

My Lai Massacre
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The My Lai massacre is one of the most horrible stains on the escutcheon of the American military – a military generally praised for its adherence to the laws of war. While the United States military prosecuted dozens of its soldiers for committing unlawful killings of unarmed civilians during the Indo-China War, by far the most violent, and hence the most infamous of all the war crimes, is known as the My Lai massacre.

The facts surrounding the My Lai massacre are fairly certain, thanks to a thorough criminal investigation aimed at the perpetrators of the crime and a collateral administrative investigation ordered by the Secretary of the Army and headed by Lieutenant General W. R. Peers. Despite an initial cover-up by the Army's chain of command, the enormity of the atrocity made it impossible to keep secret, although for well over a year the general public knew nothing of the incident.

On March 16, 1968, an American combat task force of the 23rd Infantry Division (the Americal Division) launched an airmobile assault into the village complex of Son My in the province of Quang Ngai, South Vietnam. As was the case for all such operations, the attack was executed only after the commander of the task force, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Barker, had assembled the key junior commanders for a final review of the details of the combat operation. This briefing, which took place on March 15, 1968, involved discussions on the positioning of helicopters, artillery preparation and the specific assignments of the three companies that comprised the task force. While the other two companies provided blocking and support functions, Charlie Company, commanded by Captain Ernest Medina, would take the primary responsibility for battling any enemy resistance encountered in the village.

The intelligence regarding a large enemy force proved to be incorrect. When the American combat forces landed they soon found that the village was occupied by non-combatants who offered no resistance whatsoever. Nevertheless, some of the members of Charlie Company went on a command directed killing spree. Under the direct supervision of several company grade officers, First Lieutenant William L. Calley, Jr., being the most notorious, American troops murdered well over 300 unarmed South Vietnamese civilians (the Vietnamese communists claim that the death toll exceeded 500).

The largest killing of civilians occurred in the hamlet of My Lai, a part of the Son My complex. The murdered consisted primarily of women, children and old men; some shot in groups, others as they fled. At My Lai proper most of the civilians had been methodically herded into large groups and then gunned down, primarily under the direct supervision of

Lieutenant Calley.

In addition to the unlawful killing of civilians, the soldiers destroyed most of the homes and killed the domestic animals. Several cases of rape were also reported to have taken place during the massacre. When it was over, the statistics told the story: one American soldier in Charlie Company had been wounded by friendly fire and hundreds of South Vietnamese women, children and old men were dead. The only positive aspect of the incident was the fact that some of the American soldiers had either refused to participate or had openly attempted to halt the killings.

The massacre itself came to light when a soldier named Ron Ridenhour sent a letter to various government officials. At the same time the general public tasted the horror of the My Lai massacre through a series of gruesome color photographs which appeared in the December 1969 issue of *Life* magazine.

In the subsequent judicial actions associated with the murders at My Lai, charges were preferred against four officers and nine enlisted men. Twelve other officers were charged with military type offenses associated with the cover-up. Only Lieutenant Calley was convicted. The other officers and enlisted men either had the charges against them dismissed or were found not guilty at their courts martial (several of the accused were killed in combat before trial).

Lieutenant Calley was found guilty of the premeditated murder of twenty-two noncombatants and of assault with intent to murder of a two-year-old child. Although Calley was sentenced to a dismissal and confinement at hard labor for life, he actually served only a total of three years confinement (most under house arrest).

The public revelation of the massacre cast a pall of confusion and shame over the nation at large and contributed to the eventual abandonment of South Vietnam to the communist forces in the North. On the other hand, the massacre reinforced the axiom that only men of the highest moral caliber and military skill should be assigned the responsibility of combat command. Still, as horrible as the My Lai massacre was it was an exception to the American record in Vietnam with regard to observance of the law of war.