

Spring 2011

Making Sense of the My Lai Massacre

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Making Sense of the My Lai Massacre

**A thesis submitted to
Regis University
Honors Program
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors**

By

Gus Maxwell

May 2011

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Acknowledgments

I have been fortunate to have a great deal of support in writing my honors thesis. Thanks are due first to Dr. Bowie, Director of the Honors Program, for setting me on this journey four years ago, and for continuous guidance along the way. Next, thanks to Martin Garnar, my reader, and the best friend a thesis writer could have, for working miracles in research, as well as for counseling and advice on all manner of things scholastic, sartorial, and otherwise. I owe a great debt to my advisors for their patience, willingness to let me follow this project where it took me, and help in bringing it back together again. It has been especially exciting to work with Dr. Gonzales, who encouraged me to take on the very difficult questions of this project in the first place, and who explored her personal relationship with the Vietnam War along with me. Dr. Clayton must be thanked for lending my project direction, energy, and comic relief. More importantly, I owe him for his role in teaching me how to think and write like a historian, and for his friendship these last four years. Finally, thanks to my first history teacher, my dad.

Preface

My Lai: March 16th 1968

Early in the morning of March 16, 1968, the men of Company C, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry, Task Force Barker, Americal Division, loaded onto helicopters, believing they were headed for battle in the Vietnamese hamlet of My Lai.¹ When they landed at My Lai, this company was an anonymous group of soldiers, just like any of the thousands of nineteen and twenty year olds the United States had sent to fight in Southeast Asia. By nightfall these young men had committed actions that ensured the singular infamy of their unit, which is now remembered by the simpler name of “Charlie Company”.

After slogging through the jungles of Quang Ngai province for three months without any large-scale contact with the enemy, the soldiers of Charlie Company believed they were finally on their way into a direct confrontation in a Viet Cong stronghold. Their commander, Captain Ernest Medina, a well-respected career soldier in his thirties, had briefed the men on the mission the night before. Their objective was to eradicate the 48th Vietcong Battalion, with an estimated strength of at least 250 men, which intelligence believed was in the village My Lai 4.² In addition to wiping out the 48th Battalion, Medina instructed the men to destroy everything that might be of use to the enemy: wells that could provide them with water, crops and livestock that could feed them, and structures that could shelter them.³

¹ Gershen, *Destroy or Die* 13

² Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 98

³ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 98

When Charlie Company entered the village they encountered only unarmed civilians. Nonetheless, the soldiers destroyed My Lai and carried out a massacre claimed the lives of hundreds of noncombatants, including women, children, and the elderly.

Introduction

When it comes to the Vietnam War, for me it's not just history. It's personal. My dad was sent to Vietnam when he was nineteen years old, two years younger than I am as I write this. The year and a half he spent at war changed him irrevocably. It was the catalyst in his life that uprooted him, radicalized him, and taught him to seek to understand things past the surface. It is also a continuing source of resentment toward hawkish politicians and suspicion of authority. Trying to understand my dad has led me into an uncomfortable fascination with the Vietnam War. It is not a fascination with the timelines, important political figures, battles, or statistics. It is a drive to know how it felt to be a nineteen-year-old American boy in Vietnam, and to understand what the war did to the young men that fought in it.

Dad once told me, "those guys at My Lai were no different from me. They just had the wrong circumstances."⁴ He believes that in the environment American soldiers lived in, normal people could be led to commit unimaginable atrocities. Although the men of Charlie Company had a larger dose of the circumstances of Vietnam than most, many things that can be said about the experience of Charlie Company could be said of any American soldier in Vietnam. Their story is the worst possible case, but in its essential elements it is the story of all of the soldiers in Vietnam.

⁴ Maxwell, interview

There is a very simple fact about the nature of war that is often overlooked: it is difficult for people to kill other people. Giving a man training, a uniform, and a gun does not alter his nature. Soldiers still values their own lives, as well as the lives of their friends and loved ones. For most, the idea of taking life strongly disconcerting. This is what U.S. Army Historian S. L. A. Marshall was referring to when he wrote:

The average healthy individual...has such an inner and usually unrealized resistance towards killing a fellow man that he will not of his own volition take life if it is possible to turn away from that responsibility.... At the vital point he becomes a conscientious objector.⁵

Marshall had conducted a mammoth study of firing rates in U.S. combat infantrymen during World War Two, and found surprising, but remarkably consistent results. His study concluded that “only 15 to 20 percent of the American riflemen *in combat* during World War Two would fire at the enemy.”⁶ The other 80 to 85 percent were not cowards. They did not run away or hide, but in fact were often willing to risk their lives to rescue others, or run messages. Yet these men “simply would not fire their weapons at the enemy, even when faced with repeated waves of bonzai charges.”⁷ Marshall had discovered “the simple and demonstrable fact that there is within most men an intense resistance to killing their fellow man. A resistance so strong that, in many circumstances, soldiers on the battlefield will die before they can overcome it.”⁸

Yet the killings carried out by Charlie Company in My Lai stand in stark contrast to this fact. Their killing spree was a methodical mass-execution. For four hours they

⁵ Grossman, *On Killing* 2

⁶ Grossman, *On Killing* 4

⁷ Grossman, *On Killing* 4

⁸ Grossman, *On Killing* 4

tore apart the village, some committing mutilations, beatings, and rapes as they went. They herded people into ditches so they could more efficiently fire into their masses. Their calculated violence did not even spare children or babies. The unfathomable horror of the My Lai Massacre demands that we ask how it could happen. How was the human resistance to killing in the boys from so Charlie Company so completely destroyed? What made this transformation so total and utterly complete that they were able to kill 500 unarmed and unresisting civilians?

Many factors contributed to the ultimate reality that made monsters out of men. The My Lai Massacre was a product of the nature of the Vietnam War, not the individual men that carried it out. While the scope of the massacre at My Lai was unprecedented, atrocity was the rule rather than the exception in Vietnam. This thesis tells the story of how the Vietnam War eroded the morals, and ultimately the humanity, of the men of Charlie Company. Because the soldiers that carried out the My Lai Massacre were acting out roles they had been conditioned to play by the American way of war, the atrocity should not be seen as a series of crimes by crazed individuals, but as a manifestation of the broader dynamic of brutality toward civilians that pervaded the Vietnam War.

Chapter One

The United States in Vietnam

*Vietnam is still with us. It has created doubts about American judgment, about American credibility, about American power – not only at home, but throughout the world.*⁹ – Henry Kissinger

Our names for wars reveal a lot about how we remember them. World War One was called “the Great War,” at the time, and Woodrow Wilson dubbed it “the War to End All Wars”. These names are a reflection for the unprecedented scale of killing, and the rethinking of the international system the conflicts provoked. World War Two was the “good war,” a struggle against the evil of fascist aggression. Korea is “the forgotten war,” perhaps because it ended in stalemate, or perhaps because it too closely followed the dramatics of World War Two. Where does this leave Vietnam? It is the only war the United States has lost. It eventually divided the country rather than uniting it. It forced the country to reexamine its place in the world community. Was it “the bad war,” “the wrong war,” or even “the war of disillusionment?”

Vietnam may have been the wrong war, a conflict we entered because American policy makers insisted on seeing the war through the prism of the Cold War. Vietnam historian Robert Schulzinger points out that “The war in Vietnam was never strictly about Vietnam for the Americans who directed it, fought in it, or opposed it. The United States became involved in Vietnamese politics and eventually fought in Vietnam because of the Cold War.”¹⁰ Southeast Asia became the front line of worldwide ideological struggle. In

⁹ Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* 9

¹⁰ Schulzinger, *A Time for War* 329

this view it was America's noble duty to halt the advance of the menacing monolith of Communism. President Lyndon Johnson situated the war in such terms in this address to the American public:

In the forties and fifties, we took our stand in Europe to protect the freedom of those threatened by aggression. Now the center of attention has shifted to another part of the world where aggression is on the march and the enslavement of free men is the goal... That is why it is vitally important to every American family that we stop the Communists in South Vietnam.¹¹

For Johnson, and policy makers from the White House to the Pentagon, Communism was America's greatest threat. And it was on the rise. In only half a century, Communist governments had gained control of Russia, Eastern Europe, China, North Korea, Cuba, and now they were threatening Vietnam. Johnson felt that a line must be drawn to stop Communism, or it would continue to proliferate across the globe. "The American crusade," Historian Stanley Karnow writes, "propelled as it was by the 'domino theory,' and the naïve assumption that the entire region would collapse to the Communists if they won in Vietnam, disregarded the complex nationalistic diversity of Southeast Asia."¹²

The American government looked at the nationalists from North Vietnam and saw operatives from Moscow. The United States sent its own troops to do what French troops before them could not – prop up the South Vietnamese government. In intervening the United States staked its credibility on winning a war that it did not understand, and put its soldiers into a crucible of Vietnamese nationalism and internal politics that had been heating up for hundreds of years. For the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong, this conflict had nothing to do with the Cold War, it was simply another chapter in a

¹¹ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 27

¹² Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* 43

centuries long struggle for Vietnamese self-determination. Vietnam Historian Stanley Karnow writes:

The essential reality of the struggle was the Communists, imbued with an almost fanatical sense of dedication to a reunified Vietnam under their control, saw the war against the United States and its South Vietnamese ally as the continuation of two thousand years of resistance to Chinese and later French rule. They were prepared to accept limitless casualties to attain their sacred objective.¹³

While the United States may have drastically mistaken both the motives and the resolve of the Vietnamese, at least policy makers recognized that the conflict would not be a simple one. Robert Schulzinger writes:

Even as they climbed the ladder of escalation, Americans knew that they would not easily prevail. President Johnson was often more aware of the dangers than many of his more hawkish advisers. He knew the governments of South Vietnam were weak, and he recognized the fragility of domestic support for the war effort. But he could not bring himself to turn back; the Cold War and American credibility seemed to matter too much.”¹⁴

The momentum of the ideological struggle, coupled with a righteous sense of American exceptionalism, proved enough to propel the nation into war, even the wrong war.

Vietnam was also a war of disillusionment. In the 1960s, America was still living out John Winthrop’s 1630 proclamation that the nation was to be a shining city upon a hill. The nation had brought democracy to the contemporary world. It had never lost a war, and after World War Two it had taken its rightful place as the economic and political engine of the free world. “I think there is a good deal of evidence that we

¹³ Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* 17

¹⁴ Schulzinger, *A Time for War* 330

thought all along that we were a redeemer nation. There was a lot of illusion in our national history,” Prominent theologian Reinhold Neibur wrote of the war, “Now it is about to be shattered.”¹⁵ The war in Vietnam helped to expose the hidden cracks in American society. Divisions between rich and poor, as well as whites and minorities, were illuminated by the blaze of Vietnam. The country lost its sense of self-assurance, and it came to blame the Vietnam War for this. Samuel Hynes writes, it was “a war of national disillusionment that changed the way a generation thought about its country, its leaders, and war itself.”¹⁶

Vietnam historian Robert Schulzinger claims that the war has a still greater significance, as a catalyst for the political and social upheaval of the 1960s. He says, “the Vietnam War stands as the sort of watershed event for American politics, foreign policy, culture, values, and economy in the 1960s that the Civil War was in the 1860s and the Great Depression was in the 1930s.”¹⁷ The significance of Vietnam in American domestic politics and society has been long reaching. Many of the fissures it created in American self-identity are still uncomfortable and unresolved.

The My Lai Massacre plays a role in both the wrong war and the war of disillusionment. When Americans found out about it in 1969, they became aware of how little they knew about the war in Vietnam. My Lai came as one of the nation’s first shocks about the nature of that war. Historian Michael Bilton claims that the massacre

¹⁵ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 3

¹⁶ Hynes, *The Soldier’s Tale* 179

¹⁷ Schulzinger, *A Time for War* ix

clearly shifted American opinions towards the war. In an interview he said “[My Lai] was too big a price to pay, that if you were going to have to win this war by this kind of conduct, then it wasn’t a price worth paying.”¹⁸ In short, fighting the Vietnam War meant atrocity and massacre, this might be a war the public did not want to fight. My Lai was also a strong factor in national disillusionment. Many Americans reacted to the massacre with disbelief. Presidential candidate Barry Goldwater claimed in a radio interview that he did not believe American soldiers were capable of committing such an atrocity.¹⁹ The same U.S. military that had stormed the beaches at Normandy was now implicated in the mass slaughter of unarmed civilians. The nation itself was implicated in the crime.

The ultimate result of the Vietnam War was devastating for both Vietnam and the United States. Schulzinger writes that for Vietnam, “the cost included three million dead, as many as fifteen million made refugees at different times throughout the war, and horrible physical devastation...”²⁰ The country of Vietnam would take years to recover, plagued by hunger and turmoil for decades after unification. The United States, on the other hand, suffered the loss of 58,000 young men and still carries the ghosts of the polarizing and devastating conflict. Karnow writes that the United States, one of the world’s superpowers “which had brought to bear stupendous military power to crack Communist morale, itself shattered under the strain of a struggle that seemed to be

¹⁸ American Experience, *My Lai*

¹⁹ Maxwell, interview

²⁰ Schulzinger, *A Time for War* 335

interminable.”²¹ Samuel Hynes suggests that the unresolved memory of Vietnam offers, at best, guidance for the future. It reminds us of our own fallibility, the limits of our strength, and the waste of war. He writes:

The story of the Vietnam War is a cautionary tale for our time, the war story that can teach us most.... For the people of the United State, the Vietnam War is more than a lesson in political unwisdom. It lingers in American minds like the memory of an illness, a kind of fever that weakened the country until its people were divided and its cause was lost.²²

²¹ Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* 20

²² Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale* 177

Chapter Two

The Great Society

*The decision to kill was not Larry's. Nor Lieutenant Calley's. Nor his superior officer, Captain Medina's. Nor Lieutenant Colonel Barker's. It was America's decision. For whatever reason, America decided that there would be killing, and insofar as these men killed, they were all doing America's bidding.*²³ – Scott Peck

In analyzing how the My Lai Massacre the first factor that must be accounted for is the men. Were they fundamentally brutal or evil? Were they somehow different from the rest of the other 2,600,000 American troops that served in Vietnam over the course of the war?²⁴ This chapter explores where the men of Charlie Company had they come from, and how they found themselves in Vietnam.

The answer seems to be that Charlie Company was not substantially different than any other group of American soldiers. On the contrary, they may as well have been the archetypal American rifle company. The Defense Department's own investigation of the massacre, the Peers Commission, concluded “the men were generally representative of the typical cross section of American youth assigned to most combat units throughout the Army.”²⁵

They were lead to Vietnam in March of 1968 by the same forces that lead the bulk of the United States Army there. The demographics of combat units in the U.S. military in Vietnam bore less resemblance to a cross section of American society than it had in any previous war. Samuel Hynes writes:

²³ Peck, *People of the Lie* 231

²⁴ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 113

²⁵ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 51

For the Vietnam War, the United States chose not to send the middle-class young men who had written the war narratives of the two world wars, but sent instead young men from the lower end of the social ladder – the rural and urban poor, the unemployed and unemployable, with heavy concentrations from the areas where jobs were scarce: the cities and the South.²⁶

On paper, military recruitment distributions appeared to be equitable, with representation of minorities and classes roughly proportional to American society. However, in reality a well-honed system of deferments, exemptions, and volunteer specializations kept much of the nation's upper economic strata well away from the fighting. According to historian Bernd Greiner, "Depending on whether one looks at the whole duration of the war or one single year, the proportion of those exempted from military service varies between thirty-five and sixty-five percent."²⁷ For example, one widely-used deferment was for higher education. By nature, this deferment favored the better-educated and wealthier sons of American families, who were scholastically and financially prepared to attend college.

These exemptions were often secured for the sons of upper and middle class households, while the Army was filled out by men from lower and working class families. Three quarters of the Army were drawn from the working and lower classes, while only a quarter from middle and upper class families with incomes higher than the national average.²⁸ This dynamic was the subject of 1969 Creedence Clearwater Revival hit, *Fortunate Son*, which reflects the feeling that the wealthy and privileged were safe from the war.

²⁶ Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale* 183

²⁷ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 113

²⁸ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 114

And when the band plays hail to the chief,
they point the cannon at you.

It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no senator's son.
It ain't me, it ain't me; I ain't no fortunate one.

Some folks inherit star spangled eyes,
They send you down to war,
And when you ask them, how much should we give?
they only answer more, more, more!²⁹

These excerpts of the lyrics indicate a feeling that the war was chosen by the privileged class, who kept their own sons safe while sending young men they saw as expendable to war. As Bernd Greiner wrote, policy makers “sent into the field the youngest sons of those who did not live in leafy suburbs, men who played an increasingly marginal role in the calculations of their electoral strategists.”³⁰ America’s poor were most exposed to the draft because they had the least access to exemptions. In the 1960s the burden of poverty, and therefore of the draft as well, fell especially heavily on minorities.

It is important to note, however, that 65% of the American soldiers that served in Vietnam were volunteers, including most of the men of Charlie Company.³¹ This does not necessarily mean that the men felt like they had a choice about being at war. Enlisting voluntarily had certain advantages over waiting to be drafted. While voluntary enlistment meant signing on for three years of service rather than being pressed into two, it offered recruits the opportunity to choose where the Army placed them. Specialization was a last resort for many men, including my dad, who accepted that they could not avoid serving in the armed forces, but still hoped to avoid duty as grunts. After receiving his

²⁹ Creedence Cleawater Revival, *Fortunate Son*

³⁰ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 115

³¹ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 114

draft notice, my dad volunteered, accepting an extra year in the Army in exchange for the chance to qualify for a specialization as an Army journalist.

Educated young men often were in better positions to take advantage of these deals, just as with they were with the draft. Conversely, youth from poor families may not have known these exemptions existed in the first place. Because of this, class divisions existed well past recruitment, into the physical makeup of the Army. While minorities and whites made up about the same proportions of the whole Army as they did in the demographics of the general population, minorities made up half of the average infantry company.³² So, while different racial groups were sending roughly proportional numbers of their youth to war, a much higher percentage of black and latino families had their sons maimed and killed. Charlie Company is a characteristic example of the makeup of infantry companies in Vietnam. For instance, while blacks made up roughly ten percent of the American population, they accounted for nearly half the members of Charlie Company.³³

It was the least fortunate sons of American society that made up infantry outfits in Vietnam, and they knew it. The Army was made up of men whom society had given least to, and who were now sent to fight for a country that they felt would not fight for them. Many such soldiers were full of resentment for the war before they even saw Vietnam. It is a sad irony that while President Johnson's social programs made efforts to ameliorate domestic divisions based upon class and race, his war and military only served to deepen them.

³² Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 115

³³ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 51

Another demographic anomaly of the Vietnam War was the uniquely young average age of the soldiers that fought in it. Historian Stanley Karnow writes:

The average age of the American soldier in Vietnam was nineteen, seven years younger than his father had been in World War II, which made him more vulnerable to the psychological strains of the struggle – strains that were aggravated by the special tension of Vietnam, where every peasant might be a Vietcong terrorist.³⁴

The high concentration of youths was not limited to the rank and file of enlisted men. Many non-commissioned officers, as well as commissioned officers were little older or more mature than the men they commanded.³⁵

The youth of the American fighting forces was a reflection of another choice made by the country's policy makers. Rather than creating an Army of citizen soldiers, the Department of Defense created an army of teenagers. These soldiers had the least to leave behind in the states, but they were also immature, and unanchored to the stabilizing influences of families and careers. Nineteen-year-olds were sent for convenience, because they make compliant soldiers. As Gwynne Dyer's writes in *War*, "you can train older men to be soldiers... but you can never get them to believe that they like it, which is the major reason armies try to get their recruits before they are twenty."³⁶

Sending teenagers to Vietnam was also politically expedient; it avoided sending fathers and businessmen into war. However, it had consequences in the conduct of the war, which would be fought by young soldiers, experiencing combat "during one of the

³⁴ Karnow, *Vietnam: a History* 26

³⁵ Grossman, *On Killing* 265

³⁶ Grossman, *On Killing* 264

most malleable and vulnerable stages of their lives.”³⁷ Samuel Hynes writes that the Vietnam Army was “an army of eighteen-year-olds, away from home for the first time, with only a few months of training to turn them from boys into soldiers, unused to taking responsibility or making moral decisions, dropped into an alien and fearful place.”-“It would be an army of uncertain, frightened boys.”³⁸ Grossman suggests, “the combatants were without the leavening of mature, older soldiers that has always been there in past wars.”³⁹ Essentially, the United States was sending teenagers into combat zones without adult supervision. These young men were on their own in the jungle, isolated from everything they had ever known, harassed by a phantom enemy, with only time and firepower to spare.

Again, Charlie Company was a characteristic example of the dynamic, with most of its men between 18 and 22 years old. Lt. William Calley was 24 years old at the time of the My Lai Massacre. Captain Ernest Medina was 31.⁴⁰ In fact, Charlie Company was typical of the American troops in Vietnam in almost every way. They were average nineteen-year-old American boys. If there is nothing unusual about the men of Charlie Company that could have led them to mass murder, the causes of the massacre must be found elsewhere.

³⁷ Grossman, *On Killing* 264

³⁸ Hynes, *The Soldier's Tale* 184

³⁹ Grossman, *On Killing* 265

⁴⁰ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 48, 52

Chapter Three

Military Strategy

General Westmoreland's strategy of attrition also had an important effect on our behavior. Our mission was not to win terrain or seize positions, but simply to kill: to kill Communists and to kill as many of them as possible. Stack 'em like cordwood. Victory was a high body-count, defeat a low kill-ratio, war a matter of arithmetic.... It is not surprising, therefore, that some men acquired a contempt for human life and a predilection for taking it.⁴¹ – Phillip Caputo

The Vietnam War was fought by both sides as a war of attrition, each seeking to destroy the other's will and ability to fight. For the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, victory was a matter of waiting out the American occupation. "We don't need to win military victories," said a colonel in the North Vietnamese Army, "we only need to hit them until they give up and get out".⁴² For the United States, the objective was to annihilate so many enemy guerrillas that the Viet Cong could no longer field an army. General Westmoreland, the commander of American forces in Vietnam, once summed up the American war strategy in this way: "We'll just go on bleeding them until Hanoi wakes up to the fact that they have bled their country to the point of national disaster for generations."⁴³ The consequences of this particularly brutal kind of warfare were devastating to the country of Vietnam and its people, as well as to the soldiers that fought in the war.

Attrition warfare is ugly, costly, and slow. It was not the American strategy because it was the best choice, but because it was the only choice. Other means of

⁴¹ Caputo, *A Rumor of War* xvii

⁴² Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 31

⁴³ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 56

victory were implausible. The United States could not march on Hanoi because crossing the Demilitarized Zone in Vietnam would bring the massive Chinese Army into the war on the side of North Vietnam. American commanders feared the Chinese would force a stalemate in Vietnam as they had done in Korea a decade before.⁴⁴ So the United States would fight a war against the Viet Cong guerrillas of South Vietnam as well as the North Vietnamese Army, but it would do so only in Southern Vietnam.

Furthermore, a war of attrition was a war the United States believed it could win. The United States had at its disposal the means to explode, incinerate, and defoliate enormous stretches of countryside; and could employ naval ships, B-52s, and heavy artillery to do so. Surely, military planners thought, such a well-funded and equipped fighting force could not lose a war of attrition to peasants in pajamas.

By the late 1960s, the United States had brought the full weight of its military and industrial might to bear in Southeast Asia. Evidence that the war effort spared no expense can be found in the forty-two ice cream plants the government built in Vietnam to supply the troops with comfort food.⁴⁵ More telling though, is the unprecedented amount of high explosives the United States expended in the war. Between 1966 and 1968 alone, the United States dropped 2,865,808 tons of bombs on Vietnam, nearly a third more munitions than it had spent in all theatres of World War Two combined.⁴⁶ Over the course of the Vietnam War, the United States fired seven million tons of

⁴⁴ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 56

⁴⁵ Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale* 184

⁴⁶ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 28

artillery in North and South Vietnam.⁴⁷ What this amounted to was twenty-six million bomb craters in a country of less than 130,000 square miles.³ In 1967, *Life* magazine reported that the cost of killing a single Viet Cong guerilla was \$400,000, which included 75 bombs and 150 artillery shells.⁴⁸ Another study concluded that the United States expended 50,000 rounds of ammunition enemy killed.⁴⁹ The United States was willing to pay an exorbitant price to pummel Vietnam into submission. All told, the United States spent a staggering \$120 billion to fight the Vietnam War.⁵⁰

The nature of the war of attrition meant that killing Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers was the chief goal of American military planners. This was a war unlike the ones they had fought throughout history. South Vietnam was already occupied by American forces and administered by a friendly government. There was no invasion, no advancing fronts. Fighting the insurgency was a matter of rooting them out in areas that were already ostensibly under American control. Therefore the United States was forced to measure its success in the war by how many enemies it had killed. Without the benefit of “dramatic and easily comprehended standards of success, it was not surprising that the body count should grab the attention of policy makers, media, and public alike”.⁵¹

This measure of success gave the Vietnam War a particularly grizzly demeanor. In traditional wars, the primary objectives had been rivers, bridges, and cities. The

⁴⁷ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 29

⁴⁸ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 33

⁴⁹ Grossman, *On Killing* 254

⁵⁰ Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* 24

⁵¹ Gartner, *Body Counts and “Success” in the Vietnam and Korean Wars* 379

killing of enemy soldiers was a secondary task - a means to the greater end of securing the next objective. In past wars, armies could fight entire wars without so frankly recognizing that their true purpose was to kill. However, in Vietnam, the goal was painfully simple: to kill as many Viet Cong as possible. This was a new kind of driving force, and it gave Vietnam a new kind of character.

Greiner explains:

Above all, many commanding officers were personally committed to a strategy of aggressive war unfettered by scruples. Because their success was measured in a 'body count' balance sheet and future promotion depended on a positive assessment in Vietnam, in the end it did not matter by what ways and means the desired 'kill ratios' were reached.⁵²

Small American units, operating autonomously in large stretches of Vietnamese countryside had a directive to kill as many Viet Cong as possible, and an incentive to define "Viet Cong" as broadly as possible. This helped to give birth to the rule of thumb that Lieutenant Caputo learned in the bush after trying to disambiguate official distinctions between combatants and civilians: "the skipper finally said, 'Look, I don't know what this is supposed to mean, but I talked to battalion and they said that as far as they're concerned, if he's dead and Vietnamese, he's VC.'"⁵³

Greiner writes, "McNamara's insistence on the body count, together with the concept of a mathematically calculable breaking-point of the enemy, presented the usual delusion of feasibility in the unusual form of business management statistics."⁵⁴ He explains, "an area was occupied, cleared out, occupied once more and again cleared out

⁵² Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 20

⁵³ Caputo, *A Rumor of War* 74

⁵⁴ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 64

by one's own troops, over and over again and always in the hope that the enemy would follow up with fresh troops which would fall under massive fire from American units."⁵⁵

The vacuum trap was the new war of attrition. Always aware that they were fighting communists, the U.S. Military loved to quote Mao Zedong, "especially the saying that 'the guerillas are the fish and the people are the sea.' But the solution to that problem was draining the sea."⁵⁶ The United States drained the sea by clearing vast areas of the Vietnamese countryside of their civilian inhabitants, and then declaring the areas *free fire zones*, allowing the United States to carry out unrestrained warfare on the only people left, presumably the Viet Cong. Free fire zones were relentlessly pounded by explosives and herbicides as the Army sought to destroy crops and villages that might help the Viet Cong. Greiner reports that while the vacuum trap policy was never officially declared, the United States pursued it with "rigorous determination."⁵⁷

The first step in creating free fire zones was clearing them of civilians, or at least making a show of doing so. The United States and the South Vietnamese government tried to resettle the peasants first by means of leaflets that asked them to leave their homes. Typical of the leaflets dropped in free fire zones is this example: "Dear Citizens: ... The U.S. Marines will not hesitate to destroy immediately, any village or hamlet harboring the Vietcong... The choice is yours."⁵⁸ The United States employed the use of

⁵⁵ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 56

⁵⁶ American Experience, *My Lai*

⁵⁷ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 74

⁵⁸ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 75

leaflets almost as prolifically as it did bombs. 50 billion leaflets were dropped on Vietnam; 1,500 for every person in the country.⁵⁹

Yet in spite of their enormous numbers, the leaflets dropped to the Vietnamese peasants likely had very little effect. Most of the Vietnamese peasants were illiterate and unable to read the warnings; dropped down to them from thousands of feet by a foreign power. Even if they had they been able to decipher these alien messages, they might have been unlikely to take advice from a country that had already indiscriminately bombed and strafed them. Finally, in spite of the perceived impermanence and expandability of the villages on the part of the Americans, to the Vietnamese they were far more than thatched huts and mud. Greiner writes, “in the eyes of their inhabitants, villages were much more than places to live or cultivate; they were revered as shrines, the natural world around them was the home of the spirits they prayed to and the graves of their ancestors were symbols of death and reincarnation. Leaving these places was unthinkable.”⁶⁰

If the leaflets were ineffectual, there were other means of resettling the peasantry. Most of the civilians in Vietnam that resettled did so because they had no choice. The United States and South Vietnamese governments forcibly resettled four million Vietnamese peasants into government created fortified villages called ‘agrovilles’.⁶¹ In spite of the public declarations of the United States that it was in Vietnam to protect the civilians, it quietly held the 3,000 refugee camps filled with dispossessed peasants as a

⁵⁹ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 60

⁶⁰ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 73

⁶¹ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 74

mark of success in draining the sea. Greiner writes, “high numbers of refugees were interpreted as a successful weakening of the Viet Cong.”⁶²

Although there were millions of refugees of the Vietnam War, those civilians who were able to, chose to stay in their villages. In the last twenty-five years these peasants had seen occupation by the French, the Japanese, the French again, and now the Americans. Their indifference towards the American presence was a callous that had been painfully earned by decades of continuous warfare. In spite of the fact that many Vietnamese remained inside the areas that had been declared free fire zones, the United States still chose to treat these areas as exactly that.

Greiner explains:

For the Americans, the whole point of clearing an area of countryside of its people was so that anyone who remained must be Viet Cong. These areas became free-fire zones. Anything that happened to someone in a free-fire zone was their own fault; they could expect the worst. The belief that the people had been given a chance to get out and had made their choice made the strategy more morally workable. In a free-fire zone, the pursuit of a high body count could proceed unencumbered by the need to discriminate between combatants and civilians at all.⁶³

Although the leaflets were demonstrably ineffectual on the peasants they were dropped on, the thousands of leaflets blowing around must have been a ubiquitous site for another group of people in Vietnam: the American soldiers. The leaflets gave the GIs operating in free fire zones reassurance that everyone had fair warning to get out. If a GI in a free fire zone made a kill that was questionable, they knew that the dead had been warned that civilians were told to leave. This view is iterated by a soldier from the 25th

⁶² Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 75

⁶³ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 60

Division, who said, “If these people want to stay there and support the Communists, then they can expect to be bombed.”⁶⁴ From there, it was only a short jump to thinking of everyone in the free fire zones as the enemy, as this GI put it in 1967:

They’re all VC or at least helping them – same difference. You can’t convert them, only kill them. Don’t lose any sleep over those dead children – they grow up to be commies too. This is a war and we have to stop the commies any way we can, using whatever we’ve got.⁶⁵

My Lai was located in one such free fire zone that by 1968 had already been devastated by American firepower. The institutional mentality of indifference towards civilian life that the “vacuum trap” policy was based on can be seen in statements made by members of Charlie Company after the massacre. Kenneth Hodges, a squad leader, stated “the order was to kill or destroy everything in the village, the children happened to be there. The people of that village were Vietcong or Vietcong sympathizers. Maybe some see it differently. That’s the way I see it.”⁶⁶

The American war effort, largely unbridled by expense or collateral damage, proved to be very effective at accomplishing its purpose of killing enemy soldiers. Bernd Greiner notes, “At the climax of the war at the end of 1967 the Communist side relied on a force of about 200,000 combat troops.... In the period from 1964 to 1975, however, about 444,000 soldiers of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army lost their lives on the battlefield. In other words, the Communist side lost a complete army twice over.”⁶⁷ However, the American way of war came at very dear price to the Vietnamese

⁶⁴ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 72

⁶⁵ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 84

⁶⁶ American Experience, *My Lai*

⁶⁷ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 39

civilians, of which two million were killed over the course of the war.⁶⁸ Even these high levels of both military and civilian casualties were not enough to break the will of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong.

The leaders on the communist sides had already fought occupation by the Japanese and the French, and were well prepared for the challenges of asymmetrical warfare. They knew that American soldiers would not parse bullets discriminating between combatants and civilians, and it is likely the Viet Cong hoped they would not. Greiner writes, “the guerrillas happily accepted that [the Americans] would not make this distinction, thereby deliberately and even intentionally risking the lives of non-participants.” As evidence of this Greiner cites “a Vietnamese political functionary in a US Army study: ‘The Party has been guided by the principle that it is better to kill ten innocent people than to let one enemy escape’”.⁶⁹ The Vietnamese may have pushed this part of their strategy into horrific extremes. One account by a former Viet Cong agent claims, “Children were trained to throw grenades. Not only for the terror factor, but so the government or American soldiers would have to shoot them. Then the Americans feel very ashamed. And they blame themselves and call their soldiers war criminals”.⁷⁰

The historical record is unclear to what extent the Viet Cong deliberately placed civilians in the line of fire, and to what extent they regretted these losses, but it is clear that they were a part of the Viet Cong strategy of asymmetrical war. Greiner writes, “the price the civilians paid was of no account; the importance was the price to be extorted

⁶⁸ Tucker, *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War*

⁶⁹ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 38

⁷⁰ Grossman, *On Killing* 267

from the enemy: the fact that he was gradually renouncing his claim to represent a morally superior cause, was exposed in the eyes of the people had come to Vietnam to protect, and not least discredited in world opinion.”⁷¹ Put more explicitly, the Viet Cong knew the American excursion in Vietnam was rooted in an American belief that it was fighting for a good cause. Standing in the way of Communism’s progress was regarded as the noble burden borne by the protector of the free world. The Viet Cong sought to turn the war from a “good war” to a “dirty war”, frustrating the morals and high purpose that brought America to Southeast Asia. The Viet Cong made the American belief in its own “moral high ground” a primary target. Former Vietnamese Colonel Bui Tin explained:

The American rear was vulnerable. Every day our leadership would listen to world news over the radio at 9 a.m. to follow the growth of the American anti-war movement...The conscience of America was part of its war-making capability, and we were turning that power in our favor. America lost because of its democracy; through dissent and protest it lost the ability to mobilize a will to win”.⁷²

For the Americans, the peasants were an obstruction and inconvenience at best, and suspicious and threatening at worst. Collateral damage to civilian populations was viewed as a negative but necessary consequence of asymmetrical war. For the Viet Cong, the peasants were human shields, bait, and a necessary sacrifice. More than anyone, the peasants lost the war. Unwillingly, they had become the great battlefield of Vietnam.

⁷¹ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 38

⁷² Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 37

The GIs of Charlie Company, like all American soldiers in Vietnam, had been warned against unnecessary violence towards civilians. They had been lectured on the rules of engagement. American leadership stressed the importance of gentility towards the peasants. To this end, the Army took cursory efforts to train their teenage infantry against using their M-16s and explosives irresponsibly. To be carried along with their equipment, soldiers were issued two cards outlining the soldier's responsibility towards civilians. Inscribed on the cards were trite guidelines typified by the following:

“Treat the sick and wounded captive as best you can... he is a human being and must be treated like one,” and “The soldier shows his strength by his fairness, firmness and humanity to the persons in his hands”.⁷³ Bilton reports that by the time of the My Lai Massacre the Army had issued “scores of directives issued by the military command in which avoidance of civilian casualties at all costs is emphasized in the strongest terms.”⁷⁴

However, while the soldiers were operating under the guidance of all of those directives affirming the value of Vietnamese life, they had another kind of directive to learn from as well: experience. GIs in Charlie Company and across Vietnam saw firsthand, in the field, how the American military planners really felt about the peasants in the countryside. They were expendable. The GIs knew that commanders felt no qualms about killing civilians.

This was illustrated to the GIs as they saw explosives from their warplanes and artillery destroy villages frequently, and with little provocation. Bilton claims, “from the beginning of American involvement, it had become common practice for patrols to call

⁷³ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 37

⁷⁴ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 37

for artillery or an air strike if they received even sniper fire from a village – irrespective of whether civilians also sheltered there. By the end of 1966, fighter bombers were making up to four hundred such sorties a day.”⁷⁵ The evidence shows that this policy was followed fairly consistently. Bilton reports that by 1967, American fighter-bombers were making up to four hundred such strikes on villages every day.⁷⁶ An Air Force Captain explained the simplicity of decision making in such cases: “the villages were very small, like a mound in a swamp. There were no names for some of them...the U.S. Air Force had spotters looking for muzzle flashes, and if that flash came from that dot, they’d wipe out the village. It was that simple.”⁷⁷

As the American war effort expanded, so did civilian casualties. Bilton writes, “civilian casualties among the people of the South whom the Americans had come to Vietnam to protect rose from an estimated 100,000 a year in 1965 to 300,000 a year in 1968.”⁷⁸ Smoldering villages became part of the landscape of the Vietnam War seen by GIs on the walking tour. Samuel Hynes writes, “civilians were killed distantly by bombs and napalm and artillery shells, and at closer range in infantry attacks on their villages; and the troops as they advanced saw the people they had killed, including the women and children and the old.”⁷⁹

The soldiers of Charlie Company operated in a province that had been particularly devastated by American bombing. In fact, by Charlie Company’s arrival in Quang Ngai

⁷⁵ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 33

⁷⁶ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 33

⁷⁷ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 69

⁷⁸ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 33

⁷⁹ Hynes, *The Soldiers’ Tale* 189

Province, seventy percent of its villages had already been destroyed.⁸⁰ With seven out of ten villages already in ashes, the men would have felt a strong sense of the expendability of Vietnamese lives, homes, and entire villages.

The GIs may not have questioned the difference between killing civilians with bombs and with guns, but the conclusion that Vietnamese life had little value would certainly have been abundantly clear. Charlie Company was only in Vietnam for three months before they committed the massacre at My Lai. Likely it did not take even that long for most American GIs to learn the critical lesson that “the only good gook is a dead gook,” something my dad found out after his first week in country.

My dad, a veteran of the same division as Charlie Company, confirms that brutality towards civilians was not simply a byproduct of the war, it was an institutional mentality. Upon arriving in Vietnam in July of 1968, Dad was sent to the Americal Division’s headquarters for a week of in-country training at its replacement depot in Chu Lai, the “Combat Center”.

Dad says the infantryman’s single most important directive was made very clear in the Combat Center: “You will maintain the kill ratio,” the GIs were repeatedly told.⁸¹ Furthermore, “In the Combat Center they taught us how to violate the Geneva Conventions, and any other human decency,” he remembers. “They taught us how to cover up the execution of prisoners, and interrogation by helicopter” he said. The latter procedure meant take three or four prisoners up in a helicopter and asking questions. “If

⁸⁰ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 14, 44

⁸¹ Maxwell, interview

the first one doesn't answer," my dad was told, "throw him out. If the second one doesn't answer, throw him out too. By the time you get to the last one, he'll tell you what you want to know," the instructor said."⁸²

"The only good gook is a dead gook," was an often-repeated phrase that seemed to sum up the Army's take on the war. While not every member of Charlie Company would have passed through the Americal's combat center at headquarters, the institutionalized brutality that was taught there suggests that, as my dad put it, "the My Lai mentality came straight from the top." My dad passed through the Combat Center in July of 1968, only six months after the My Lai Massacre, so his account should provide a reasonably accurate picture of how the Americal Division functioned during the timeframe in question. Furthermore, because the Army's own investigation of the massacre would eventually charge both the commander and assistant commander of the Americal Division for negligence and dereliction of duty in failing to investigate reports of the massacre, it is plausible to assume that division commanders were aware of the kind of conduct their soldiers were committing in the field, that they likely knew that some degree of massacre had taken place, and that in failing to investigate these war crimes, gave at least their implicit approval to continuing criminal conduct.⁸³

⁸² Maxwell, interview

⁸³ Peers, *The My Lai Inquiry* 113, 221

Chapter Four

Individuals

There is also the aspect of the Vietnam War that distinguished it from other American conflicts – its absolute savagery. I mean the savagery that prompted so many American fighting men – the good, solid kids from Iowa farms – to kill civilians and prisoners.⁸⁴ – Phillip Caputo

Charlie Company entered the Vietnam War in when America was still in period of heady optimism, in both the cause, and military superiority. 1967 was early in the large-scale stage of American intervention in Vietnam, and enthusiasm for the fight against communism was strong. “The enemy’s hopes are bankrupt,” General Westmoreland had recently proclaimed, “We have reached the important point when the end begins to come into view.”⁸⁵ This optimistic attitude was embodied by the men of Charlie Company. Squad Leader John Smail remembers, “When I first went, I was into the idea that I was going to free these people and stop Communists from spreading.”⁸⁶ Fred Widmer, Charlie Company’s Radio Operator, felt compelled to go to war for similarly patriotic reasons: “Having grown up with parents that came from World War II and people that were in the Korean War... you felt it was basically your duty to go ahead and go to war.”⁸⁷

When the soldiers of Charlie Company arrived in Vietnam, the only thing differentiating them from any other rifle company in the division was an exemplary record in their training at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii. Under the leadership of Captain

⁸⁴ Caputo, *A Rumor of War* xix

⁸⁵ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 45

⁸⁶ American Experience, *My Lai*

⁸⁷ American Experience, *My Lai*

Medina, the men had excelled in exercises in jungle warfare. “We took every award,” Medina later remembered.⁸⁸ Charlie Company had carried out one amphibious assault exercise so successfully that the regimental historian was brought in to make a record of it.⁸⁹

If Charlie Company had left Hawaii as the best in its battalion, carrying notions of valor and heroism, the jarring reality they found in Vietnam must have been disappointing and unsettling. In December 1967 Charlie Company was deployed near the city of Chu Lai, in the boondocks of the I Corps area of South Vietnam, directly south of the demilitarized zone. I Corps was administrated and defended by the Marine Corps, with the exception of the American Division and Task Force Barker, to which Charlie Company belonged.

The men arrived in Vietnam just in time to get a front row seat for the infamous Tet Offensive of February 1968.⁹⁰ According to historian Michael Bilton, Charlie Company was stationed just outside Quang Ngai City during the offensive, a position from which it observed the strength of their enemy. Bilton writes:

through the night they could hear the din of the fighting in Quang Ngai, but more chilling and eerie were the tremendous sights from 60 miles away as munitions dumps were blown up at the gigantic American airfield at Chu Lai.”⁹¹

The green company’s illusions of glory and victory must was sapped by the ominous sight of blazing fires at their own division headquarters. Their disillusionment continued into the next day, as Charlie Company watched an entire battalion of Viet Cong forces

⁸⁸ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 52

⁸⁹ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 52

⁹⁰ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 70

⁹¹ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 69

withdraw from Quang Ngai City, having successfully overrunning a South Vietnamese training center.⁹² The company was helpless to do anything but watch the battalion march by in the distance, as the South Vietnamese government did not permit them to call in artillery.

The Tet Offensive was Charlie Company's initiation to the uncertainty and frustration of the Vietnam War. The Viet Cong, an enemy that American military commanders had repeatedly claimed was at a breaking point, had executed well-organized, simultaneous surprise attacks on numerous South Vietnamese and American positions throughout the country. Whether General Westmoreland recognized it or not, it became very clear to Charlie Company that the enemy was as strong as ever. They began to feel that they were surrounded by the enemy, that the enemy was not afraid of them, and that the fight would not be quick or easy. Charlie Company had arrived in Quang Ngai province believing that it was part of the winning team, but now they began to feel besieged. Lieutenant Calley recalled thinking, "you don't have any place really to go home... think what he (the Viet Cong) would do to your company if he caught you alone."⁹³

As the February of 1968 wore on, Charlie Company learned the hard reality of the Vietnam War. Task Force Barker was given the job of hunting down the 48th Viet Cong Local Force Battalion, the outfit that had assaulted Quang Ngai during the Tet Offensive. Charlie Company, and the others in the task force, searched the province on foot patrol after foot patrol for an elusive enemy. Bilton writes, "The traps always closed empty.

⁹² Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 69

⁹³ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 69

They were chasing phantoms. There was nothing to show for the long, hot, exhausting days tramping through paddy fields and friendless villages.”⁹⁴ Phillip Caputo, a Marine Lieutenant that served in I Corps wrote of the frustration brought on by patrols:

In the vacuum of that jungle, we could have gone in as many directions as there are points on a compass, and any one direction was as likely to lead us to the VC, or away from them, as any other. The guerrillas were everywhere, which is another way of saying they were nowhere.⁹⁵

While Task Force Barker’s patrols searched for a large body of Viet Cong troops, they found the enemy only in booby traps and snipers. Charlie Company began to suffer its first casualties in February. The company was being harassed, they were pawns in the game of the Viet Cong. Squad leader Joe Grimes describes the effects the sporadic and random violence had on the company:

February was our most devastating month for Charlie Company. It drove us to the ground. It’s just like if you had a wound, and they would stick something in that wound and go a little bit deeper. Every time somebody else got killed, and it was like that wound, and it would go a little deeper. And the hurt never stopped.⁹⁶

Attacks appeared from nowhere and disappeared just as suddenly. Machine gunner Greg Olsen described the anxiety and fear this provoked: “When you’re dealing with snipers, it’s like a roulette wheel. You know, there’s 30 or 40 of us out there walking around. Which one of us is going to get it? You know, you – it’s a roll of the dice. And the same thing with the booby-traps.”⁹⁷ The soldiers of Charlie Company were never at ease as they patrolled the jungles of Quang Ngai province. Constant tension prevailed, and the men lived in fear of the very ground they walked on. Phillip Caputo wrote:

⁹⁴ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 70

⁹⁵ Caputo, *A Rumor of War* 113

⁹⁶ American Experience, *My Lai*

⁹⁷ American Experience, *My Lai*

This kind of warfare has its own peculiar terrors. It turns an infantryman's world upside down. The foot soldier has a special feeling for the ground. He walks on it, fights on it, sleeps and eats on it; the ground shelters him under fire; he digs his home in it. But mines and booby traps transform that friendly, familiar earth into a thing of menace, a thing to be feared as much as machine guns or mortar shells. The infantryman knows that any moment the ground he is walking on can erupt and kill him; kill him if he's lucky. If he's unlucky, he will be turned into a blind, deaf, emasculated, legless shell. It was not warfare. It was murder.⁹⁸

Constant anxiety was fully realized as horror on the morning of February 25th, when Charlie Company walked into a minefield. "We had walked into the middle of it before anyone had tripped anything. Anybody who moved to try to help someone just got blown up themselves," one soldier remembered. The company suffered 15 casualties that morning, including three dead.⁹⁹ The effect on the men was profound. Historian Martin Gershen suggests that this single event was so damaging to Charlie Company that it was a factor directly linked to the Massacre. He writes:

Charlie Company...died in an enemy minefield on the morning of February 25, 1968. The haunted, hollow-eyed, shell-shocked survivors who stormed My Lai 4 three weeks later were psychologically twisted, emotionally disturbed wrecks of the boys who had arrived in Vietnam three and a half months earlier.¹⁰⁰

Michael Bernhardt, a member of Charlie Company said, "When you have been through a minefield and put the remains of friends in body bags, nothing shocks you anymore."¹⁰¹

The men of Charlie Company had only been in Vietnam for two months, but they were fully acclimated to the brutality of the war. The shattering of the illusion of their own strength came at a high cost to the moral compass of the group. Psychiatrist Scott Peck describes how this kind of trauma can serve to diminish how life is valued:

⁹⁸ Caputo, *A Rumor of War* 288

⁹⁹ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 84

¹⁰⁰ Gershen, *Destroy or Die* 13

¹⁰¹ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 85

Insensitive to our own suffering, we tend to become insensitive to the suffering of others. Treated with indignity, we lose not only the sense of our own dignity but also the sense of the dignity of others. When it no longer bothers us to see mangled bodies, it will no longer bother us to mangle them ourselves.¹⁰²

Charlie Company had arrived in Vietnam believing it was a troupe of heroes and crusaders, but found that it was just an array of targets on a firing range. There was no dignity even in death. Dying in combat, the greatest patriotic self-sacrifice, was not a *mano a mano* struggle between warriors, but an ignoble, dizzying instant of randomness and shock. In a near constant state of fear and alert, Charlie Company desperately wanted to release the tension by confronting the enemy in a an open battle. However, the Viet Cong refused to admit such open hostilities. Radio Operator Fred Widmer describes the feeling, “You can’t fight. There’s nothing to fight. You can’t fight a booby trap. You can’t fight a sniper” (American Experience).

The men of Charlie Company were continually harassed by the Viet Cong, and constantly in fear of mines and booby traps. While they had lost fully a quarter of their strength to casualties, they had yet to inflict significant damage on their enemy.¹⁰³ The pent up aggression felt by men in rifle companies is described by Phillip Caputo,

I burned with a hatred for the Viet Cong and with an emotion that dwells in most of us, one closer to the surface than we care to admit: a desire for retribution. I did not hate the enemy for their politics, but for murdering Simpson, for executing that boy whose body had been found in the river, for blasting the life out of Walt Levy. Revenge was one of the reasons I volunteered for a line company. I wanted a chance to kill somebody.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Peck, *People of the Lie* 221

¹⁰³ American Experience, *My Lai*

¹⁰⁴ Caputo, *A Rumor of War* 221

While the Viet Cong continued to elude Charlie Company, the men began to direct their animosity and aggression at the Vietnamese they could see: the civilians. On the strategic level, American commanders saw the Viet Cong and the Vietnamese population as very distinct and separate groups. One must be annihilated, the other protected. For the American soldiers walking through Quang Ngai province, the problem was not so simple. They saw the two groups as being more similar than different, and their hatred for and distrust for the other quickly bled together. As psychiatrist Scott Peck wrote, “the Viet Cong, were largely indigenous to the South Vietnamese people, from whom they were often impossible to distinguish. Almost inevitably the specified enemy was generalized to include all Vietnamese, so that the average American soldier did not just hate the Viet Cong, he hated “Gooks” in general.”¹⁰⁵ Or, as the Army’s lead investigator of the My Lai Massacre would later more succinctly observe, many soldiers “viewed the Vietnamese with contempt, considering them subhuman, on the level of dogs.”¹⁰⁶

Many soldiers held the civilians responsible for the enemy mines, and when the enemy could not be found, they took revenge on civilians too. Charlie Company Squad Leader Lawrence La Croix describes how easy it became to blame civilians for the deaths of comrades: “They know where the mines and booby traps are, they have to or they can’t work in the fields, they can’t move between villages, you know. But they’re not gonna tell you. They’re gonna let you blow your leg off.”¹⁰⁷ Radio Operator Fred

¹⁰⁵ Peck, *People of the Lie* 225

¹⁰⁶ Peers, *The My Lai Inquiry* 230

¹⁰⁷ American Experience, *My Lai*

Widmer also remembers how GIs gradually began to conceptualize the enemy as not just the Viet Cong, but all Vietnamese:

We had heard a lot about women and children being used as booby-traps and being members of the Viet Cong. As time went on you tended to believe it more and more. There was no question that they were working for the Viet Cong....You didn't trust them anymore. You didn't trust anybody....And I would say that in the end, anybody that was still in that country was the enemy.¹⁰⁸

So “gooks,” in general became an outlet for the anger that soldiers felt. The GIs may have felt powerless in their fight against the Viet Cong, but they had all the power they wanted over the civilians they encountered. The GIs were young, and they were bigger, and stronger than the Vietnamese villagers. They roved the countryside in gangs, and they had automatic weapons. Some GIs used their power for physical gratification. Greg Olsen, a Charlie Company Machine Gunner, said “I remember one guy that held a young girl at gunpoint and made her perform oral sex on him. And then, he cut off her ponytail and stuck it in his helmet.”¹⁰⁹ Sexual assault and rape were commonplace in Vietnam, and why not? Teenage boys chock-full of hormones, sharpened by fear and calloused by violence, lived in a world where their occupation was killing and every civilian was the enemy.

Greg Olsen explains, “You stick some jerk over there and give him a gun and very little restriction and you stick him in a free-fire zone, he’s going to live out all these things he’d go to prison for in the states.”¹¹⁰ If you could kill, why not rape? Sex, even forced sex, helped petrified and insecure soldiers reassert their masculinity. One soldier

¹⁰⁸ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 74

¹⁰⁹ American Experience, *My Lai*

¹¹⁰ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 81

remembered the drive for sex this way:

It was to let you know you're still a human being... Sex proves you're not a fucking animal. Picture this – you come in off an operation... some of your friends are dead... You know you stunk of fear – you had to get laid. The only release was fucking.¹¹¹

Sexual assaults sometimes included physical mutilations, and were often committed in public, compounding the violation of a single woman's body with the humiliation and emotional torment of not only herself, but her family and community as well. As such, rapes were not only acts of physical gratification for the soldiers that committed them, but exertions of dominance and control over the enemy. While sexual assaults were only committed, or even seen, by few soldiers their occurrence was known and accepted by infantrymen across Vietnam. Charlie Company's Varnado Simpson captured the casual ubiquity of these acts, commenting, "Rape? Oh, that happened every day."¹¹²

Men also sought gratification beating, torturing, and killing Vietnamese outside of combat. Michael Berndhardt, of Charlie Company, recalls how performing these acts on broader and broader categories of Vietnamese became acceptable:

It started with just [killing] plain prisoners – prisoners you thought were the enemy. Then you'd go on to prisoners who weren't the enemy, and then the civilians because there was no difference between the enemy and civilians. It came to the point where a guy could kill anybody.¹¹³

Anger was often taken out on individuals, according to Phillip Caputo. He writes, "It was common knowledge that quite a few captured VC never made it to prison camps; they were reported as 'shot and killed while attempting to escape.' Some line companies did

¹¹¹ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 161

¹¹² Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 81

¹¹³ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 78

not even bother taking prisoners; they simply killed every VC they saw, and a number of Vietnamese who were only suspects.”¹¹⁴

This behavior seems to have been condoned by the leadership of rifle companies across the United States Army, and in Charlie Company especially. Bilton reports, “[Captain] Medina’s dislike of the Vietnamese was clear for everyone to see. GIs who showed kindness to prisoners were rebuked. According to witnesses, Medina himself beat up suspects during interrogation.”¹¹⁵ With at least the tacit approval of the officers, malicious behaviors which were, on paper, very illegal became commonplace. This letter from Greg Olsen, describes how such events would take place:

One of our platoons went on a routine patrol today and came across a 155-millimeter round that was booby-trapped. Killed one man, blew the legs off two others, and injured two more. On their way back to the LZ, they saw a woman working in the fields. They shot and wounded her. Then, they kicked her to death and emptied their magazines into her head. It was murder; I’m ashamed of myself for not trying to do something about it. This isn’t the first time, Dad.¹¹⁶

Revenge could be exacted upon a single Vietnamese civilian, as it was in Olsen’s account, or it could be applied to larger groups - even entire villages. Lieutenant Caputo, in his personal biography of his Vietnam War experience, relates ordering his men to set fire to the Vietnamese village Giao-Tri after his platoon was hit by a booby trap while passing through.

Tit for tat. You let the VC use your village for an ambush site, I think, and now you’re paying the price. It is then I realize that the destruction of Giao-Tri was more than an act of madness committed in the heat of battle. It was an act of retribution as well. These villagers aided the VC, and we taught them a lesson.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Caputo, *A Rumor of War* 229

¹¹⁵ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 79

¹¹⁶ American Experience, *My Lai*

¹¹⁷ Caputo, *A Rumor of War* 110

Torture, rape, and murder were, in part, a factor of the asymmetrical war in which made civilians into combatants. They were also actions in which GIs were able to assert brutal and unlimited power – the power to do anything they wanted – over other people, whom they imagined to be their enemies. Carried out for revenge, for lust, and to assert dominance, these acts all were ways for the fearful soldiers to again feel empowered. They were committed with all the more fervor because of the uncertainty the soldiers felt in their own safety and position. All of these acts were war crimes, but a tiny minority of them ever saw prosecution. This was part of the nature of the war, and the way it was being fought.

Charlie Company had slipped a long way since arriving in Vietnam in December 1967. They had been sniped at, blown up by mines and booby traps, and constantly immiserated by fear of an invisible enemy. Lack of large-scale contact with the Viet Cong left them frustrated, and led them to see the civilians and the enemy as essentially one and the same. Some soldiers took this a step further, making individuals victims of fits of aggression, and outlets for their rage, anguish, and confusion. It was not much further to fall down this slippery slope before an entire village might be destroyed to serve just this purpose.

Chapter Five

The Massacre

The order that was given was to kill everyone in the village. Someone asked if that mean the women and children. And the order was: kill everyone in the village. Because the people that were in the village – the women, the kids, the old men – were VC.... – Sgt. Hodges, Charlie Company¹¹⁸

On the evening of March 15th 1968, Captain Medina gathered the members of Charlie Company around him and briefed them on the next day's mission, the one that would earn them their place in the history books. Medina told the company that in My Lai 4 they'd be directly engaging the 48th Viet Cong Battalion, the same company they had watched retreat from Quang Ngai during the Tet Offensive.¹¹⁹ The enemy strength was estimated at 250 men, so Charlie Company was in for a good fight, Medina told them.¹²⁰ Medina also told them that this was their chance to get even with the VC for the men Charlie Company had lost. Radio Operator Fred Widmer recalls the anticipation the men felt on March 15th, "Your adrenalin started to flow just thinking about the next day. We were going to get into it – and this is what we're here for. Finally, at last, it was gonna happen."¹²¹ The men had every reason to believe they were heading into full-scale combat. Medina would later testify that he had instructed his company in this way: "The village could be destroyed since it was a VC stronghold, to burn the houses down, to kill

¹¹⁸ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 99

¹¹⁹ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 98

¹²⁰ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 98

¹²¹ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 98

all the livestock, to cut any of the crops that might feed the VC, to cave the wells, and destroy the village.”¹²²

The historical record agrees that at this point one of the soldiers asked if the women and children were to be killed as well. However, there has been considerable debate over how Medina answered the question. Medina claims he answered by saying, “No, you do not kill women and children. You must use common sense. If they have a weapon and are trying to engage you, then you can shoot back, but you must use common sense.”¹²³ Many of the soldiers tell a different story. Sergeant Hodges remembers it this way: “The order that was given was to kill everyone in the village. Someone asked if that mean the women and children. And the order was: kill everyone in the village. Because the people that were in the village – the women, the kids, the old men – were VC.... It was quite clear that no one was to be spared in that village.”¹²⁴ Flynn recalled Medina’s answer as “Kill everything that moves.”¹²⁵ In fact, at Calley’s court martial, twenty-one members of Charlie Company testified that Medina had ordered the company to kill everyone in the village.¹²⁶

The debate over whether or not Medina had spoken the order to kill everyone in the village is far less important than the three months of brutality towards the Vietnamese people that the members of Charlie Company had already witnessed and taken part in. By then they would have felt authorized, even expected, to kill indiscriminately in My

¹²² Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 98

¹²³ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 98

¹²⁴ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 99

¹²⁵ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 99

¹²⁶ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 99

Lai regardless of whether or not the question about the women and children never been asked. They were a group of teenagers who, for the most part had volunteered for active duty in a combat zone. They had been trained from the beginning to shoot at targets reflexively, without thinking. They had been picked off by mines, booby traps, and snipers, and they were scared and frustrated. They were operating among people they did not understand, and whom they were deeply suspicious of. They knew that the lives of the Vietnamese mattered little to the Army, as they had seen their commanders use bombs, artillery, and napalm to kill civilians indiscriminately. They had walked among charred corpses in other villages. Some had taken part in the torture of prisoners and the sexual abuse of women, and felt an intoxicating power over other people. They had been encouraged to get high body counts, and they knew that “if it’s dead and Vietnamese, it’s VC”. And they had machine guns. Now they were told this was their chance to get revenge.

At 7:15 am the next morning Charlie Company loaded onto flights of helicopters and was ferried over the treetops of Quang Ngai to its landing zone at My Lai, fifteen minutes away by air.¹²⁷ If Charlie Company took any hostile fire that day, it was at the landing zone. The helicopter pilots told the men it was a “hot” LZ, so as the choppers touched down, door gunners and infantrymen alike poured suppressing fire into the perimeter. Squad leader Lawrence La Croix recalls the confusion: “There were rounds

¹²⁷ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 116

zinging all around. It's hard to tell where they were coming from at that point. We hit the ground and almost immediately started firing into the village area."¹²⁸

It is unclear exactly what happened in the moments after Charlie Company left the landing zone. Charlie Company moved into the hamlet unopposed by any hostile forces, breaking apart into platoons, squads, and fire teams.¹²⁹ The soldiers were on guard, but encountered only unarmed civilians as they advanced. Charlie Company immediately began ransacking My Lai, shooting animals and any Vietnamese that ran¹³⁰. Historian Michael Bilton reports that the massacre started something like this: "Soldiers yelled inside small dwellings for people to come out... If there was no answer, they threw grenades into the shelters and bunkers. Others didn't bother to find out if the bunkers were empty and threw the grenades in regardless."¹³¹ Soon the soldiers began killing Vietnamese civilians in earnest, shooting them in the open, in their homes, and wherever else they found them. They did not discriminate between targets, shooting men, women, children, even babies. One villager from My Lai, a child at the time of the massacre, saw his entire family gunned down. He recalls:

Suddenly an American soldier came in carrying a gun. I saw my father collapse, and then my mother, my grandfather, and my grandmother. They all continued to fall. My brother, younger than me, only three years old, suddenly they blasted his head open. One shot and his head blasted onto the floor.¹³²

¹²⁸ *American Experience, My Lai*

¹²⁹ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 110

¹³⁰ Vietnamese that were running were considered legitimate targets in *free fire zones*

¹³¹ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 111

¹³² *American Experience, My Lai*

The killings, as well as efforts to cover them up, began early that day. By 8:00 am Captain Medina had radioed in fifteen confirmed enemy killed.¹³³

The wholesale destruction of My Lai continued for four hours, and the crimes were not limited to murder. American soldiers performed many horrific assaults; beating, mutilating, and raping women and children.¹³⁴ Not every member of Charlie Company took part in the killings, but most did, including the officers. Some killings were sporadic, other were systematic. As the massacre took place, Ron Haeberle, a photographer for the Army's *Stars and Stripes* newspaper catalogued the atrocities.¹³⁵ He remembers, "It was just shoot, shoot, shoot at anything. I don't care what moved. I mean, the person would come out of a hut. Bang, shoot! It was just complete carnage that day."¹³⁶ First platoon, led by Lieutenant Calley, gathered old men and women, and mothers with children as they advanced, collecting roughly 170 civilians out of the way at a large irrigation ditch on one end of the village. The apex of the violence occurred when Lieutenant Calley ordered his men to fire on this group, killing the elderly, the mothers, and their children en masse.¹³⁷

It was only at this point that anyone moved to intervene in the slaughter. Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson, the pilot of one of several helicopters flying in support of the mission, witnessed the events of the massacre unfold with increasing disbelief throughout the morning. After investigating the killings at the ditch, Thompson could no longer give

¹³³ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 109

¹³⁴ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 129

¹³⁵ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 104

¹³⁶ American Experience, *My Lai*

¹³⁷ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 123

the American troops the benefit of the doubt. Beside himself with distress, Thompson decided that he had to intervene. He sighted a group of ten villagers running for refuge in a makeshift bomb shelter, with American soldiers in pursuit. Acting quickly, Thompson landed his helicopter between the civilians and the soldiers, instructing his door gunners to shoot the American troops if they fired on the civilians. With the help of another pilot, Thompson ensured that the villagers in the bomb shelter were lifted to safety. He personally plucked one blood-covered, but unhurt child from the ditch and flew him to the hospital in the provincial capital, Quang Ngai city. Thompson's report of the war crimes was ignored by his superiors.¹³⁸

Finally, at noon, with the village in shambles and most of its inhabitants murdered, Captain Medina ordered his men to cease firing. Charlie Company had committed an egregious massacre of civilians. In the most heinous manner imaginable, they terrified, beat, molested, and ultimately murdered the villagers of My Lai. The victims of the massacre included over 500 Vietnamese farmers, mothers, fathers, grandparents, children, and babies. The murders themselves were committed by a hundred American boys called Charlie Company, but responsibility for the massacre stretches far beyond, into the heart of the American war machine. To understand the massacre at My Lai, we must understand this story.

¹³⁸ American Experience, *My Lai*

Chapter Six

Stateside

*There's been no case in the history of military justice that has torn this country apart as this one.*¹³⁹
– Presiding judge, court martial of Lt. Calley.

In the weeks and months after the My Lai Massacre, the members of Charlie Company went on soldiering. They spent the rest of their tour patrolling through the jungles of the I Corps area, fighting more skirmishes, taking more casualties, and eventually coming home. Nobody said anything about the massacre beyond confessions to their families and friends. Word of the massacre reached division commanders, but they too kept silent on the matter, choosing not to send the war crimes through official channels. As one historian put it, “Officers up to the top echelons of the Americal Division were more interested in sending on favorable reports about their operations than in asking awkward questions about civilian deaths.”¹⁴⁰

The massacre at My Lai may have vanished from all records except the memories of the witnesses if not for the efforts of a patriotic serviceman named Ronald Ridenhour. Ridenhour first heard about the massacre by chance; he had befriended a few men that had taken part in it. Ridenhour was shocked when his friends told him what they had done, and for the rest of his tour he obsessively worked to find out what had happened at My Lai. Ridenhour was also an aspiring journalist, and he felt compelled to bring the atrocity to light. However, after writing his 1,500 word account of the massacre, he

¹³⁹ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 337

¹⁴⁰ Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory* 51

decided not to peddle the story to newspapers, but to act instead as a citizen. On April 2nd, 1969, over a year after the massacre took place, he mailed his letter to the President, Secretary of Defense, and various senators and congressmen.¹⁴¹

Ridenhour's letter stirred several members of Congress to make inquiries, which led to internal investigations within the military. The machinery of justice began to move not a moment too soon, as formal charges were brought against Lieutenant Calley the day before he was to be discharged from the military, in September 1969.¹⁴²

However, apart from those involved in preliminary investigations, the My Lai Massacre remained completely unbeknownst to the American public. A freelance journalist named Seymore Hersh was about to change all that, and eventually win a Pulitzer Prize in the process. After receiving a tip about the charges being brought against a low-ranking officer for killing civilians, Hersh set to work cataloging what happened at My Lai. His story of the My Lai Massacre was originally turned town by *Life* and *Look* magazines, but he managed to arrange for its simultaneous publication in 35 local newspapers across the country on November 13th 1969.¹⁴³ The story was quickly taken up by leading news sources both domestically and internationally. Hersh had brought the massacre into the public eye, and the story rapidly began to develop a momentum of its own.

News of the massacre came at a time when the American public was still largely ignorant of the nature of the fighting in Vietnam. Historian Bern Greiner writes, “the

¹⁴¹ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 220

¹⁴² Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 247

¹⁴³ Bilton, *Four Hours in My Lai* 254

civilians who had been killed by bombs or massacred by ground troops played no part in press, radio, or television coverage – they were simply invisible.”¹⁴⁴ As Hersh’s story cast light on the treatment of civilians, the American public began to experience a rude awakening to what its war was doing to the people of Vietnam. The media worked to satiate the people’s appetite for more information about not only what had happened at My Lai, but what was happening every day in Vietnam. At this point the most important piece of the My Lai story, the irrefutable evidence which could not be ignored, came into play – the pictures. The photographer, Ronald Haeberle, who had accompanied Charlie Company into My Lai, sold his photographs that depicted the massacre as it unfolded. The graphic images appeared in a Cleveland newspaper, then national television news broadcasts, then *Life* magazine.¹⁴⁵

Soon, My Lai was everywhere. According to historian James S. Olson, “the pictures become almost ubiquitous. And they symbolized evil. And the more they’re shown, the more difficult it is to defend what happened at My Lai, or even to look at whatever extenuating circumstances might have been...”¹⁴⁶ The pictures did more than prove Hersh’s story, they made it real. The American public was forced, over and over, to look at the terrified faces of the My Lai villagers, and at the mangled bodies of women and children their own soldiers had killed. Haeberle’s pictures forced America to reckon with the massacre, and with the Vietnam War itself.

¹⁴⁴ Greiner, *War Without Fronts* 3

¹⁴⁵ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 260

¹⁴⁶ American Experience, *My Lai*

With the American public reeling from news of the war crime, the military had to answer for how the massacre could have happened in the first place, as well as who had been responsible for covering it up. Two weeks after Hersh's story first appeared in newspapers, the military announced the formation of a special commission to investigate the massacre and the cover up, and Calley's trial was put on hold.¹⁴⁷

For the next three and a half months the commission, led by Lieutenant General William R. Peers, painstakingly reconstructed the events of March 16th, 1968 from the testimonies of over four hundred witnesses.¹⁴⁸ The commission's report determined that the causes of the massacre included the following: lack of proper training, hateful attitudes toward Vietnamese, permissive attitude regarding treatment of civilians, poor leadership, psychological factors, organizational problems, the nature of the enemy, and unclear orders.¹⁴⁹ Peer's scathing indictments were softened by military leadership, which replaced the term "cover up" with "not passed up the chain of command," and "massacre" with "tragedy of major proportions."¹⁵⁰ Nonetheless, Peer's report brought charges to twenty-eight officers, all the way up to the commanding general of the Americal Division for covering up the massacre, and down to Captain Medina and Lieutenant Calley for their actions in My Lai.¹⁵¹

Calley would be the first to be court martialled, his trial beginning in the fall of 1970. The prosecution drew a deluge of media attention to Fort Benning, Georgia. The

¹⁴⁷ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 266

¹⁴⁸ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 297

¹⁴⁹ Peers, *The My Lai Inquiry* 229

¹⁵⁰ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 309

¹⁵¹ Peers, *The My Lai Inquiry* 212

Army devoted seven full-time information officers to public relations for the trial, and there were not enough seats in the courtroom for all of the press that hoped to report on it.¹⁵² Throughout the trial Calley maintained his innocence, claiming that he acted in accordance with his orders.¹⁵³ Media attention was not the only unprecedented element of the trial: the four month court martial was the longest in the history of the American military, and the thirteen day jury deliberation was a record as well.¹⁵⁴ Finally, on March 29, 1971, the jury announced they had found Calley guilty of the premeditated murder of twenty-two villagers at My Lai.”¹⁵⁵ He was given a life sentence.

The debate over Calley’s guilt was even more vigorous outside the courtroom than in. At the end of the trial the presiding judge remarked, “there’s been no case in the history of military justice that has torn this country apart as this one.”¹⁵⁶ Strong sentiment, especially in the southern states, held that Calley had been used as a scapegoat for the massacre. This feeling was summed up by soldier from the Americal Division quoted in *Time* magazine: “the people back in the world don’t understand this war. We are here to kill dinks. How can they convict Calley for killing dinks? That’s our job.”¹⁵⁷ A folk song called “The Battle Hymn of Lieutenant Calley” sold 200,000 copies in three days. The Army prosecutor who tried Calley remembers, “There were mass protests

¹⁵² Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 333

¹⁵³ American Experience, *My Lai*

¹⁵⁴ American Experience, *My Lai*

¹⁵⁵ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 337

¹⁵⁶ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 337

¹⁵⁷ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 14

around the country. Draft boards were resigning. Veterans were turning in their medals. It was enormous, overwhelming.”¹⁵⁸

With Calley a household name on the cover of *Time* magazine, his conviction became a political problem for President Nixon. Legislatures from five states, including Colorado, passed resolutions encouraging Nixon to grant Calley a pardon.¹⁵⁹ Similar sentiments were expressed in thousands of telegrams sent to the White House by citizens, which CBS news reported was the “greatest expression of public sentiment by far on any issue of the Nixon Presidency.”¹⁶⁰ The President responded accordingly, moving Calley from the stockade to house arrest while his appeal was considered. When the appeal itself was ruled down, Nixon commuted Calley’s sentence and left him a free man.¹⁶¹ Calley’s release undermined the trials of the rest of the men indicted by the Peers Commission. The remaining defendants implicated in the massacre and its cover-up were acquitted, or their charges thrown out.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ American Experience, *My Lai*

¹⁵⁹ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 341

¹⁶⁰ American Experience, *My Lai*

¹⁶¹ Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 357

¹⁶² American Experience, *My Lai*

Conclusion

*I sent them a good boy, and they made him a murderer.*¹⁶³ – mother of Paul Meadlo, massacre participant

History is not simply a static catalogue of names, dates, numbers, and events from long ago, because these facts do not exist in a vacuum. History is also how we relate to those facts and the significance we attach to them. It is as much about the reader as it is about the record. The facts may be in the past, but the story is endlessly in the present. The story is what we use to make sense of the world, and it has great power in shaping our perceptions today.

The My Lai Massacre during the Vietnam War was an event, but also a symbol. In factual terms, the My Lai Massacre held little strategic significance. It took place on a single operation in a single day in long war. It accounts for a tiny fraction of the war's civilian casualties – 500 among two million. Rather, My Lai's great significance was in the role it played in shaping the American understanding of the Vietnam War. It forced the country to confront what it was doing to the Vietnamese, and what it was doing to its own young men.

Historian Samuel Hynes discusses the need to understand war through the lense of human experience in his book, *The Soldier's Tale*, in which he writes:

There comes the need to bring it down to the human realm. This is not a mechanical problem, but an essential one. When I say, 'to bring it down,' I do not mean to simplify, to attenuate, or to sweeten the horror, but to attempt to make the events speak through the individual and in his language, to rescue the suffering from the huge numbers, from dreadful anonymity."¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Kenworthy, *Songmy 1: Questions for the Conscience of a Nation*

¹⁶⁴ Samuel Hynes, *The Soldier's Tale* xvi

Those 504 civilians' deaths were not somehow more significant than those of their countrymen, except that their killings were recorded and then broadcast for all to see. Hynes writes, "if we would understand what war is like, and how it *feels*, we must turn away from history and its numbers, and seek the reality in personal witness."¹⁶⁵ The American public, for a time, found this personal witness in the images of the villagers of My Lai. They were cut down in their homes, in front of their families, eye-to-eye with their executioners. Their deaths were graphic, tangible, and they could not be ignored away. The faces of My Lai were drawn with horror, shock, fear, and helplessness. They were therefore incredibly human – more human than a statistic about millions of deaths. The faces of the victims of My Lai became the faces for all two million Vietnamese victims of the war. They provided the American public with the qualitative truth of the war that could not be shown in figures. My Lai showed the American public how the war was destroying the lives of the Vietnamese people and American soldiers.

As news of My Lai reverberated through American living rooms, the nation was forced to ask difficult questions about the war in Vietnam. The public reckoned with the reality that "The B-52's hit villages like this all the time in 'free fire zones' killing anybody in the area. Ditto the artillery."¹⁶⁶ If Vietnamese civilians were regularly being killed indiscriminately, the *New York Times* asked "should the facts be suppressed, the soldiers

¹⁶⁵ Samuel Hynes, *The Soldier's Tale* xii

¹⁶⁶ Reston, *The Massacre of Songmy: Who is to Blame?*

who kill on the ground hung and the airmen in the B-52s who kill many more be praised?”¹⁶⁷ After the story broke the *New York Times* wrote:

What about the whole moral basis of United States involvement? President Johnson... insistently proclaimed the United States intervention was simply to give the South Vietnamese a free choice, and President Nixon had adopted the same rationale. But how did the killing of civilians, even if they were in a ‘free fire zone’ give them a free choice?¹⁶⁸

There were also questions about how the war was affecting American GIs. One column asked, “was this brutal war brutalizing America’s young draftees?”¹⁶⁹ Who was really to blame for the massacre - “the men who killed the people in the village, the officers who gave the orders to kill them, or the ‘system’ of war which trapped them all?”¹⁷⁰ My Lai provoked many more questions than it did answers, but it clearly caused the American public to examine the moral implications of the Vietnam War more closely than it had before. As the American public came to understand that the massacre at My Lai represented the exception rather than the rule in Vietnam, it was difficult to avoid the conclusion that responsibility for the massacre rested largely with the United States itself, rather than with Charlie Company alone.

Phillip Caputo’s Vietnam War story ends with his own implication in a war crime, the killing of two Vietnamese civilians named Le Dung and Le Du. He discusses how the circumstances experienced by soldiers led to such killings:

I drew my own conclusion: the explanatory or extenuating circumstances was the war. The killings had occurred in war. They had occurred, moreover, in a war

¹⁶⁷ Reston, *The Massacre of Songmy: Who is to Blame?*

¹⁶⁸ Kenworthy, *Songmy I: Questions for the Conscience of a Nation*

¹⁶⁹ Kenworthy, *Songmy I: Questions for the Conscience of a Nation*

¹⁷⁰ Reston, *The Massacre of Songmy: Who is to Blame?*

whose sole aim was to kill the Viet Cong, a war in which those ordered to do the killing often could not distinguish the Viet Cong from civilians, a war in which civilians in ‘free-fire zones’ were killed every day by weapons far more horrible than pistols or shotguns. The deaths of Le Dung and Le Du could not be divorced from the nature and conduct of the war. They were an inevitable product of the war.¹⁷¹

Through My Lai, the American public saw that indiscriminate killings across Vietnam were, as Caputo put it, inevitable products of the war, rather than the crimes of individual soldiers alone.

It was the nation that put guns in their hands, the nation that indicated that making distinctions between civilians and combatants was unimportant, and the nation that then turned a blind eye and demanded bodies. The nation created circumstances in which committing evil acts was very easy to do, and even unwittingly encouraged such acts. The confused and frustrated young men only had to pull the trigger.

Yet for all the symbolic importance My Lai held during the war, it is becoming little more than a footnote in how we remember Vietnam. Historian Michael Bilton suggests:

My Lai is now almost completely forgotten, erased almost entirely from the national consciousness. What was once an image of incandescent horror has become at most a vague recollection of something unpleasant that happened during the Vietnam War. Even in the newspapers of the time, a process of eclipse can be traced clearly. What was first a “massacre” quickly became a “tragedy” and was then referred to as an “incident”.¹⁷²

My Lai has little place at all in the prominent American histories of the Vietnam War.

George Herring devoted two sentences to the massacre in his book, *America’s Longest*

¹⁷¹ Caputo, *A Rumor of War* 323

¹⁷² Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai* 4

War, published in 1979. Both published in 1983, Stanley Karnow gave My Lai four sentences in *Vietnam: A History*, and Arnold Isaac another two in *Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia*. In 1991, Marilyn B. Young wrote two paragraphs about My Lai in *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990*. The massacre received two paragraphs in each *America's Vietnam War*, by Elizabeth Becker, and *A Time for War* by Robert Schulzinger, published in 1992 and 1999, respectively. *The Columbia History of the Vietnam War*, published in 2011, discusses the massacre for only two sentences. All told in over 2,500 pages representing the main body of American histories of the Vietnam War, the My Lai Massacre was discussed in only six paragraphs and eight sentences.

Marilyn B. Young commented, “the comfortable paradigm of the nation’s history...had no more room for My Lai than it had for the genocide of the American Indians, for slavery, for the conquest of the Philippines, or the persistence of poverty and inequality.”¹⁷³ The My Lai Massacre, for all the questions and consideration it provoked, was ultimately too uncomfortable to remain a part of the national consciousness. If My Lai is forgotten, its lessons are lost with it.

My Lai is the war story from Vietnam that can teach us the most. It gives us the chance to understand what this war was like, and how it *felt*. It provides a window into humanity at its worst. It shows us how innocence can be destroyed, and the brutality that average nineteen-year old American boys are capable of. It illuminates and tragedy and injustice of all war, and it tells us about the dangers of hubris. If we remember these

¹⁷³ Young, *The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990*

lessons, we can in some way redeem the victims of the My Lai Massacre, soldier and civilian alike, by refusing to let history repeat itself.

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