Saigon in an attempt to locate and rescue his Vietnamese wife’s extended family.

Wellesley resident Dick Pirozzolo and his co-author Michael Morris are Vietnam veterans and career journalists. They based their fictional characters on real reporters who covered the war and described events inspired by their own experiences. Scenes unfold involving the real American ambassador and his staff, President Gerald Ford, and generals involved at that time.

When Pirozzolo and I met to discuss their new book, he confirmed he and Morris adhered closely to historical records. Woven throughout are excerpts from archival material drawn from major news media accounts and government documents. They interviewed former military personnel, CIA agents, even the proprietor of a Saigon bar, for technical fact checking and first-person accounts of pressure-cooker situations. Former U.S. Air Force pilot Major Steven Dorian (Ret.), who lives in Wellesley, imparted his knowledge of fighter jet and air transport operations.

As they recapture the frantic pace of a city and nation torn apart, the novel rings true. But this is not a war story in the traditional mode.

“We wanted to write about human relationships and how people behave or respond to extraordinary circumstances, rising or not rising to the experience,” said Pirozzolo. He described Sam as the archetypical, hard-hitting, ambivalent reporter out to get the story for his newspaper. Lisette, the bi-lingual daughter of a Vietnamese father and an American mother, covers the war for TV news. She is equally ambitious and talented, determined to make it big by landing a job working for Cronkite. As Pirozzolo pointed out, women were gaining prominence in the media at that time.

The characters Sam and Lisette are stubborn professionals and almost inseparable friends. Both rely heavily on South Vietnamese locals with whom they have worked for years. But in the final days, it becomes less clear whether some of those locals can be trusted. And



top: Dick Pirozzolo, **bottom:** Dick Pirozzolo, Air Force captain and press officer during his Vietnam tour at an event on the Saigon River, “in civvies” in the early ’70s

KALMAN ZABARSKY

COURTESY OF DICK PIROZZOLO



books “a snapshot in time”

PHOTO BY LT. COLONEL EDWARD WALTERS WITH PERMISSION FROM MICHAEL WALTERS

North Vietnamese tanks are just days, and then hours away.

Pirozzolo and his wife, Jane, have lived in Wellesley for more than 40 years. They arrived shortly after he served in the Air Force as an information officer in Saigon from 1970 to 1971. While there as a media spokesperson, he participated in the daily press briefings known as “The Five O’Clock Follies” and developed an enduring affection for Vietnam and its people. Back in the United States, he was a reporter for the *Worcester Telegram & Gazette* and handled media relations for Boston University before opening his Boston-based firm, Pirozzolo Company Public Relations, whose clients have included the governments of Vietnam, Japan, and Canada, and corporations in several foreign countries. During the 1990s, he helped foster reconciliation and trade between



DICK PIROZZOLO

top: Saigon during the Vietnam War; bottom: Saigon today: Tu Do Street—known for bargirls, beer, and brawls during the Vietnam War has been renamed Dong Khoi Street and recast with trendy cafés and boutiques, appealing to a post-war generation of Vietnamese Millennials. What’s more, the Ao Dai, the traditional Vietnamese garb, has been supplanted by the latest fashions.

books “a very emotional journey”

the U.S. and Vietnam. He currently serves on the editorial board of the Boston Global Forum, a think tank focused on peace initiatives with Vietnam.

Michael Morris served as an infantry sergeant from 1967 to 1968. He earned a Purple Heart for being wounded in combat while in the Northern I Corps region during some of the Vietnam War’s worst fighting, including the Tet Offensive. A career journalist and editor, he lives in Savannah, Georgia.

Their novel is a snapshot in time, but it also offers a vantage point for comparison with today.

“The U.S. made a massive effort to rescue the Vietnamese boat people and resettle refugees,” said Pirozzolo. “Correspondents made an equally massive effort to get the news to the U.S. accurately. There were no cell phones or laptops. It was a laborious process of getting film shipped to the TV networks and letters delivered to wives and family members.” They could use Telex but phone calls were difficult and time-consuming. Veterans returning to the States often were confronted by animosity from protesters opposed to the war; Pirozzolo recalls his welcome home as “lukewarm.” The *Worcester Telegram & Gazette* was actively looking to hire veterans, he said, and later Boston University hired him on the strength of his military communications experience.

Pirozzolo has returned to Vietnam a half dozen times since then. He has witnessed Vietnam changing in both subtle and significant ways. Women now favor western clothing over traditional dress, and upscale retailers have replaced seedy streets once known for the bars and bar girls who inhabit his book. He helped foster international business relationships that were part of the eventual reconciliation between the two countries. “The U.S. and Vietnam are now allies,” said Pirozzolo who acknowledged that writing the book became a very emotional journey.

“In 1971, Vietnam was in my rear view mirror,” he said. “I moved on.” Even though later he arranged media coverage of Vietnam by U.S. and world press, and wrote by-lined articles on Vietnam public policy and trade, writing the novel brought it all back. “That’s neither good nor bad for me,” he said, “but it was good for the book.” 