‘Something Dark and Bloody’
William Calley was court-martialed for the tragic My Lai massacre. But was war itself to blame?

BY DREW LINDSAY

The first reports of the tragedy presented it as a triumph. American media trumpeted an “impressive victory” in the long, stubborn war in Southeast Asia. The New York Times put the story of the battle on the front page, describing how an American pincer movement destroyed a Viet Cong unit. General William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, sent congratulations to Charlie Company, a unit of the Americal Division’s 11th Light Infantry Brigade. But there were whispers about what had actually happened. Official accounts put the tally of enemy dead at 128—an unusually high body count in Vietnam, where American troops were chasing guerrilla ghosts. What’s more, only three weapons were reported captured. Something wasn’t right. For months, nothing happened. Then, in hushed conversations with friends, members of Charlie Company confessed that they’d turned machine guns and grenade launchers on dozens of
innocents. A U.S. Army photographer returned home and slipped gruesome images of slain women and children into a slide show he gave to local church and Kiwanis groups.

The truth emerged piecemeal, and only much later—indeed 20 months after those first reports. There'd been no firefight, no clever pincer movement. Instead, on the morning of March 16, 1968, more than 100 American soldiers had swept through the village of My Lai in South Vietnam. In less than four hours they killed as many as 500 women, old men, children, and babies. Their "search and destroy" mission—intended to wipe out a crack VC unit—had led instead to a massacre. So callous were the killers that they'd even taken a lunch break during their spree.

Over the next few years, as the perpetrators of My Lai were brought before military courts, America probed the depths of their crimes. How could U.S. soldiers, the "good guys," commit such evil? Why did this happen?

Today, 40 years after Charlie Company platoon leader William Calley stood trial for the My Lai massacre, we're asking those questions again. Last spring, army sergeant Robert Bales was arrested and charged with killing 16 Afghan villagers, including nine children, in a shooting rampage that echoes My Lai, Wounded Knee, and other dark moments in American military history. When parceling out guilt for such horrors, we look to the soldiers themselves, who often seem mentally unfit for battle or simply crazy. Or we point to the officers and decry a command environment that encouraged barbarity. More often than not, however, we do what Americans did when confronted with My Lai. We blame war itself. Atrocities, we shrug, are inevitable when you send men into combat.

"Things like that happen in war," a woman in Indiana told a reporter after My Lai. "They always have and they always will."

**Mad Dog's Men**

In December 1966, the 150 or so men of Charlie Company arrived in Hawaii for training. There was nothing unusual about them—a typical cross section of American youth assigned to most combat units, a military investigation would later conclude, with whites, blacks, and Hispanics from all over the country, many of them just out of high school.

Their commander, Captain Ernest Medina, a 30-year-old Mexican American, had grown up in poverty before joining the service and working his way up the ranks. Nicknamed "Mad Dog," Medina commanded the respect of his men as a tough but fair leader. He wanted his unit to be the best, and called his troops "the Death Dealers."

Said Lawrence La Croix, a company squad leader: "Every time we killed a Viet Cong we were to leave the ace of spades."

Lieutenant William "Rusty" Calley led one of Charlie Company's three platoons. A boyish 24-year-old who stood only 5 foot 4, Calley had joined the army after flunking out of Miami's Palm Beach Junior College and shuttling through jobs as a dishwasher, a railway switchman, and an investigator for an insurance adjuster. Nervous and anxious—he had developed a stomach ulcer at 19—he was scorned by his men. Medina called him "sweetheart" and "Lieutenant Shithat.

Roy Wood, rifleman: I sometimes wondered how he got through OCS; he couldn't read a darn map, and a compass would confuse his ass.

Charles Hall, machine gunner: Calley...reminded me of a kid, a kid trying to play war.

Michael Terry, fire-team leader: He was gung ho, always trying to impress Medina by being a super trooper.

**Psychiatrist who tested Calley after the massacre:** A rather passive young man harboring a deep-seated sense of inadequacy, insecurity, and inferiority.

John Small, squad leader: Calley was so disliked by members of the unit that they put a bounty on his head. None of the men had any respect for him.

**The Death Dealers Go to War**

Charlie Company arrived in Vietnam in December 1967, nearly three years after the first American combat troops were inserted into the conflict. The unit had won top awards in training, and the men were confident. "My rifle swung low," Calley said. "My helmet pulled down. I was scowling even. I felt, This is my big day. And these are my men. And we're going to end this whole damned war tomorrow. I'm superior. I thought, I'm the American from across the sea. I can really sock it to these people."

After weeks of uneventful guard duty at the 11th Brigade headquarters, Charlie Company was sent on January 26 to Quang Ngai Province, on the northeast coast of South Vietnam. It joined Task Force Barker, an ad hoc group under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Frank Barker assigned to pressure an area known to Americans as Pinkville, a nod to its shading on army maps.

Quang Ngai, a mountainous region with thick jungles, was
"This is my big day," William Calley remembered thinking. "And we're going to end this whole damned war tomorrow!"

a Viet Cong stronghold with a history of violent rebellion against outsiders, including French colonizers in the 1930s. General Westmoreland himself had identified the province as a critical target. After the North Vietnamese Tet Offensive collapsed in February 1968, Barker's men were ordered to root out VC troops thought to be hiding there. Charlie Company

On another occasion, a Medina-led expedition stumbled into a minefield and took heavy casualties, including three dead. One man, Medina said, "was split as if somebody had taken a cleaver right up from his crotch all the way up to his chest cavity."

The men of Charlie Company soon lost their swagger. This was not the war they had expected from watching movies. They began weeks of tense, exhausting patrols in Pinkville.

In one of the unit's first encounters with live fire, snipers pinned down Calley's platoon, and the men watched as radio operator Ron Weber died in extreme pain from a shot that tore out his kidney. Several of the men blamed Calley for their vulnerable position and their first death. "I admit it," he said later. "I was stupid that day."

never saw the enemy, never faced him in a direct encounter. Yet men died, and in terrifying ways—in booby traps, in minefields, and at the hands of snipers.

Charlie Company began to look with suspicion on anyone who wasn't American—even the Vietnamese children, who they became convinced carried grenades.

Varnado Simpson, rifleman: Who is the enemy? How can

Hueys lift off from base, headed for My Lai. The men expected a bloody fight with a crack VC unit that outnumbered them two to one.
The allegation that U.S. Forces shot and killed 400-500 civilians is obviously a Viet Cong propaganda move.

you distinguish between the civilians and the noncivilians? The same people who come and work in the bases at daytime, they just want to shoot and kill you at nighttime.

Ronald Grzesik, fire-team leader: I remember writing a letter home saying that I once had sympathy for these people, but now I didn't care.

Michael Terry: A lot of guys didn't feel that they were human beings.

Charlie Company began to lash out at the Vietnamese. An old man was thrown down a well and shot. Prisoners were executed. Women were raped. Isolated in an alien world thousands of miles from home and terrified by an enemy they couldn't see, many of the men lost their sense of right and wrong.

Greg Olson, machine gunner: 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.

Varnado Simpson: Rape? Oh, that happened every day.

Michael Bernhardt, rifleman: The definitions for things were turned around. Courage was seen as stupidity. Cowardice was cunning and wariness, and cruelty and barbarity were seen sometimes as heroic.

Fred Widmer, radio operator: Here you are fighting an enemy who doesn't follow the Geneva Convention but you have to abide by it. It's like being [on] a football team where you have to follow the rules to the letter and the other team can do whatever the hell they like... You reach a point where you snap. That is the easiest way to put it; you finally snap. Somebody flicks a switch, and you are a completely different person.

They were like Wild Animals

The worst blow to Charlie Company came on March 14. Sergeant George Cox, one of the unit's most popular men, died when his squad stumbled upon a booby trap. Greg Olson described the explosion, and the unit's reaction, in a letter home:

Dear Dad: How's everything with you?...One of our Platoons went on a routine patrol today and came across a 155-millimeter round that was booby trapped. It killed one man, blew the legs off two others, and injured two more....On their way back to [base], 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. They slashed every little kid they came across.

Why in God's name does this have to happen? These are all seemingly normal guys; some were friends of mine. For a while they were like wild animals. It was murder, and I'm ashamed of myself for not trying to do anything about it. This isn't the first time, Dad.

With that disaster, Charlie Company had lost 28 men, including five dead, all killed by mines, booby traps, or snipers.

"The men were hurt real bad, real bad," said one member of the company.

The soldiers attended a memorial service for Cox the next day, March 15. Afterward, Medina briefed them on a three-day search-and-destroy mission scheduled to begin the following morning. The target was My Lai, a village about 11 miles away from base. Elements of the VC 48th Local Force Battalion, a crack unit, were said to be there. Charlie Company would be outnumbered two to one.

Many of the men later claimed that Medina in the briefing ordered them to kill everyone in the village. Civilians would be away at market; anyone left would be either a guerrilla or VC sympathizer. Medina denied such a specific order, and others backed up his claim. Regardless, Charlie Company left the briefing anticipating its first face-to-face encounter with the enemy. The real war was finally about to begin.

Kenneth Hodges, squad leader: This was a time for us to get even. A time for us to settle the score. A time for revenge.

Fred Widmer: Your adrenaline started to flow just thinking about the next day.... This was our chance to prove ourselves as a fighting unit.

Lawrence La Croix, squad leader: This was gonna be an all-out war. This was gonna be shades of Iwo Jima.
'A Time for Revenge'
March 16 dawned warm and sunny. Four American 105mm howitzers erupted, firing 120 shells within three minutes into rice paddies west of My Lai to create a landing zone. The three Platoons of Charlie Company were to go in, with Calley's the first. He and about 25 others boarded helicopters for the short hop to the village, arriving about 7:30 a.m. Some mistook noise from the chopper blades for incoming fire; the landing zone was hot, they thought. Minutes after putting boots on the ground, they logged their first kill—a farmer who stood in a rice paddy waving his arms. It's not clear whether the men considered him a threat.

After a second platoon landed, the Americans entered the village. Investigators never put together a perfect picture of all that happened next. But it's clear that the intelligence about the Viet Cong was wrong. In fact, the 48th was nowhere near My Lai. What's more, the villagers had not gone to market; frightened by the shelling and the helicopters, many were hiding in huts or bunkers. Charlie Company faced no enemy fire. But the men started shooting.

Thomas Partsch, grenadier, from his journal: We started to move slowly through the village shooting everything in sight. Children, men and women and animals. Some was sickening. There [sic] legs were shot off and they were still moving it was just hanging there.

Varnado Simpson: You didn't have to look for people to kill; they were just there. I cut their throats, cut off their hands, cut out their tongue, their hair, scalped them. I did it. A lot of people were doing it, and I just followed.

Ronald Haeberle, army photographer: I noticed a woman appeared from some cover and this one GI fired first at her, then they all started shooting at her, aiming at her head. The bones were flying in the air chip by chip.... As they moved in closer to the village, they just kept shooting at people. I remember this man distinctly, holding a small child in one arm and another child in the other, walking toward us. They saw us and were pleading. The little girl was saying, "No, no," in English. Then all of a sudden a burst of fire and they were cut down.

Pham Thanh Cong, villager: Three American soldiers came to my house. They pushed six of us down into the shelter and threw a hand grenade in behind us. And then they used their machine guns to shoot us down. My entire family was blown into pieces. The only person left alive was me.

Some of the killing was sadistic. The men carved "C Company" or the shape of the ace of spades into the chests of a few victims. They raped women, then ripped open their vaginas with knives before killing them.

As the carnage continued, the men reacted differently.

Varnado Simpson: My whole mind just went. It just went... I had no feelings, no emotions. Nothing.

Herbert Carter, a "tunnel rat": The boys enjoyed it. When... someone laughs and jokes about what they're doing, they have to be enjoying it.

Ronald Haeberle: I asked some soldiers: "Why?" They more or less shrugged their shoulders and kept on with the killing. It was like they were fixed on one thing—search and destroy, and that meant killing civilians.... The other soldiers had a cold reaction—they were just staring off into space like it was an everyday thing, they felt they had to do it and they did it. That was their job. It was weird, just a shrug of the shoulder. No emotional reaction.

Thomas Partsch: As we went through there I don't think the
guys realized what they did until after, when it hit them. Maybe some of them did—they were having a ball, but some of the guys were just like in a daze.

**AT SOME POINT**, the random slaughter abated and the men began to round up the villagers, herd them together, and shoot them en masse. In one instance, some 70 or 80 villagers were forced into an irrigation ditch and gunned down.

Calley is at the center of many of these accounts. According to the testimony of machine gunner Robert Maples, the lieutenant pulled a pistol on him to force him to shoot a group of villagers.

**Paul Meadlo**, rifleman who helped gather a group of men, women, children, and babies in the center of the village: Lieutenant Calley came over and said, “You know what to do with them, don’t you?” And I said, “Yes.” And he left and came back about 10 minutes later, and said, “How come you ain’t killed them yet?” And I told him that I didn’t think he wanted us to do the killing, that he just wanted us to guard them. He said, “No, I want them dead.” So he started shooting them. And he told me to start shooting. I poured about four clips into them.

**Pham Thi Thuan**, villager: In the ditch I pushed my daughter down under my stomach and told her not to cry. I pretended to be dead and dared not move. The Americans were waiting to see if anyone moved, and then they shot them. I put a hand over my child’s mouth to prevent her from crying. She was covered in blood.

**Dennis Conti**, grenadier, on the Vietnamese forced into the ditch: I saw women, children, and a couple of old men, just regular civilians. I saw a woman get up, and Calley shot her in the head.

**The Assault Went Like Clockwork**

About 11 a.m., more than three hours after Charlie Company landed, Medina called a lunch break. Most of the killing was over, and the men were soon ordered to move out. That night, they camped in a village graveyard.

Charlie Company did not return to base for a couple days. But a helicopter pilot who intervened in the slaughter reported what happened to his commanding officer. [See sidebar, page 58]. Within 24 hours, at least five high-ranking officers were told of the incident, including Lieutenant Colonel Barker and Colonel Oran Henderson, commander of the 11th Brigade. Henderson, who had assumed command only the day before My Lai—his first combat command—questioned the men of Charlie Company upon their return. He concluded nothing was amiss: “Their heads were high. They were standing tall and in good spirits.”

Weeks later, the army came upon leaflets distributed by the Viet Cong detailing the horror. Henderson made a more formal inquiry, but his subsequent report put the number of noncombatant fatalities at 20—the result, he said, of crossfire and the artillery fire before the assault. Officially, the operation
The army charged 26 with crimes stemming from My Lai. 

Only six were tried, and just one—Calley—was convicted

They feared they’d be ignored, or even killed by their comrades. 

Jesse Frosch, military intelligence officer in Quang Ngai: We simply could not believe the count. There weren’t 128 Viet Cong troops in the village to be killed that day, and it would have been impossible for that many Viet Cong to have been killed with so few weapons taken.... Although there was speculation that civilians had gotten in the way, nobody made much of it. The more accepted conclusion was that Task Force Barker had inflated the body count for good press coverage.

Thomas Partsch, journal entry, March 18: There is going to be

U.S. artillermen in Vietnam demonstrate their support for Calley, whom many Americans—including Jimmy Carter—lauded as a hero.

an investigation on Medina. We are not supposed to say anything.

Herbert Carter: A lot of people have wondered why I didn’t say anything. Now, who would believe me? You would call me a nut. You would think that nothing like that goes on in the United States.

'Something Rather Dark and Bloody'
What happened at My Lai might have stayed a secret if not for Ron Ridenhour. A helicopter door gunner, he flew over My Lai a few days after the massacre and noticed the desolation. He knew a few members of Charlie Company from training in Hawaii, and talking to them, he began to piece together the truth.

Discharged in December 1968, Ridenhour returned to the States and decided he had to do something. “My God, when I first came home, I would tell my friends about this and cry—literally cry,” he said.

In early April 1969, he sent a registered letter detailing what he knew to 30 government leaders, including President Richard Nixon, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, and members of Congress. What happened at My Lai, he said, was “something rather dark and bloody.”

“I wanted to get those people,” Ridenhour said. “I wanted to reveal what they did.”

The official response was slow, but both the Army Inspector General’s office and its Criminal Investigative Division eventually opened investigations.

In September 1969, five months after Ridenhour sent his letter, the army charged Calley with murdering 109 “Oriental human beings.” The news barely made a ripple until November, when the Cleveland Plain Dealer and Life ran Ron Haeberle’s photos of the massacre. Haeberle hadn’t kept his shots a secret; indeed, he had included them in slide shows of his tour of duty that he gave to local groups in his hometown of Cleveland. But no one believed they were real. “They said Americans wouldn’t do this,” Haeberle said.

Now, with Calley’s arrest, the photos could not be ignored. “Having been in combat myself, I thought I would be hardened,” said Hawaii senator Daniel Inouye, who’d lost an arm fighting in World War II, “but I must say I am a bit sickened.”

Americans as a whole, however, could muster little outrage. For some time, the United States had been waging a brutal war of attrition in Vietnam, hoping to kill enough of the enemy to force the Viet Cong to give up. In South Vietnam, entire villages were destroyed in order to eliminate VC havens and support. Civilian casualties in Quang Ngai alone topped 50,000 a year. Before Charlie Company helicoptered into My Lai, 70 percent of the villages in the province had already been destroyed in American air attacks.

Given that, how could Medina, Calley, and the others be condemned?

The Times of London: There has been remarkably little reaction....People have known for a long time that Vietnam was an especially nasty war and that there have been plenty of incidents of brutality involving the American army. One more is merely one more.

Senator Ernest “Fritz” Hollings: Are we going to take every helicopter pilot and every pilot of a B-52 that hits the wrong target and call him a murderer?

Philip Caputo, Marine lieutenant (and later Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist) who served in Vietnam: Our mission was not to win terrain or seize positions, but simply to kill: to kill Communists and kill as many of them as possible. Stack ‘em up like cordwood. Victory was a high body count, defeat a low
kill ratio, war a matter of arithmetic.

William Kerns, G.I. who saw the My Lai aftermath: You just can't blame Calley's platoon....It was a free-fire zone. And you know, if you can shot artillery and bombs in there every night, how can the people in there be worth so much?

Ultimately, many Americans shrugged off My Lai as no big deal. In a Time magazine survey, 65 percent of respondents said “incidents such as this are bound to happen in war.” Only 22 percent expressed any moral concerns about the massacre.

Patrick Kupper, elevator operator in Boston: What do they give soldiers bullets for—to put in their pockets? That's the way war is.

Mary Halsem of Los Angeles: Oh, fiddle. Every war has that. War is war.

Stanley Gertner, former Marine, World War II veteran: If this man is guilty, he is guilty for the same thing we did. We shot up villages under orders and killed countless civilians.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, World War II navy veteran and aide to Richard Nixon, in a memo to the president: It is not the American character that came out at Mylai [sic]. It is what war can do to that or any character.

'He Knew Right From Wrong'

To the Vietnamese survivors of My Lai, he is the "pilot of peace." To Americans, he is the only ray of hope in the horror of March 16, 1968.

On that day, 25-year-old warrant officer Hugh Thompson was flying his H-33 observation helicopter in support of Charlie Company troops on the ground. Raised in a strict, churchgoing family in Georgia, Thompson had joined the navy reserves as a high schooler and later trained as an army helicopter pilot. Married with two children, he was taking confirmation classes from an army chaplain in Vietnam.

From the air over My Lai, the scene on the ground didn't look right. Thompson and his two-man crew flew over a stream of refugees fleeing the village, only to return minutes later and see them lying dead along the road. Next they saw Charlie Company's captain, Ernest Medina, fire a burst from his M-16 into a wounded woman.

Thompson thought: My God, he just killed her.

Medina later claimed he believed the woman was armed. But the shooting proved to the men in the helicopter that they were witnessing a massacre of innocents. "When we saw Medina do that, it all clicked," said Larry Colburn, Thompson's door gunner. "It was our guys doing the killing."

Thompson twice landed his helicopter and intervened to stop the slaughter. The second time, he positioned the craft in front of a squad of Americans advancing on Vietnamese in a bomb shelter. "Y'all cover me," he told Colburn and crew chief Glenn Andreotta as he climbed out. "If these bastards open up on me or these people, you open up on them."

After an angry confrontation with the Americans, Thompson coaxed the frightened villagers out of the bunker and called two gunships to the ground to ferry them to safety. Returning to base, Thompson reported what he'd seen to his superiors—including Colonel Oran Henderson, commander of the 11th Brigade. But his allegations were ignored or discounted. Henderson later said he wrote Thompson's story off as the ramblings of a young, excitable man.

When the massacre came to light in 1969, Thompson proved an invaluable witness for investigators.

"He may have only been a high school boy from Georgia, but he knew right from wrong and acted on it," said one.

Others denounced the pilot as a traitor. He received death threats, and a member of Congress moved to court-martial him for turning guns on American soldiers.

Thirty years later, the army finally embraced Thompson as a hero. In 1998, in a ceremony at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., he and Colburn were given the Soldier's Medal, the highest award for bravery outside combat. (Andreotta, who had been killed in action shortly after My Lai, received the award posthumously.)

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Joshua did not have charges brought against him for the slaughter of the civilian population of Jericho," said the judge.

'That Was My Job'
The notion that atrocities are unavoidable in war clearly influenced the prosecution of the men involved in My Lai. The army charged 26 enlisted men and officers with crimes stemming from My Lai, but only six were brought to trial. Captain Medina was acquitted of murder, manslaughter, and assault. Colonel Henderson was found not guilty on charges of covering up the massacre.

Calley's trial was the emotional flashpoint of the My Lai aftermath. It ran 77 days in late 1970 and early 1971—the longest court-martial in U.S. history. More than 20 members of Charlie Company testified that Medina had ordered the slaughter. Calley in turn portrayed himself as a dutiful soldier. "I was ordered to go in there and destroy the enemy. That was my job on that day...I carried out the orders that I was given, and I do not feel wrong in doing so, sir."

Psychiatrists had examined the lieutenant and reported that "he did not feel as if he were killing human beings but rather that they were animals with whom one could not speak or reason."

On March 29, 1972, the six-man jury convicted Calley on 22 counts of premeditated murder. The verdict and sentence of life imprisonment sparked outrage and transformed Calley into a martyr. Draft boards refused to conscript young men until the decision was reversed. Jimmy Carter, then governor of Georgia, urged residents to drive with their lights on in protest and to "honor the flag as Rusty had done."

The White House received thousands of telegrams, almost all of them backing Calley. The president wanted to intervene, if only because the furor threatened the war effort and his reelection in November. Nixon went so far as to consider commuting Calley's sentence. His justification: We could no longer think of war as "a game with rules." Instead, the president moved more judiciously, ordering Calley released from jail and placed under house arrest pending his legal appeals.

In the coming years, those appeals chipped away at Calley's punishment. The army reduced his sentence to 20 years, then 10 years. He was released on parole late in 1974, having served less than four years, most of it under house arrest.

The most memorable defense of Calley came from Robert Elliott, a Georgia federal district judge who threw out Calley's conviction when reviewing the case on civil appeal. Elliott's ruling was later overturned, but his argument captured the public mood. Reaching back to biblical times for evidence, the judge concluded that the slaughter of innocents is accepted practice in war. "Joshua did not have charges brought against him for the slaughter of the civilian population of Jericho," he declared.

On the massacre's 40th anniversary in 2008, survivors gathered at the memorial site and museum that has replaced the village.

Elliott also summoned the spirit of William T. Sherman. The Union general, he argued, waged war with calculated cruelty. Yet unlike Calley, he was "glorified, idolized, beatified, and sanctified" by an admiring nation.

"Sherman," Elliott concluded, "was absolutely right; not about what he did, but about the nature of war; War is Hell." MHQ

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