



**Title: Then I Came Home**  
**Author: Sam Gaylord**  
**Treatment By: Julie Tosh**

### **Mission Statement:**

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Sam Gaylord's *Then I Came Home* is the true account of the author's tour of duty in Vietnam and the injuries that changed his view of patriotism. Told with realistic grit, the story shares the grim picture of war, as a soldier faces physical then mental challenges. Unfortunately, Sam does not receive the welcome home he expects, and his dedication to duty and his country is sorely tested after his return to the States.

Because of the straightforward narrative line, the feature film follows the same journey as the novel with few modifications. Although Sam's unit contains a variety of characters, much of the action is devoted to Sam, Donnie, and Limey to keep the story focused during the two-hour experience of viewing the film. Also, some emotional beats add depth to the grim nature of the war sequences.

*Then I Came Home* views war and its aftermath through the eyes of a regular soldier. It depicts no man as a hero and questions what it means to honor veterans for performing services no non-serving individual can truly understand. With its fresh look at patriotism, *Then I Came Home* will open the eyes of audience members and shed light on how America approaches the needs of its wounded veterans.

### **Logline:**

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A patriotic young man serves his country in Vietnam, but after an explosion robs him of his feet, he discovers the value the government really places on military service.

### **Treatment:**

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Hanover, Indiana. Near the summer of 1967. STUDENTS stand in the Monday lunch line, waiting for the CASHIER to sell them their weekly tickets for lunch. Whispers of conversation reach SAM GAYLORD (16, a junior, half Irish, half Indian, and skinny as a rail) as he nears the front of the line: something about police action in Vietnam, avoiding the draft by going to college, the lure of Canada. Sam ignores the talk as he makes eye contact with the Cashier. She ought to know him by now, as he's the boy who sweeps up after the school day. But no, she asks Sam for his money, and he has to tell her once again that he gets "Free Lunch."



That afternoon, Sam finishes up in the cafeteria and passes through the gym on his way to the boys' locker room. The PLAYERS and COACH don't notice Sam pass. He's a fixture at the school and too poor to get up to the usual high school antics. In the locker room Sam sweeps then stops. He pulls open a locker, takes out a wallet filled with several bills. Sam takes one dollar, moves on to the next locker, and takes a dollar from that one. Later on the way out, Sam counts the money in his pocket and looks satisfied. A short time later, Sam sits in Maude Summer's Restaurant and eats a cheeseburger. MAUDE (40s) smiles sweetly at him, and Sam nods back, grinning, guilty, his mouth full of food.

A few weeks later in Madison, Sam sits across a desk from a MARINE RECRUITER. As the man points out the benefits of being in the Marines, Sam's eyes go to the flag behind him. Then the Recruiter mention the G.I. Bill. If Sam joins, he'll get four years of college for free. Minutes later, Sam's signing the paperwork.

In August of 1967 Sam's first stop is Brown Hotel in Louisville, where he gets a physical then is inducted into the Marines. After that, Sam and three GUYS board a plane for San Diego. Joking as they leave the plane for a waiting bus, their small group is assaulted with colorful insults before scrambling for a seat. Then Sam stands on a pair of yellow footprints, staring straight ahead, as two DRILL INSTRUCTORS explain how completely they own his ass. The light in Sam's eyes retreats as he wishes, like anything, that he was back home.

Over the next few hours, Sam gets his head shaved, carries his new equipment to a bunk, and finally lays his head on the pillow, only to be woken for drill, drill, drill. Sam performs, as requested, an automaton, until he goes to his first meal in the mess. The light comes back to his face as Sam realizes that he gets to eat. For the first time in his life, he'll get three meals a day.

The weeks go by: marching, running up hills, letters home, hot showers, and making a bed to perfection. Sam stares straight ahead, ignoring the SNEAKY PRIVATE punished for smoking and the BLUSHING PRIVATE for getting a letter from his girlfriend. Sam ploughs through until he accidentally crosses glances with two SHORT SHORTS GIRLS at another platoon's graduation. Snapping his eyes forward, Sam finds his Drill Sergeant's hat inches from his face. He'd like to see Sam later. Ignoring his suddenly weak knees, Sam barks, "Yes, sir!"

Outside the Duty Hut, other RECRUITS ignore the tongue-lashing going on inside and then the SLAM as something is shoved against the wall. Inside, Sam stares straight ahead as his instructor holds him against the wall, grabs his rifle, and jabs the butt into Sam's stomach. With a "Woof," Sam doubles over just before the Drill



Sergeant orders him to get the fuck out of his house. Taking the rifle with him, Sam stumbles outside before he spits up blood into the dirt. Hours later, Sam sits in the mess, elbow to elbow with his fellow recruits, staring ahead as they all shovel their food into their mouths. Sam knows they know what happened. Sam knows his mistake affects them all. The corners of his eyes crinkle as a part of Sam grows a little tougher.

Those same eyes, harder still, stare straight ahead as Sam's platoon parades in their dress uniforms for graduation. As they pass the COMMANDANT, every head snaps right on command, and Sam feels the wetness following down his cheeks. He made it. He's a Marine.

Shortly after that while training at Camp Pendleton, Sam gets orders to report to Wes-Pac. He's going to Vietnam. Before leaving, he heads home for a visit. Sam is struck by how much they have all changed, until he realizes it's he, not they, who is different. The next morning his MOM surprises Sam as he bounces down the steps for his morning run. She says they already have two inches of snow. Sam turns around and smiles before telling her he has to run. Then, leaving the house behind in the falling whiteness, Sam's feet pound away. Later that evening, Sam's DAD tells war stories about his time in World War II. Sam shrugs when asked about serving in Vietnam. The idea of killing bothers him, but he has a job to do. For the first time, Sam's dad looks at him like there might be some worth to his boy.

End of January, 1968. Sam's transport plane descends into Da Nang, Vietnam as the cloud cover disappears. In the darkness Sam sees bursts of sparks down below on the ground. The PILOT alerts the MEN that they are landing in the midst of an attack on the airstrip. He instructs them to get off the plane quickly and run for cover.

As the plane comes to a stop, Sam hears EXPLOSIONS before homing in on a SERGEANT, who directs the men to bunkers. Quickly, Sam is handed a helmet and M-16 but no ammo. He blinks in the acrid smoke and wonders what the hell he's supposed to do with an unloaded gun as he watches PEOPLE running every which way, yelling and screaming. Dawn breaks a short time later, and Sam receives a flak jacket, ammo, and hand grenades. He's leaving for Phu Bai the following morning. Sam blows out some air, relieved to survive his first night of war.

In the quiet morning haze Sam waits as dead and wounded are unloaded from a helicopter before he and his fellow MARINES board. Sitting in the chopper as it rises into the air, Sam sees the blood on the floor. Others notice before moving their steady gazes toward the beauty of the jungle below, the hands on their rifles flexing as they tighten their grips.



As the helicopter lands, it immediately comes under enemy fire. Sam and his comrades duck as rounds PING inside the chopper, sending sparks everywhere. At ten feet from landing, the men jump out. Sam starts firing as he heaves himself out of the helicopter and runs for cover. Before him, another transport chopper is shot down. The MEN and PILOT make it out just before it EXPLODES! Minutes later, Medi-vacs arrive, and Sam helps load dead and wounded onto the chopper. As it lifts off, Sam says a prayer then sees blood on his hand. He wipes it on his pant leg and lets out his held breath. He looks around for his unit and trots over to join them. A little, loud-mouthed Italian guy DONNIE remarks that this was a hot zone. Sam thinks, no shit. Recognizing the dazed look in Donnie's eye, Sam nods. They'll have each other's back next time.

Sam's unit moves into patrols of the city. As darkness falls, planes drop flares to light up the night sky. Sam and Donnie are told to bed down for the night in a building. Another guy LIMEY joins them. In the middle of the night Limey spots three VIETCONG in the backyard behind the building. He wakes Sam and asks what he should do. Sam tells him to shoot them then radios for help. Limey does, killing one before the other two disappear into the darkness. The next morning their group eats chow, and a couple of SOLDIERS carry the dead Vietcong Soldier out to the street. Sam doesn't miss the shaken look on Limey's face.

Days later, Sam finds himself pinned down on a bridge as he, Limey, and Donnie attempt to cross. A relentless hail of bullets overhead prevents them from responding to CRIES for help up ahead. Then the cries stop. Sam feels something sticky on his back. He's been hit. His heart seems to stop as the liquid runs down his side. Under fire cover, the three men sprint toward the wounded up ahead. Sam pulls off his pack, feeling for the bullet holes, but Limey tells him there's nothing there. Sam feels the wet place and realizes someone shot the fruit cocktail in his pack, not him. He's relieved, and Donnie almost grins. That's why they call them Fucking New Guys. But war calls. They grab the wounded and head back to cover, determined not to let their comrades rot on the street as so many dead Vietcong are doing.

Another day, another bridge. Racing from a firefight at the house where they stayed the night, Sam, Donnie, and Limey head toward the Perfume River to secure another strategic location. SNIPER FIRE rains down, and a few American SNIPERS get to work as Naval GUN FIRE comes in over their heads, killing fish and landing far too close to home. But a short time later, this bridge is secure. The men take a swim afterwards, ignoring the dead fish caused by the gun fire. Sam gets a piece of mortar shrapnel dug out of his ass, then he's in the water, too, relieved the current fight is over.



After a respite at the bridge, Sam's unit moves into the jungle. He gets word he's to be the point man, or leader, as they blaze their way ahead. Thumb on the selector of his M-16, Sam moves cautiously, his ears sensitive to any noise. Then Sam hears digging. He steps into a clearing where three VIETCONG are setting up a machine gun. He kills two in the split second it takes for their eyes to meet. As Sam's SQUAD LEADER yells for information, Sam ejects a clip and jams in another. Suddenly, a whole bunch of VIETCONG appear from behind the tree line. They look pissed. Sam's breath freezes then someone grabs his ankle and pulls him back into the jungle. All hell breaks loose as AK-47 FIRE shreds the foliage above Sam's head.

Later, the Squad Leader demands to know if Sam is trying to be some kind of hero. Sam says, no. He is just trying to take care of himself and the rest of the guys. The Squad Leader grins at that and tells Sam he did one hell of a job. Back in Hue City, Sam shrugs at the REPORTER from *Stars and Stripes* who interviews him because of his enemy kills. The reporter asks what Sam thinks of the negative opinion back at home about the war. Sam's glad he and his buddies are alive, having put their asses on the line for their country. That's the only story he has to share.

On his next mission Sam wades through rice paddies on his way toward a Vietcong base camp rumored to be in the mountains near the Ho-Chi-Minh Trail. As his group moves along, they find shallow graves with Vietcong, abandoned ammo, and underground bunkers, but no enemy. Then they move through a village, approached by YOUNG BOYS selling Cokes and even their sisters for sex. The boys say no Vietcong have come to their village, but Sam locks eyes with a pair of MEN who quickly look away. He's sure they are Vietcong but has no reason to blow them away. Later at base camp, Sam writes a letter to his little sister and notices a silver glint in the sky. It's a freedom bird, a TWA jet flying military personnel home. Sam rubs at the wetness in his eye and gets back to his letter.

Then it's day after day in the jungle. A firefight at a village. The resulting Fourth of July-like celebration when the shooting is over. The VIETCONG tied to a banana tree and being beaten by SOUTH VIETNAMESE. The late night patrols. The C-rations, the mosquitoes, the leeches. And every once in a while, a trip wire attached to a bunch of explosives.

On Sam's nineteenth birthday, he and Donnie go into a village to get their hair cut. Donnie does his usual clowning around, making the VILLAGERS laugh at his antics, while Sam plays the straight man and watches the Vietnamese, always alert for trouble. After PAPA-SAN cuts Donnie's hair, he lathers his face for a shave. When he pulls out a straight razor, Sam has his .45 in the man's chest in seconds. The room grows silent then Papa-san throws his hands in the air. Sam starts to laugh as



Donnie gives him a dirty look. Sam holsters the gun, realizing he better leave the clowning to Donnie.

On the way back to camp Sam and Donnie talk about their upcoming R & R. Both want to go to Hawaii. Limey is there now and probably having the time of his life. Donnie talks about the fun they'll have before returning to all this shit. A shadow passes over Sam's face. He's not going to want to come back; he knows this. He turns toward Donnie. When he gets to Hawaii, Sam plans to go AWOL. He'll grow his hair long, get a job, and make enough money to go to San Francisco. Sam's sorry, but he won't be able to cover Donnie's back anymore. Sam looks over at Donnie as he walks along, carefree, and realizes that he hasn't spoken any of his plans out loud.

The next day Sam and Donnie are back in the jungle with three FNGs (Fucking New Guys) and the rest of the platoon. Sam feels sorry for them as they get sicker looking from the heat. The group has trouble finding water and supplies are low. Worried about dehydration, the DOC calls for a Medi-vac to bring in water and fly out those overcome by heat. The group hurries, as best they can, for the landing zone.

Hustling along, Sam isn't sure he's going to make it. He's hot, dehydrated, almost as bad as the new men. Then an EXPLOSION throws his body in the air. He wakes, unable to hear, and sees a MARINE staggering around with half his face gone. Blood everywhere. Sam sees the blood is mostly his own. He looks down to see his left foot and boot lying to the side of his body. He apologizes to his mom. He won't be coming home.

Eyes closed, Sam sees a soft bright light reach out to touch him. Donnie's voice breaks through. He'll be okay, he'll be okay, he'll be okay. Donnie, bleeding from his own wounds, cradles Sam's head in his lap as a Medi-vac chopper flies them up and away.

In a field hospital Sam wakes to country music, played just for him, a sign he isn't expected to live. Then he wakes again in the 106<sup>th</sup> Army Hospital in Yokohama, Japan. A NURSE holds his hand and asks Sam if he knows where he is. He looks down and sees bandages where his feet used to be and starts crying. Sam asks about Donnie but doesn't learn where he is. At his first bandage change, maggots crawl out of his wound. The Nurse puts a hand to her mouth, but Sam tells her his mom used to put urine in his ear when he had an earache. What the hell are a few maggots?

Over the coming weeks, Sam struggles with depression. No R & R. No freedom bird to take him home. He'll be in a wheelchair for life. He thinks about that bright light and wonders why God didn't take him. He's nineteen and his life is over.



At the Great Lakes Naval Hospital in Illinois Sam settles into his ward. After a radio station holds a fundraiser, Sam's mom and SISTER visit. His sister tells him that his mom wouldn't answer the door when the sheriff and Marine officer arrived at the house to give them the news. The sheriff had to yell through the door that Sam was still alive to get her to answer. Sam tells them both he has a number of surgeries ahead. The doctors say he was lucky. Sam almost pulls off a look of optimism as he shares this.

As Sam goes through the paces of his recovery, he gets another set of visitors: Donnie's PARENTS and sister LINDA. They tell him Donnie is fine, recovered from his shrapnel wounds and back in the bush. Sam can see the pain, hurt, and worry in their eyes. He tells them all about Donnie and the fun part of their time in the jungle. As Sam talks, he can hardly keep his eyes off Linda. She's pretty and nice and makes Sam think of all the possibilities in the future that may never be.

As time goes on, a GENERAL arrives with a contingent of REPORTERS and CAMERAMEN. He pins a purple heart on Sam, but all Sam can do is look at the man's feet. This asshole can walk and he can't. Shortly after that, Sam meets with his DOCTOR and learns he's headed to Philadelphia for artificial limbs. Sam didn't think he'd walk again, so the news makes him grin.

At Philadelphia Naval Hospital Sam does physical therapy to further improve his strength. The local papers and TV news are full of stories about war protestors, and he finds his depression replaced by anger when he learns some returning veterans were spat on in San Francisco. Sam gets fitted for artificial feet, and they turn his legs blue. A letter from Linda cheers him up as he absorbs all the bad news. In short order, he walks around the ward without a cane to say goodbye. Sam's going home.

After his plane lands in Indianapolis, Sam steps onto the tarmac, his teeth gritted against the pain. Determined to have his family see him walk, Sam ignores his protesting legs as he makes his way to them. Never a demonstrative family, they all nod at his arrival, though Sam can see the relief in his mother's eyes.

In the kitchen the following morning Sam enjoys coffee with his mom. A lot of neighbors are sorry he got hurt, so is she. Sam tells her it was his decision to join the military. He will fucking live with that. His mom tells Sam not to use the F word in her house. Sam blinks, struck by how different he is now from the boy who left home.

Sam finds himself spending his days in his wheelchair, staring out the window at the approaching winter. He gets a letter from the VA detailing his disability benefits. What seems like a lot of money isn't shit, considering he won't have a job, have a



girl, have a life now that he'd lost his feet. He watches the last leaf fall from a tree outside and tells himself he can at least look forward to a merry fucking Christmas. Before long, Sam sits at the window each day, nursing a rum and coke and fanning the flames of his anger.

Then one day Sam plots his suicide. First he considers a gunshot to the head, but his sisters would find him. Then he imagines crawling up a nearby hill and shooting himself, but what if he doesn't take himself out in the one shot? Then he thinks of drowning in the Ohio River. Fixing himself another drink, Sam pleads with God. He'd stop all these thoughts if God would just help him. He didn't take him that day he was wounded, but he could help Sam take control of his life. If God will lead, Sam promises he will follow.

The next day Sam joins his parents for coffee, then he works out. He has a new set of feet that fit better than the last pair. Using his anger, he pushes himself to do another rep, to walk a little further. As a Marine, Sam knows attitude is everything. Life isn't fair, so it's time to accept that.

As the weeks pass, Sam improves. He rents an apartment in Madison and then tries to purchase a car. But the bubble bursts when the bank won't give him a loan. He returns to the dealership and tells the OWNER the news. The Owner tells Sam to sit down, then he calls the bank. Sam's amazed at the way the man stands up for him. In no time Sam has both the loan and the car.

After having the car fitted with special equipment, Sam drives to a riverbank along the Ohio. He gets out and sits along the shore, watching the river slide by below him. Sam tells God he made a decision for his future, to serve the United States in war, because he loved his country, but he doesn't love his country anymore. Despite that, it's time to move on, go to college, find a girl. A cool breeze wafts up in the growing darkness and caresses Sam's cheek. It's an answer from God. Sam smiles slightly, studies the flow of the river one more time, and then turns back to his new car. After a flash of taillights, he pulls back onto the road towards home, through the open window country music flowing out into the serene night.