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Massacre at My Lai: Violence in the U.S. Military

On March 16, 1968, Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson was flying over Son My with Specialist Glenn Andreotta, his crew chief, and Specialist Lawrence Colburn, their gunner, as part of Task Force Barker's operation to clear the Viet Cong 48th Local Force Battalion out of the area. As the men flew over a ditch that was full of the bodies of dead Vietnamese civilians, Andreotta saw a movement in the pile of corpses. They landed the helicopter, and Andreotta began to dig through destroyed and bloody body parts to remove what had been moving—a girl of no more than six caught under the dead body of a woman who might have been her mother. The removal of the young girl—who survived the ordeal uninjured—was one last shocking event for the three men, who had spent the morning trying to intervene in the strange events unfolding before them.¹ Despite the many things they saw that morning, it is unlikely they knew the scope of what they discovered. The bodies in the ditch and the young girl likely orphaned were the casualties of what came to be known infamously as the My Lai Massacre, an event in which the men Task Force Barker, particularly members of Charlie Company's 1st Platoon, raped and murdered several hundred Vietnamese citizens in the space of a few hours. The horrible events of the My Lai Massacre demonstrate many of the problems faced by the military in Vietnam and show the tension in public opinion about the war, while bringing up questions about accountability and responsibility in the military.

¹ William Thomas Allison, *My Lai: An American Atrocity in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012) 43-44. [PRINT]

Heading into the war in Vietnam, the U.S. Military had been mostly trained for big wars with big enemies and big weapons, in the style of World War II just decades before. However, in Vietnam this style of war just was not feasible, due to the enemy's guerilla style of fighting and the culture and geography of the country. This put soldiers into conditions they were often not well prepared for, and that the military as a whole was not well prepared for. Used to fighting wars with a strategy of annihilation, the military was forced into a strategy of attrition in part due to President Johnson's desire to keep the war a limited one to avoid provoking larger communist nations into a larger war. This issue of unfamiliarity was made worse on the ground by the twelve-month tour length of soldiers. This relatively quick turnover in a long-lasting war prevented unit cohesion. New soldiers were coming into the unit almost every day, trained at home but unprepared for the realities of fighting in the jungle of Vietnam. These are the conditions that Charlie Company (Company C) entered into upon arrival in Vietnam.²

Charlie Company (1st Battalion, 20th Infantry, 11th Brigade, Americal Division) arrived in Vietnam in December 1967, where they received a month of more training before being added to Task Force Barker (named for its commander, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Barker) in January 1968. Upon deployment, the company consisted of 6 officers and 158 men, which would drop to 5 and 125, respectively, by the time of the company's involvement at Son My. The company was under the command of Captain Ernest L. "Mad Dog" Medina, a demanding and much-respected company commander. The 1st Platoon, perhaps the group whose involvement in the My Lai massacre is the most infamous, was lead by Lieutenant William L. Calley, Jr., a junior college dropout who bounced from job to job in the early and mid-60s before enlisting in the Army. After some success as a military clerk, Calley ended up in Officer Candidate school at Fort

² Ibid., 5-11.

Benning, where he graduated 120th out of a class of 156. Because the high demand for junior officers created by the war, the underwhelming Calley became an officer in Charlie Company in the fall of 1967.³

On January 30th, 1968, the Viet Cong (VC) launched the first part of the Tet Offensive. After follow-up from other VC units and the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) failed to come, the VC were overwhelmed within about a week by US and Vietnamese forces. When the Tet Offensive began, Charlie Company was north of Quang Ngai City at Landing Zone (LZ) Dottie, having been recently relocated to pursue a new mission. Task Force Barker's mission in the area, codenamed Muscadine, was to find and destroy the Viet Cong 48th Local Force Battalion. As the Viet Cong fought for Quang Ngai City, Charlie Company and the rest of Task Force Barker enjoyed relative quiet at their location. After failing to win the city, the Viet Cong fled to villages on the coast, including the complex of Son My. Son My consisted of 4 administrative districts, My Khe, My Lai, Tu Cung, and Co Luy. These were comprised of various hamlets, whose Vietnamese names generally did not match with the American designations. The most important hamlet in the events that would follow was Xom Lang, designated My Lai (4) by the military.⁴

US Military intelligence placed the Viet Cong 48th Local Force Battalion in the area of Son My, where they were supposedly using various hamlets as safe havens and staging areas and were said to be headquartered at My Lai (4).⁵ In preparation for the operation on March 16, the men of the Task Force were told to expect heavy enemy resistance. Captain Medina told Charlie Company in a briefing on the 15th that they should expect to be outnumbered two to one by Viet Cong, and also that "all [they] would expect to find there would be the 48th VC Battalion," and

³ Ibid., 17-22.

⁴ Ibid., 5, 22-23.

⁵ Ibid., 23.

that any civilians would be out of the village to go to the market by 7:00 A.M.⁶ In considering what could have caused the violence at My Lai, it is important to consider the losses incurred by Charlie Company in the days and weeks leading up to March 16. On February 25th three men were killed and sixteen wounded when the company walked into a minefield. Lieutenant Calley said that after this incident, “It seemed like a different company now.”⁷ The anger and distress from this event was compounded on March 14 when a mine killed another member of Charlie Company, Sergeant George Cox. At a memorial for Cox on the March 15, Captain Medina reportedly told the company they would be able to get revenge for those lost the next day.⁸

With revenge on their minds and the expectation of heavy combat ahead, the men of Charlie Company loaded onto helicopters in the early morning of March 16, weighed down by their regular gear plus extra ammunition for the hard fighting they were anticipating. As artillery fired into the villages to clear the area, the 1st and 2nd Platoons of Charlie Company were getting flown to a Landing Zone near My Lai 4 that they had been told would be “hot” (have an enemy presence/resistance), but the helicopters took no enemy fire as they landed and troops disembarked.⁹ According to Herbert L. Carter, when they landed, “There was no resistance from the village. There was no armed enemy in the village.”¹⁰ Soon after, the 3rd Platoon joined them. After this point, it is hard to entirely ascertain how exactly the events of the day transpired due to

⁶ Ernest L. Medina “Testimony of Capt. Ernest L. Medina,” *Investigation of the My Lai Incident: Hearings of the Armed Services Investigating Subcommittee of the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives, Ninety-First Congress, Second Session* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976) 80-81.

⁷ Lieutenant William Calley, quoted in *My Lai: An American Atrocity in the Vietnam War* by William Thomas Allison (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012) 26.

⁸ Allison, *My Lai*, 26.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 32-34.

¹⁰ Herbert L. Carter, “Testimony to U.S. Army CID, 1969, CID Deposition Files, My Lai Investigation, CID Statement, file no. 69-CID0011-00074,” in *My Lai: Brief History with Documents*, ed. James S. Olson and Randy Roberts (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 1998) 79. [PRINT]

conflicting accounts from various participants. What can be assured is that members of the US Military participated in various rapes and murders in My Lai (4) over the next several hours.

Allegedly, Lieutenant Calley told a group of soldiers including Dennis Conti and Paul Meadlo, after they rounded up a group of perhaps 40 villagers, to “take care of them,” prompting the soldiers to sit and watch the villagers while Calley left. According to Conti, Calley returned and was upset that the villagers were still alive, clarifying that he had meant for them to be killed. He had the villagers line up and had men begin shooting. Meadlo shot for a while, but then began to cry and passed his gun to Conti. Conti, however, refused to shoot:

At the time, when we were talking, the only thing left was children. I told Meadlo, I said: “I’m not going to kill them. He [Calley] looks like he’s enjoying it. I’m going to let him do it.” So, like I said, the only thing left was children. He [Calley] started killing the children. I swore at him. It didn’t do any good. And that was it. They were all dead. He turned around and said: “Okay, let’s go.” We turned around and walked away.¹¹

This event also appears in the testimony of Herbert L. Carter, who also stated that

Meadlo began to cry while shooting the civilians. Carter also testified that he witnessed the shooting of a mother and her baby by Specialist Frederick Widmer. A member of the 3rd Platoon, Varnado Simpson, admitted that he also shot a woman and her baby, acting on the orders of the commander of the 3rd Platoon, Lieutenant Brooks. Simpson testified, “Brooks told me to kill the woman, and, acting on his orders, I shot her and her baby.... I remember shooting the baby in the face.”¹² At some point after all these murders began and dead bodies were already piling up in the ditch is when Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson (mentioned above) and his crew began to stage their mildly successful interventions.

¹¹ Dennis Conti, “Testimony to Peers Commission, Peers, *Report*, vol. 2, bk. 24, p. 31-33,” in *My Lai: Brief History with Documents*, ed. James S. Olson and Randy Roberts (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 1998) 78.

¹² Varnado Simpson, “Testimony to U.S. Army CID, 1969, CID Deposition Files, My Lai Investigation, CID Statement, file no. 69-CID011-00069,” in *My Lai: Brief History with Documents*, ed. James S. Olson and Randy Roberts (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 1998) 88-89.

Aside from the many murders committed that morning, there were also a great number of rapes in the village. The “Summary of Rapes” put together by army investigators lists at least twenty rapes, which they were able to compile based on the testimony of Vietnamese witnesses.¹³ One of the most striking accounts of rape, however, comes again from the testimony of Varnado Simpson: “I saw Wright, Hutto, Hudson, Rucker (deceased), and Mower go into a hut and rape a 17 or 18 year old girl. I watched from the door. When they all got done, they all took their weapons, M-60, M16’s, and caliber .45 pistols and fired into the girl until she was dead. Her face was just blown away and her brains were just everywhere.”¹⁴ It is worth noting however, that several other soldiers gave different accounts of this same event, with Specialist Hutto blaming two different soldiers, others giving a smaller number of soldiers involved, and several of the named soldiers denying that it even happened.¹⁵

By lunchtime on March 16, around 500 Vietnamese civilians, mostly old men, women, and children, had been killed by U.S. soldiers at My Lai (not all by the platoons at My Lai (4), although they did the worst of it).¹⁶ Although the company would claim 128 Viet Cong killed and three weapons recovered, the number of dead VC would later be disproven, and the platoons recovered no enemy weapons from My Lai (4) itself.¹⁷ Ultimately it was discovered that the Viet Cong had been fleeing the area of Son My in the nights leading up to the American attack, with almost all of them gone by the night of March 15, leaving the only a few Viet Cong who were

¹³ “Summary of Rapes, 1970, CID Deposition Files, My Lai Investigation, Vietnamese Statemets, Rape Victims,” in *My Lai: Brief History with Documents*, ed. James S. Olson and Randy Roberts (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 1998) 99-102.

¹⁴ Varnado Simpson, “Testimony to U.S. Army CID, 1969, CID Deposition Files, My Lai Investigation, CID Statement, file no. 69-CID011-00069,” in in *My Lai: Brief History with Documents*, ed. James S. Olson and Randy Roberts (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 1998) 89.

¹⁵ Allison, *My Lai*, 47.

¹⁶ Michael Ray, “My Lai Massacre,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, March 3, 2018. Accessed April 23, 2018. www.brittanica.com [WEB]

¹⁷ Allison, *My Lai*, 75.

killed outside of the hamlets and explaining the lack of enemy fire.¹⁸ The events of the day did not incite any punishment or reaction until, after hearing stories from men in Charlie Company, Ronald Ridenhour, a former private with the aviation section of the 11th Brigade, wrote a letter to various military and government leaders in March 1969 detailing the horrific stories he had heard about what happened at My Lai.¹⁹

Although the large-scale military investigation into the events of March 16, 1968 began in April 1969, sparked largely by Ridenhour's letter, the story did not break in the press until September of that year, and it did not become a big deal in the public until Associated Press reporter Seymour Hersh got a story on it published in thirty U.S. papers on November 13, with a follow-up on November 20.²⁰ Hersh's first article, titled "New Viet murder charge," gave an overview of the charges against Lieutenant Calley of murdering 109 Vietnamese civilians, discussed what was known of the incident, and gave the opinions of both investigators and others involved in the incident—some saying what Calley did was justified, others less sure.²¹ The second article included interviews with two members of Calley's 1st Platoon, Michael Terry and Michael Bernhardt.²² Perhaps most notably, Terry was quoted by Hersh as saying the killings in the ditch was "just like a Nazi-type thing."²³

As the story of My Lai (4) continued to dominate in the press, the American public fell on both sides of the issue. In December 1969 the *Los Angeles Times* ran an article with excerpts of some letters sent to Ridenhour as the public learned about what was happening. Some letters

¹⁸ Allison, *My Lai*, 33-34.

¹⁹ Ronald Ridenhour, "Letter to Military and Political Leaders," in *My Lai: Brief History with Documents*, ed. James S. Olson and Randy Roberts (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 1998) 147-151.

²⁰ Allison, *My Lai*, 84-85.

²¹ Seymour M. Hersh, "New Viet murder charge," *Boston Globe*, November 13, 1969. [Historical Newspapers]

²² "This Day in History, Nov. 20: Seymour Hersh files follow-up to My Lai story," *History.com*. Accessed April 23, 2018. [WEB]

²³ "Private Interviewed," *The New York Times*, November 20, 1969. [Historical Newspapers]

praised him, saying things like: “Your courage and beliefs are the type of thing that will save the soul of the nation,” and, “Thank you for not copping out, for not turning your back on a bad scene.”²⁴ However, there were also those that disagreed—often strongly—with Ridenhour’s decision to blow the whistle. Many of these people felt that he had betrayed America and hurt the war effort by making America look bad, some going as far as to say that reporting the massacre had helped the communists and the Viet Cong. Others took a different view of the issue, expressing disregard for the lives of the Vietnamese: “So a bunch of people were killed in a so-called massacre in Vietnam.... This should be of no concern to anyone. There was no real loss—just a bunch of worthless Asians in a part of the world that is already overcrowded.”²⁵ Overall, however, the article stated that of the almost 200 letters Ridenhour received, responses have been nearly “4-1 in favor of Ridenhour’s action.”²⁶

Lieutenant Calley was similarly subject to both sides of public opinion. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* from December 1970, during Calley’s trial, claims that “letters to the editor of the Columbus newspapers have been overwhelmingly sympathetic to Lt. Calley,” citing the fact that the area had many retired military residents as the reason for this.²⁷ Prior to Calley’s trial, though, he and his attorneys were convinced that he could not get a fair trial due to the “vast amount of public passion against Lt. Calley” caused by images and accounts of My Lai carried in the media.²⁸ The varying opinions on the My Lai massacre back home highlight just how conflicted Americans were about the war, but the fact that both letters to Ridenhour and the

²⁴ Kenneth Reich, “My Lai Story Brings Ex-GI Praise, Scorn,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 11, 1969. [Historical Newspapers]

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Warren Rogers, “Conscience of U.S. on Trial With Lt. Calley,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 14, 1970. [Historical Newspapers]

²⁸ “Lt. Calley Says He Can’t Get Fair Trial, Asks for Dismissal,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 9, 1969. [Historical Newspapers]

perceptions of Calley and his attorneys lean so heavily to the public being appalled and angry about the massacre that the incident helped validate and fuel growing anti-war sentiment on the homefront.

The My Lai massacre raises questions about to just what extent soldiers should follow orders—if the order is clearly unnecessary and immoral, as any order to kill mass amounts of civilians at My Lai was, should it be obeyed? Or do soldiers have the responsibility to identify orders that could be “unlawful”?²⁹ Are soldiers who are following orders responsible for what they do, or does that burden fall on the officer who gave the orders? The fact that of all the men involved, only Lieutenant Calley was convicted, gives some sort of answer to this question—the men who were under his command, who killed under what they said to be his orders, were not found guilty, and the men above him who may have given orders to kill the civilians, as he claims, were not found guilty either. It appears, then, that Calley, as an officer in the Army, may have been expected to be able to identify unlawful orders from above, making him responsible for what happened when they were carried out, while the regular drafted and enlisted men serving under him, lacking the level of training and authority of officers, were not.

Although the murders at My Lai cannot be excused by just blaming the conditions created by the war, in some ways it demonstrates how all of the strange conditions involved in and surrounding the war could be compounded to create a flashpoint of disaster. Thrust into a war that required both a fighting style and strategy that America was not prepared for, members of the military at all levels were learning on the job. Between casualties and the relatively short tours of duty, there was a high demand for more soldiers and officers to be sent to Vietnam, leading to the commissioning of officers who were perhaps not as qualified for the position, like

²⁹ Allison, *My Lai*, 13-14.

Lieutenant Calley, and also the compressed training of noncommissioned officers (NCOs) that sped up what was normally a five-year process. Therefore, soldiers who did not spend as much time together, were not as prepared for the type of war they would be engaging in, and were not always as qualified or well trained as would generally be preferred. These factors, when combined with a desire for avenging the deaths of their comrades and a general dehumanization of the Vietnamese as “gooks,” “slopes,” and “dinks,” helped create the conditions in which something like the My Lai massacre could occur.³⁰

That it was a level of violence against civilians only really seen previously in other instances where the U.S. Military was fighting a group that was “othered” and dehumanized is crucial in putting the massacre into context and, maybe, explaining a bit of how it could happen. Prior to My Lai, the most recent instance of mass murder of civilians by the U.S. Military occurred at No Gun Ri during the Korean War, where Korean civilian refugees were shot at and trapped under a bridge for several days. The wars against the Plains Indians near the end of the nineteenth century also displayed the kind of destruction and disregard for human life that arise out of the dehumanization of a group of people.³¹ These two wars, which, coincidentally, also relied in part on strategies of attrition, provide precedent, even if on a slightly less horrific scale, to the events at My Lai in 1968.³²

Although it is difficult to either explain or entirely nail down what happened in the hamlet of My Lai (4) on the morning of March 16, 1968, it is an important event in both the history of the Vietnam War and America as a whole. The incident demonstrates a convergence of the problems in Vietnam, while public reaction to it shows just how divided and charged the

³⁰ Allison, *My Lai*, 5-12.

³¹ Antullio Echevarria, *Reconsidering the American Way of War* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014) 93-96.

³² *Ibid.*, 93, 128.

atmosphere at home was when it came to the war. My Lai was one of the first times America had to face that its “good ole boys” could do something very, very bad—although the massacre was not without precedent in military history, its horrific scale came as a shock to many. However, after 40 long years and several attempts to appeal his conviction, Lieutenant William Calley, the only man convicted in the aftermath of My Lai, issued his first-ever apology for the killings: “I feel remorse for the Vietnamese who were killed, for their families, for the American soldiers involved and their families. I am very sorry.”³³

³³ Associated Press, “Calley apologizes for role in My Lai massacre,” *NBCNews.com*, August 21, 2009. [WEB]