

## Chapter 7<sup>11</sup>

### How My Lai Was Pacified

*Calley was at the drainage ditch on the eastern edge of the village, where about seventy to eighty old men, women, and children not killed on the spot had been brought. Calley ordered the dozen or so platoon members there to push the people into the ditch, and three or four GIs did. Calley ordered his men to shoot into the ditch. Some refused, others obeyed. One who followed Calley's order was Paul Meadlo, who estimated that he killed about twenty-five civilians. Calley joined in the massacre. At one point, a two-year-old child who somehow survived the gunfire began running towards the hamlet. Calley grabbed the child, threw him back in the ditch, then shot him. <sup>12</sup>*

You have just read part of a description of what happened at My Lai in Vietnam. The man held responsible for the events in My Lai on March 16, 1968 claimed he was acting under orders, and higher ups should be held responsible for his actions. Spiro Agnew, Vice-President of the United States thought that it was unfair to punish a patriotic American boy who answered his country's call to duty and allow Americans who deserted and skipped off to Canada to go free. Some wanted Calley's superior, Captain Medina, who spent most of the day just 150 yards away from My Lai, to be punished. Americans strongly opposed to the war thought that the top officials in the U.S. government who were responsible for blanket bombings in Vietnam that killed hundreds of thousands were also chargeable for individual acts of brutality committed by American soldiers not properly instructed to respect the lives of innocent civilians.

This chapter examines the many questions raised by the My Lai incident and the trial of Lt. William Calley that followed.

#### **My Lai: The Cast of Characters**

The reader should know the people whose names are closely associated with the My Lai massacre:

**Paul Meadlo** — with Calley at My Lai. He said he was told to shoot prisoners in a ditch and obeyed orders; Meadlo was granted immunity from prosecution and testified at the court martial trial.

**Hugh Carter** — told to shoot civilians. He shot himself in the foot to avoid carrying out these orders.

**Lt. William Calley** — the U.S. soldier directly accused of killing and ordering the death of 350 innocent civilians. He said he was carrying out orders.

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12 Testimony by Hugh Thompson in Doug Linder, An Introduction to the Court Martial Trial, My Lai home page.

# Digital History

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**Captain Ernest Medina** – Captain of Charley Company, 150 yards away from where the killing took place. He said he did not know what was going on, and did not give orders to kill civilians; he also claimed only 20-28 civilians were killed at My Lai.

**General Westmoreland** – U.S. Commander in Vietnam. He said he knew nothing about My Lai, and that U.S. soldiers always acted according to the rules of war.

**President Johnson** – President during the military build up in Vietnam. He misled the American public, directed the escalation of the war, and was ultimately responsible for the manner in which it was prosecuted.

## Preparation for My Lai

Under the command of Captain Ernest Medina, Charley Company was patrolling an area where the Vietcong 48th Battalion was operating. On February 25, 1968, 18 men in Charley Company were killed or injured crossing a minefield. Two weeks later a popular soldier was killed. At the funeral service, Captain Medina told his men not to be afraid to show their feelings.

The next day, Charley Company was scheduled for action around My Lai, Captain Medina allegedly told his men to 'destroy everything with life'. Medina later denied this in court. But he admitted to allowing his soldiers to believe that the only people in the area would be enemy soldiers.

## What Happened at My Lai?

Early on March 16, 1968, Lt. Calley and his platoon were flown to My Lai. When they arrived, another helicopter cleared the landing place by covering the area with bullets. Calley and his men landed without drawing enemy fire. Calley entered the village and ordered his men to round up Vietnamese for questioning. But he never questioned them. Instead, Calley and other soldiers in his platoon began to kill women, children and old men.

One group of 15 - 20 women and children were in a temple where they were kneeling, crying, and praying. American soldiers came up behind them and shot all of them in the head.

**Publication of this and other pictures taken at My Lai by Ronald Haeberle on the day of the massacre led to an official investigation and eventual a trial of five**

13 Meanwhile, Calley had 80 women, children, and old men taken out of their huts and brought to the center of the village. Calley told Private Meadlo that he knew what to do with them. When he came back 10 minutes later, Calley saw these prisoners were still alive. He then ordered Meadlo to "waste (kill) them" and the private obeyed. Calley helped out, firing somewhere between 250-300 shots into the crowd.

QuickTime™ and a  
Photo - JPEG decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

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Altogether some 350 old men, women, and children were killed at My Lai that day. None of the men were of military age. The Vietcong in the area had plenty of time to leave My Lai before Calley arrived. No enemy shot at American soldiers that day. The only American hurt was Carter, who shot himself in the foot to avoid carrying out orders to kill Vietnamese civilians.

There was some question where Captain Medina was on March 16. He said, he never entered My Lai while the shooting was going on, but several soldiers including Calley said he saw him there. He admitted his helicopter landed about 150 yards away from the village.

In his report at the end of the day, Captain Medina stated that 125 Vietcong had been killed, and 3 weapons captured. He later admitted that there were 20-38 civilian casualties.

## Word of My Lai Gets Out Slowly

Medina's report on My Lai made first page news in some American newspapers. But no one in Saigon or in America seemed to be surprised that so many enemies could be killed and only three weapons captured. None of the men on the 60 helicopters that flew over My Lai that day believed what they saw there was so unusual that a special report was needed. An official photographer took pictures of women tied and shot, and ditches full of dead women and children. It was not until Life magazine published these pictures seventeen months later that American public showed concern about the incident. Faced with overwhelming evidence that a massacre had taken place, the Army launched an investigation and brought Calley to trial.

## The Rules of War

Some people have considered it an exercise in futility. Nevertheless, over the centuries, international lawyers and judges have drawn up a series of laws known as the "rules of war." These international rules, revised at the Geneva Convention in 1949, include the following:

- It is forbidden to kill or wound an enemy that has surrendered.
- The attack or bombardment, by whatever means, of undefended towns, villages, or buildings, is prohibited.
- Volunteer corps" (or guerrilla fighters) have the same rights and duties as armies.<sup>14</sup>

QuickTime™ and a  
Photo - JPEG decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

### **Bodies of dead left lying on the side of the road just out-**

During their military training, U.S. soldiers, including Calley, were supposedly instructed about the rules of war (Calley claimed he never was). But once they got to the rice paddies of Vietnam, little if anything was said about these rules, and many didn't believe they should be applied in Vietnam.

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14 LIFE, December 5, 1969 [Pathfinder.com/photo/essay/mylai/mylaihp.htm](http://Pathfinder.com/photo/essay/mylai/mylaihp.htm)

# Digital History

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At his trial in 1971, Lt. Calley's main defense was that he was obeying orders and that he could be court martialled for refusing to obey them. He had been told by Medina that everyone in My Lai was an enemy, and:

*Not to let anyone get behind us. It was paramount in our mission that we would have to go through My Lai 4,5, and 6 as secondary objectives and then our primary objective was My Lai 1. When we went through there again he stressed let no one get behind you while moving through there. Everyone and everything would be destroyed. The only remark he made as to civilians was...[t]hat all civilians had left the area. And anyone there should be considered enemies.<sup>15</sup>*

After the case had been presented, the judge instructed the jury to decide whether:

*"a man of ordinary sense and understanding would know the order (Calley followed or thought he followed) was unlawful"*

## **Suggested Student Exercises:**

1. Review what you think are the important facts in this case, including the definitions given for war crimes.
2. Do you think there should be such a thing as a war crime, and do you think one was committed at My Lai?
3. Do you think Lt. Calley was guilty of having committed crimes that should result in a prison sentence of at least ten years. Or do you think he was he a loyal soldier merely following orders?
4. Aside from Calley, how far up and down the chain of command should responsibility for My Lai go? Explain.

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15 Quoted in Arthur Everett, Kathryn Johnson, and Harry Rosenthal, Calley, Dell Publishing Company, New York, 1971, p. 262.

## Epilogue

After deliberating for a record thirteen days, the military jury found Lt. Calley guilty of first-degree murder and sentenced him to life in prison. Following an overwhelming popular opposition to the verdict, President Richard Nixon ordered Calley transferred from a military stockade to house arrest. In 1974 Calley was paroled, in 1976 he was married and found a job selling jewelry in his father-in-law's store.



**Children fleeing a misdirected**

(napalm) that could not be extinguished and burned right down to the bone; they repeatedly used anti-personnel weapons that would blow the leg off a man, woman, or child; and they routinely used a defoliating, cancer-causing contaminate called agent orange to destroy areas where enemy troops may be seeking cover. Before setting their helicopters down near villages, U.S. soldiers commonly sprayed the area with bullets that often killed civilians. Furthermore, the U.S.'s actions forced a third of Vietnam's population out of the countryside and into crowded towns and cities, creating 870,000 orphans, and driving 200,000 women into prostitution.

In the light of the horrors just described, Calley's crime was only a miniscule sample of what the United States did in an effort to save the Vietnamese from communism. If Lt. Calley indeed was guilty of deliberately murdering Vietnamese civilians one should ask who should be held responsible for the policies which resulted in the death of many thousand times the number that died at My Lai.

In discussing the issue of responsibility, one might again consider the words of Albert Speer, Hitler's architect, as he contemplated his own guilt:

*In the final analysis I myself determined the degree of my evasion . . . Whether I knew or did not know, or how much or how little I knew, is totally unimportant when I consider what horrors I ought to have known about and what conclusions would have been natural ones to draw from the little I did know. Those who asked me are fundamentally expecting me to offer justifications. But I have none. No apologies are possible.<sup>16</sup>*

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Daniel Ellsberg, *Papers on the War*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1972, pp.275-76