



Robert M. Pacholik captures his experience as a U.S. Army reporter in his newest novel.

PHOTO COURTESY ROBERT M. PACHOLIK

Snapshots of war

While more than 40 years have passed since the war in Vietnam, Carmichael author and veteran **Robert M. Pacholik's** time there still feels as relevant as ever. As a reporter and photographer for the U.S. Army, Pacholik attempted to expose the military's involvement in siphoning off supplies and selling it on the black market. His upcoming book, *Saigon Summer: Corruption and Murder During and After the Tet Offensive, 1968*, is a fictional narrative that heavily mirrors his experiences and those of four other military journalists he worked with. Pacholik has stated that people will not like his book. Why? SN&R sat down with him to find out.

Why won't people like this book?

Well, it's a harsh book. ... I landed on the third day of the Tet Offensive, and I was a photographer—still and motion picture. And there was house-to-house fighting for three weeks in the city, and in the process of doing that work, I found that the units that were fighting didn't have supplies that they were supposed to have. ... The story is, the people in this unit who are covering the war find bits and pieces of why things are being stolen and sold on the black market.

What are some of the themes you explore in *Saigon Summer*?

The one item that is the most dominant in the story is that these five guys—all of them independently of each other—they go out and they're terrified that they are going to be killed instantly. And yet they take photographs, they go to places during the fighting, and they get the pictures and come home. The picture on the front cover, that's my photograph. That's of a wounded guy in 9th Infantry, after a firefight where he got hit in his helmet and his helmet shattered, and parts of it, not shattered

but shrapnel hit him and he's blind. And that's one of the few pictures that I got out during the time I was there.

What happened to the other pictures?

A lot of them were destroyed by the Army. And we fought a battle for two years to get material out about what was happening. And the command we reported to fundamentally didn't want any of that information getting out ... So we were constantly being recycled back through doing KP, being forced to go on guard duty, being confined to quarters, unable to communicate with anybody and threatened with court martials.

Was that disillusioning for you?

Oh yeah. Yeah, I was 20 years old, I was as stupid as a post. I was invincible, and I was convinced that I was Robert Capa. And I did things that to this day, are just unbelievably stupid. So, for example, if ... there was fighting in this building, I would sneak around the door and put my head around that corner to get a picture going up there, OK? And people were shooting! And I had a helmet on, but I didn't have a flak jacket. And the Army, in its infinite wisdom, did not allow us to carry a rifle, because they said "Well you're a journalist, you sit around and you don't need a rifle." Well, if I go out with the troops and they're fighting, and they have M16s and the Vietnamese have AK-47s, and all I've got's an eight-shot pistol, who in their right mind is gonna do that? So I bought—illegally—a French submachine gun from World War II.

How do you think people will respond to this story?

Well, I'm 74 years old. That took place 1968, '69. I have worked on it and harbored it as a story for almost 40 years. ... So, I want the indictment to get out. I want those five men who gave their best dedication to this country to be vindicated as the good people they were. ... And I want the actions of [those responsible] to be brought to light. □

Grab a signed copy of *Saigon Summer* at the release party, Feb. 22 at the Rancho Cordova Library, 9845 Folsom Blvd.

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