My Lai at 50

Background – Tet Counter- Offensive, Vietnam War (January 1968): The 23rd Infantry Division (Americ) conducted conventional warfare operations fighting North Vietnam Army (NVA) Regulars and the South Vietnamese Viet Cong (VC) communist forces who departed from hiding to conduct conventional attacks on fortified Republic of Vietnam (RVN)-controlled cities and U.S. forces. U.S., RVN, and allied nations’ forces moved to the offense – seeking out the enemy and attacking them with overwhelming firepower and rapid airmobile maneuver tactics. Soldiers of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, and 11th Infantry Brigade fought an elusive enemy for over three months prior to the My Lai mission. During that time they observed almost no enemy within the brigade area of operations and received several casualties (including 5 killed) in 28 incidents from booby traps, ambushes, and snipers.

Mission Planning: The 11th Infantry Brigade intelligence summary identified the ‘Pinkville’ region as the center of a Viet Cong Battalion stronghold and the source of enemy offensive activity and logistical support. Located in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), U.S. forces considered all inhabitants to be enemy forces, supporters, or sympathizers. The Division planned an offensive against the hamlets of My Lai, My Khe, and Son My. Task Force Barker, a battalion-size provision unit made up of three rifle companies of the 11th Infantry Brigade and led by Lieutenant Colonel Frank A. Barker, received a cordon-search-and-destroy mission with artillery and aviation support. Charlie Company was the decisive effort to attack with the other two companies as shaping efforts to provide the cordon (blocking) and reinforcement missions. Colonel Oran K. Henderson, the 11th Infantry Brigade Commander, urged his officers to be “aggressive” and to “close with the enemy.” LTC Barker further ordered the 1st Battalion to burn the houses, kill livestock, destroy food supplies, and to close and pollute the water wells. CPT Frank Medina, the Charlie Company Commander, reportedly told his troops before the attack that everyone in the village was either a VC or VC sympathizer.

The Attack: On March 16 1968, Charlie Company initiated the attack with a short artillery preparation. Within the landing zone (LZ) and forward movement to the village, they met no enemy resistance. Upon entering the village, they herded unarmed civilians away from their homes. Despite a lack of resistance in the village, 2LT William Calley directed his Soldiers to kill everyone. When one of his M-60 machine gunners refused to kill the captives, 2LT Calley seized his weapon and personally executed approximately 20 of the women and children. After 2LT Calley’s action, they began killing every living person and animal they could find. This included Vietnamese women and children who

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did nothing to stop the massacre. An estimated 350 to 500 unarmed civilians died in My Lai. Since Charlie Company had encountered no enemy opposition, the Brigade Commander ordered air movement of 4th BN, 3rd INF REGT, to another landing zone to attack the hamlet of My Khe. The unit killed as many as 90 people in the village. 4th BN did experience light enemy resistance at My Khe, resulting in one U.S. Soldier killed and seven WIA. Over the following two days, both battalions continued the burning and destruction of dwellings, as well as mistreatment of Vietnamese detainees and tortured to death a suspected VC guerrilla.

Warrant Officer 1 Hugh Thompson, tasked to provide observation and aerial fires to TF Barker observed that there was no enemy return fire and that Soldiers were herding groups of unarmed civilians away from the village. While reconnoitering the village in his helicopter, WO1 Thompson and his flight crew noticed large numbers of bodies of infants, young children, women and the elderly. None of the bodies appeared to carry weapons; none of the bodies appeared to be military-age men. In the middle of the attacks by Charlie Company, WO1 Thompson landed his helicopter to investigate. He and his crew discovered the U.S. Soldiers, led by 2LT Calley, shooting unarmed villagers. He yelled at a group of Soldiers and ordered them to stop shooting. As WO1 Thompson questioned the troops, they indicated that they were “just following orders.” Charlie Company continued to systematically murder civilians. The Soldiers of 2LT Calley’s platoon and adjacent platoon chased, herded into ditches, and murdered the non-combatants they found. COL Henderson and LTC Barker were also in the air overhead with their staffs observing and communicating with CPT Medina on the ground, directing and coordinating the attacks, artillery, and aviation units. WO1 Thompson landed his aircraft between the non-combatants and Charlie Company Soldiers who were actively engaged in killing and ordered his two crewmen gunners to fire on their fellow Soldiers if they continued to kill the villagers. He intervened to save and evacuate several villagers from a bunker and saved some wounded children whom he transported on his helicopter to medical care. On three occasions, he landed amid the atrocities and transported survivors to the safety of medical facilities.
WO1 Thompson immediately reported the atrocities to his company commander Major Frederic W. Watke. His commander passed on a verbal radio report to LTC Barker, who ordered CPT Medina to stop all killing, which they did, approximately four hours after the assault began. The unit continued on the mission for two more days, burning villages, killing livestock, and closing wells. The first reports to the Division Tactical Operations Center and to Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) Headquarters a day later, reported that “128 Viet Cong and 22 civilians” died in the village during a “fierce firefight.” WO1 Thompson refuted that claim and made an official report of the killings to his Squadron Commander, who in turn did not accurately report it to the Division Headquarters, stating that only 20-28 noncombatants died in the battle between Viet Cong guerillas and US forces.

Concerned, MG Samuel Koster, the Americal Division Commander, cancelled similar planned operations by Task Force Barker against other villages in the Quang Ngai province of RVN, possibly preventing the additional massacre of Vietnamese civilians. MG Koster directed his deputy, BG Young to have the Brigade Commander conduct an investigation of the alleged war crimes. The village chief, absent during the massacre, reported to RVN forces that there had been unnecessary killing of 400-500 civilians during the combat action, which was in turn reported to the Americal Division Headquarters.

**Aftermath – Investigation and Prosecution:** COL Henderson claimed that he conducted an investigation and reported to BG Young that he interviewed several Soldiers involved in the incident, including WO1 Thompson, then issued a two-page written report in late April 1968, claiming that some 20 civilians were inadvertently killed during the operation by erroneous artillery fire and crossfire between the U.S. and enemy forces. COL Henderson falsely reported that no civilians were gathered and shot by U.S. forces, and further assessed the allegation of murdering 450-500 civilians as enemy propaganda. LTC Barker was killed in action in May 1968 and never made a written statement. MG Koster later admitted that he suspected the report from COL Henderson was false, but he did not further pursue the investigation, because he had believed the initial reports that only 20 non-combatants died during an actual battle with the enemy. He indicated that he could not believe that American officers and Soldiers would intentionally massacre innocent civilians, nor that such a war crime could have been so horrendous and widespread.

The incident passed without any further senior leader or media notice after the massacre. Six months later, Specialist 4 Tom Glen, a 21-year-old Soldier of the 11th Infantry Brigade, wrote a letter to GEN Creighton Abrams, the Commanding General of U.S. forces in Vietnam, accusing the Division of routine and pervasive brutality against Vietnamese civilians. MAJ Colin Powell, a recently assigned Deputy G3, investigated the allegations described in the letter. He proved unable to uncover either wide-spread
unnecessary killings, war crimes, or any facts related to My Lai against the 11th INF BDE.

One year later, Ronald Ridenhour, a former member of the 11th INF BDE sent a letter to 30 members of Congress, imploring them to investigate the circumstances surrounding the My Lai incident. Congress urged the Secretary of the Army to conduct an investigation.

History Channel depiction of Ronald Ridenhour’s letter (abbreviated):²
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnvTyMptOt8

WO1 Thompson Interview with British Broadcasting Company (BBC):³
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkFa2lSNAGc&t=12s

The Secretary of the Army directed a formal investigation be conducted. LTG William Peers served as the investigating officer and delivered his report to the Army Chief of Staff (CSA), GEN William C. Westmoreland, in March 1969. What became known as The Peers Inquiry lasted four months and was a thorough investigation, personally led by LTG Peers. His report summarized the situation WO1 Thompson and his crew flew into: “During the period of 16-19 March 1968, US Army troops of TF Barker, 11th Brigade, Americal Division, massacred a large number of noncombatants in two hamlets of Son My Village, Quang Ngai Province, Republic of Vietnam. The precise number of Vietnamese killed cannot be determined but was at least 175 and may exceed 400.”⁴ LTG Peers further found: “A part of the crimes visited on the inhabitants of Son My Village included individual and group acts of murder, rape, sodomy, maiming, and assault on noncombatants and the mistreatment and killing of detainees. Some attempts were made to stop the criminal acts in Son My Village on 16 March; but with few exceptions, such efforts were too feeble or too late.”⁵

The Peers Report verified the atrocities, identified 30 leaders and Soldiers suspected of criminal involvement or contributed to the massacre and attempted cover-up, and identified the factors contributing to this terrible war crime. It also found that MG Koster should reasonably have known about the massacre, but neither aggressively pursued the investigation nor took appropriate disciplinary measures to charge the offenders with war


⁵ Ibid., pg. 12-2.
It further determined that COL Henderson knowingly filed a false report. Over the next 18 months, COL Henderson received a court martial for covering up war crimes, which acquitted him. MG Koster, then nominated for his third star, retired and received a demotion to BG with his Distinguished Service Medal rescinded. In September 1969, CPT Medina, 2LT Calley, and 21 other Soldiers were charged with murder and war crimes.

It was not until November 12, 1969 that the story reached public news and the media published photographic evidence from the courts martial to world-wide outrage. Two former Soldiers of Charlie Company, both of whom were implicated in the rapes and killing, reported the massacre to the press after being discharged from the Army. One, an Army photographer, had illegally retained photos of the massacre and sold them to the media. A court martial held at Fort Benning convicted 2LT Calley of war crimes and personally murdering at least 20 unarmed civilians. He initially received a sentenced of life in prison. After several subsequent reductions to his sentence, President Nixon pardoned him after two years of home confinement. CPT Medina, the company commander, was tried and acquitted for his role in the massacre. When CPT Medina received an acquittal in a highly publicized trial, the Army dropped the charges against the remaining accused Soldiers. Several of the accused Soldiers received immunity for Congressional testimony. In the wake of a tremendous media and public outcry against the Army, the acquittals, and with 12 of the Soldiers accused of the war crimes having already been discharged from the Army, the Army chose to discharge the remaining suspects without further prosecution.

Soon after the attack on My Lai, WO1 Thompson was awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross “for distinguishing himself in aerial flight by heroism in braving intense VC crossfire” while participating in the battle with enemy forces, and his two crewmen were also awarded Bronze Star medals for valor. WO1 Thompson refused to accept the award given from a false report. Thirty years later, in 1998, Hugh Thompson and his crewmen, SP4 Glenn Andreotta (deceased), and SP4 Lawrence Colburn each received Soldiers’ Medals for saving civilian lives at the risk of their own lives. He and his crewmen are credited with saving the lives of at least 10 of innocent people.

Probably more than any other single event, the My Lai massacre and subsequent cover-up caused the U.S. Army to lose the trust of the American people. It required almost 20 years and the decisive victory in Operation Desert Storm for the Army to regain the public trust.
Discussion Questions:

- Identify which of the Army Profession certification criteria (character, competence, commitment) were not displayed by 2LT Calley and his platoon? Explain why.
- Identify which of the Army Profession certification criteria (character, competence, commitment) were displayed by WO1 Thompson and his flight crew? Explain why.
- How does this event impact trust internally within the U.S. Army and externally with the American public?
- Compare the actions of 2LT Calley and his Soldiers with the actions of WO1 Thompson and his aircrew.
- Explain which moral principles of the Army Ethic were violated by or upheld by each group present in the massacre.
- What moral principles of the Army Ethic were violated by the Americal Division chain of command?
- Why do you think that 2LT Calley and WO1 Thompson arrived at much different decisions of what was right (ethical, effective, efficient) in the My Lai massacre?
- Reports can be wrong due to human error or a deliberate falsification (lie). What are your responsibilities if you believe a report is wrong, deliberately or otherwise?
- What is your duty when you suspect or believe you have received an unlawful or unethical order?
- Doing nothing in the presence of misconduct or unethical practice is wrong. What actions can you take to prevent misconduct or redress unethical practices?
- What can you do if you suspect misconduct, unlawful orders, and unethical practices? Where can you get advice or counsel?
- If you heard rumors of misconduct or unethical practices what are your responsibilities?
- How do you as a leader prevent this atrocity from occurring?
- Your loyalty is to the Constitution of the United States, how does this duty relate to the nature of mutual trust and cohesion in your unit. Does loyalty to the Constitution override friendship and bonding within the unit or to a team mate when they do something illegal or unethical?
- How did moral disengagement or dehumanizing the enemy impact the ethical reasoning of Soldiers?
- As a leader, how do you work with your Soldiers to ensure that they respect the intrinsic dignity and worth of all people (e.g., the enemy, non-combatants, and other nationalities)?
- As a Soldier, how would you respond to an order to protect foreign nationals from mistreatment by anyone, even your allies or fellow Soldiers?
Additional References:

**My Lai Documentary**

**My Lai Documentary (Soldier interviews)**

**LTG General Peers Commission Report**