



John Sack

(1930-2004)

Esquire's legendary war correspondent, a founder of New Journalism, covered every conflict from Korea to the war on terrorism

ONE DAY A FEW YEARS AGO, John Sack came by the office and we went to lunch at a fish place a few blocks away. It was a spectacular late-summer day in New York. John had just recently had back surgery and was a little hobbled, but, still, he wanted to see the city on foot, so arm in arm we headed for Fifth Avenue. He was full of talk about having to recuperate so that he wouldn't miss a single day of skiing come winter out in Ketchum, Idaho, where he lived, and about stories that he just had to write, and about putting the finishing touches on *The Dragonhead*, his next book, and did I know that he was first and foremost a humorist? We rolled down past St. Patrick's Cathedral, and the sun was bright, and John just gave off his own light, too; the whites of his eyes and his teeth sort of glowed. Such was his enthusiasm that he made everything seem possible. And almost without fail, everything was possible with John Sack. This was the John Sack, after all, who was the only person to have reported from every American war since Korea. This was the man who had written epically, from Vietnam, about the grunts of M Company (October 1966)—at thirty-three thousand words, the longest story that will ever be published in this magazine. Arnold Gingrich, Esquire's founding editor, was in such awe of the piece that he could compare it only to Fitzgerald and Hemingway. This is the man who conducted the historic interviews with Lieutenant William Calley (November 1970), the only man convicted for the massacre at My Lai. John risked prison when he refused to turn over his tapes to Calley's prosecutors on the grounds that in America, journalists are not agents of the government. This was the John Sack who was the only journalist in an armored vehicle during the ground phase of the first Gulf war, and thank God for it, because he alone captured the utter chaos of operations there. And when an imperious editor asked John to make a damaging and unnecessary change to his story, "C Company" (December 1991), out of fear of litigation, John said, "I am not going to change the truth for you. With all due respect, please

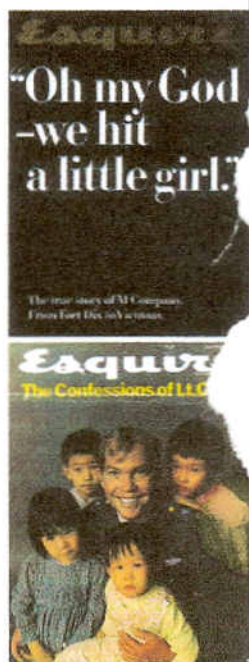
shove that change up your ass." That was John Sack—courtly yet vehement, dogmatically honest, a man of conscience, and almost always right. This was the man, after all, who, when the confines of conventional journalism proved too restrictive to capture the truth and too dull to permit literature, broke the mold and, with a few fellows named Mailer, Talese, and Wolfe, created New Journalism, or what he liked to call literary journalism.

Well, John recovered from his back surgery in time to ski that winter, and he kept causing trouble by committing journalism. He even went to war again, trudging up the peaks surrounding the Shah-i-Kot Valley in Afghanistan with the grunts from Fort Drum, New York, to give a definitive account of Operation Anaconda, the bloodiest battle of the war (August 2002). And he never lost a step as a writer, and his buoyant voice never flagged, and he had so much more work to do, more truth to tell, when he died in late March after a tough illness. And because he was that John Sack, and because he wasn't nearly finished showing us how it's done, we of course never said a proper goodbye.

So goodbye, John. We are humbled to have known you. Thanks for your inspiration and your example and for helping to save journalism. Readers who have never heard your name owe you a great debt of gratitude. We miss you and will remember you.

—MARK WARREN

Sack's classic story "M," and his last piece for the magazine, "Operation Anaconda," are available online at esquire.com.



Two of Sack's landmark cover stories: October 1966, his epic profile of M Company in Vietnam; and November 1970, his historic interview with Lieutenant William Calley following the massacre of civilians at My Lai.

