

Perspective on My Lai: 'It was a Nazi kind of thing'

By Ron Ridenhour

*Los Angeles Times*

March 16, 1993

Today marks the 25th anniversary of the My Lai massacre, an event that shattered the fondest illusions of many Americans, including me. Foremost among those illusions was the notion that war crimes of the sort committed at My Lai were acts that Americans simply would not commit. As helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson, who was at My Lai and saw what happened there, later told me: "We're the good guys. We don't do those kind of things." Now, however, I think of the events of that day as a terrible, and terribly accurate, metaphor for our conduct of the entire Vietnam War.

Shortly after 7 a.m. on March 16, 1968, the first platoon of Charlie Company, one of three U.S. infantry companies assigned to Task Force Barker, began landing just outside a small village in central Vietnam, intent on doing exactly what Thompson and I and most other Americans didn't think American soldiers would do: massacre an entire community of unarmed, unresisting civilians.

Task Force Barker's GIs knew the village as Pinkville, for both its color on military maps and its reputation as the home base of a particularly fierce Viet Cong battalion. Pinkville was really three adjacent hamlets that were designated under the single name of My Lai 4 on U.S. Army maps. It was also the home of many soldiers fighting on both sides of Vietnam's civil war.

On the evening before the massacre, the commanding officer of Charlie Company, Capt. Ernest Medina, told his men to expect fierce resistance when they attacked Pinkville the next morning. They instead found no resistance.

Over the 4 1/2 hours of the assault on the village, the men of Charlie Company, supported by the other two Task Force Barker companies and an artillery battalion and a helicopter battalion, all under the direction and the watchful eyes of a chain of command composed of nearly 20 senior American officers, including two generals, systematically slaughtered almost 500 Vietnamese civilians. It did not seem to matter that the vast majority of the villagers they found were women, children and old men.

At one point, a young second lieutenant named William L. Calley supervised the shooting of dozens of villagers who were rounded up, forced to stand on the edge of a ditch and then machine-gunned. It was, a friend and fellow GI who had been there later told me, "a Nazi kind of thing."

Later that day, roughly two miles away, another Task Force Barker unit, Bravo Company, similarly massacred 90 people in a village called My Khe 4.

For me, as I am sure for most American soldiers who went on combat missions in Vietnam's rural countryside, it quickly became clear that whatever was happening there, it was not what the U.S. government was telling the public, nor what military authorities had told us, the front-line soldiers. Rather than saving democracy-loving Vietnamese civilians from the ravages of foreign invaders, we seemed to be the foreign invaders and we were doing the ravaging.

In mid-April, 1968, one of several friends who took part in the massacre told me the story of Pinkville for the first time. While the massacre at My Lai was the logical extension of the smaller but far more numerous day-to-day atrocities I had witnessed as a helicopter door gunner, hearing the story come from the lips of someone I knew and trusted, someone who'd been there, who saw it and participated in it, staggered me.

Eighteen months later, the story of My Lai broke into the headlines. With few exceptions, even among those who opposed our involvement in Vietnam and had been predicting that just such events would occur, U.S. citizens everywhere were stunned by the news.

Predictably, many at first refused to believe that the story of My Lai was true. But when photographs appeared showing clusters of Vietnamese women and children pleading for their lives, accompanied by other photos showing the same people dead in heaps, denial began to melt into bitter recognition.

Even more revealing was the reaction of American officialdom. Compelled to concede that the massacre at My Lai was real, military and political leaders quickly began to manipulate the release of information, doing all they could to shift responsibility for the slaughter onto the lowest-ranking officer present, Calley.

My own investigation into My Lai — which took place between April and November, 1968, while I was a soldier in Vietnam — convinced me that even the distressingly enthusiastic Calley, like everyone else in Charlie Company, was following orders.

What happened at My Lai was not the consequence of some lowly second lieutenant who went berserk.

It was, instead, the logical outgrowth of overall U.S. military policy in Vietnam, one of two massacres that day, one of what I believe were many such massacres during the course of the war and, without question, the specific act and responsibility of officers much further up the military food chain than Calley.

Subsequent official investigations concluded that at least a dozen higher officers bore direct responsibility for the massacre at My Lai. But those conclusions were kept quiet until after Calley was convicted, until after the officers above Calley who issued or transmitted the massacre orders were either acquitted or not tried — and until the public was no longer paying attention.

If you were to randomly stop people on the street today and ask them if they know what happened at My Lai, the huge majority, if they have any clue, will say something like this: Isn't that the place where that lieutenant went crazy in Vietnam and killed a bunch of villagers?

There were several important lessons in this for me, personally.

Among the most important and disappointing of them was that some people — most, it seems — will, under some circumstances, do anything someone in authority tells them to. Another is that government institutions, like most humans, have a reflexive reaction to the exposure of internal corruption and wrongdoing: No matter how transparent the effort, their first response is to lie, conceal and cover up. Also like human beings, once an institution has embraced a particular lie in support of a particular coverup, it will forever proclaim its innocence.

Since the end of the war in Vietnam, for instance, neither the military nor the U.S. government has made any effort to come clean with the American public, the Vietnamese people or the rest of the world regarding the reality of our deplorable conduct in Vietnam.

In that vein, it is striking to hear American news people, writers and pundits cluck their collective tongues when they talk about the reluctance of German society to embrace the history of their crimes during World War II.

There is, admittedly, no direct parallel between American conduct in Vietnam and the Holocaust. There are, however, a number of disturbing similarities between what German soldiers did to civilians all over Europe during World War II and what American GIs did to Vietnamese civilians during the war in Vietnam.

The conduct of soldiers in both instances was a direct result of the respective overall strategies and policies of military leaders at the highest levels of both countries.

We will serve ourselves and future generations well if we openly and honestly examine those similarities and the questions they raise. If we don't, can we ever truly become the society of justice and equality that we claim to be?

This article was also published in *The Oregonian* and *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*.

---