The Misfortune at My Lai

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Historical Paper

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Over 500 men, women, and children were murdered, and their village burned to the ground in the My Lai Massacre on March 16, 1968. When the tragedy was exposed to the public, many in America were appalled, and those in Vietnam were angry at the Americans for killing their innocents.

**Before the Massacre**

Task Force Barker was created in effort of removing the threat of the 48th Viet Cong Battalion. That battalion was rumored to have a stronghold in the Quang Ngai province, and Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie Companies were trying to get rid of them. A search and destroy mission was scheduled for March 16 in the My Lai region, in order for the three companies to find and eliminate any communist fighters.¹

On February 13, the three companies had their first big encounter with the 48th Viet Cong Battalion, in an area north of My Lai. At the end of the operation, they claimed 80 Viet Cong dead.² On February 23, Alpha and Bravo Companies fought the Viet Cong again. In two days, they killed an additional 78 Viet Cong, but the battalion was still dangerous.³

In My Lai, villagers would leave for the market each morning. This was taken into consideration, and the operation was to begin after those villagers had left. On March 15, the intelligence officer of Task Force Barker, Captain Eugene Kotouc, told the soldiers involved to be aware that the area would be Viet Cong populated when they arrived.⁴

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³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid., p. 28
Intelligence reports were indicating a possible 250 enemy fighters. Because of this, soldiers were expecting the area to consist of supporters and sympathizers of the Viet Cong, with heavy resistance. Nguyen Duc Te said in testimony that the My Lai region was a majority of Viet Cong guerrillas. Women and children were used for finding information, and set up mines around My Lai. Ta Linh Vien claimed that My Lai was under Viet Cong authority, and corroborated that women and children were used for setting mines.

Colonel Oran K. Henderson also spoke to the soldiers about what they were to do in My Lai. He mentioned in his speech that not only women, but children could be helping the Viet Cong escape, and storing away weapons for them.

Charlie Company had recently lost 28 men due to the Tet Offensive. In the briefing, some soldiers reported that Captain Ernest Medina told them that this operation was a chance for revenge against the Vietnamese, for the soldiers the company had lost.

**The Massacre**

The My Lai Massacre occurred the morning of March 16, 1968, and was about four hours long. In total, 504 civilians were killed and their animals slaughtered, the village

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6 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
was in ruins. A museum was built on top of the My Lai remains, dedicated to those who lost their lives that day.\textsuperscript{12}

When the soldiers arrived in My Lai, a search of the village was conducted. Residents were gathered into large groups, and the houses were thoroughly searched. Any food storages and rice caches were destroyed. Charlie Company found only three weapons in the whole village, but Calley still ordered his men to begin shooting. In testimony, Paul Meadlo said, “We burnt the village and killed all the people and just one mass slaughter, just like you do a bunch of cows, you know, just killed them all.”\textsuperscript{13}

Dennis Conti and Paul Meadlo were watching a group of Vietnamese when Calley told them to “take care of these people”.\textsuperscript{14} Meadlo and Conti assumed that Calley wanted them to make sure that none of the villagers got away, just keep watch over them. When Calley came back, he was confused because the villagers were still there. Calley meant that he had wanted the villagers killed. Conti remembered being stunned, and he wasn’t quite sure what to do. When Calley went over to shoot the villagers, Conti refused to kill them and made Meadlo go with Calley. After some time shooting the villagers huddled in the group, Meadlo broke down crying, exclaiming that he would not kill any more people.\textsuperscript{15}

Gary Roschevitz was one of the soldiers who took part in killing villagers and raping women. Someone reported Roschevitz taking his weapon when he refused to shoot some nearby Vietnamese, and shooting them himself. After the Vietnamese were dead,
Roschevitz casually returned the weapon, as if nothing had happened.\textsuperscript{16} Leonard Gonzales also came across Roschevitz, and a pile of nude women shot to death. Roschevitz told Gonzales that he demanded the group of women to undress and have sexual intercourse with him. When the women refused to let Roschevitz near them, he shot them all.\textsuperscript{17}

Frederick Widmer, known as “Mr. Homicide”\textsuperscript{18} among the group, asked a soldier nearby for his gun, and started shooting anyone he saw to be alive, including a boy about five years old. That soldier remembered not being able to comprehend how anybody could kill a child like that.\textsuperscript{19}

Varnado Simpson was ordered to shoot a crying woman who came out of her house, holding an infant. He did as he was told, killing the mother and child. Soldiers accompanying him went into the house to find more children, shooting until they were all dead.\textsuperscript{20}

At the My Lai Massacre, many women were raped and sodomized, young girls, mothers, and elderly women alike. People were beaten and mutilated. One soldier who testified said; "I cut their throats, cut off their hands, cut out their tongues, scalped them. I did it. A lot of people were doing it and I just followed. I lost all sense of direction."\textsuperscript{21}

We will never be able to document everything that happened in the My Lai Massacre, and will therefore never accurately determine how many women were raped in My Lai, but

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 40
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 38
\textsuperscript{21} “My Lai Massacre.” \textit{Digital History},
www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/vietnam/vietnam_mylai.cfm.
it is important to remember that it did happen. Pham Thua, a survivor of the massacre, remembers seeing seven black soldiers gang-rape an innocent Vietnamese woman.\textsuperscript{22} The woman was held down while each soldier took their turn with her. Another group of soldiers was reported for gang-raping in My Lai and brought to questioning. Each soldier insisted that they hadn’t raped the woman, and pushed blame to a different soldier.\textsuperscript{23}

Later, survivors of My Lai came back to salvage anything they could from the wreckage, and bury their dead. Pham Lai returned to see the homes in ashes, the dead lay everywhere.\textsuperscript{24}

Some survivors also chose to speak out about what they lost that fateful day, and what they had to go through for survival. Truong Thi Le lost her husband, mother, three of her brothers, and she watched her 17-year-old daughter die in front of her. To keep her life, she had to hide under the bodies of two other Vietnamese.\textsuperscript{25} A child in My Lai, who luckily survived, but watched his family die in front of him. “Suddenly an American soldier came in carrying a gun. I saw my father collapse, and then my mother, my grandfather, and my grandmother. They all continued to fall. My brother, younger than me, only three years old, suddenly they blasted his head open. One shot and his head blasted onto the floor.”\textsuperscript{26} Truong Moi saw dead children, some naked and disemboweled, others with their throats slit.\textsuperscript{27} Pham Thi Thuam also lost many family members that day, including her father,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 47
\item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 53
\item \textsuperscript{25} My Lai Massacre. WordPress, blogs.baylor.edu/mylaimassacre/234-2/.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Maxwell, Gus. “Making Sense of the My Lai Massacre.” \textit{Regis University: EPublications at Regis University}, 2011, epublications.regis.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1542&context=theses. p. 44
\item \textsuperscript{27} My Lai Massacre. WordPress, blogs.baylor.edu/mylaimassacre/234-2/.
\end{itemize}
brother, sister, and three nephews. Another woman who survived My Lai agreed to an interview with USA Today, where she shared her experience from March 16, 1968. She hid with her two daughters in a ditch under the dead and said that “I had to climb over so many bodies, I was crying so much. I wondered what had happened, why we were the only ones left to survive.”

While some lost their lives in their homes, others were gathered into a ditch and shot to death. Not far outside the village, drainage ditches were in place to protect against heavy rainfall during the wet season in Vietnam. In one instance, a young boy who survived the shooting was crawling out of the ditch when Calley threw him back down and killed him.

The Cover Up

In Vietnam, word spread quickly about the My Lai Massacre. The Viet Cong were angry that their innocents were killed. Red armbands were worn as a reminder to avenge the Americans for what they did. Meanwhile, on the American side, anybody who was not directly involved was given false information about the operation. A fake report on the incident was written up, omitting information and lying about what really took place. Charlie Company falsely reported that 128 Viet Cong fighters were killed during their operation. When questioned about March 16, both Medina and Henderson lied about the

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28 Ibid.
31 Ibid., p. 69
number of civilians they saw dead. Medina had actually seen about 100 but reported seeing between 20 and 28 civilians shot.

The My Lai Massacre was chosen to be covered up, to avoid any possible rioting in the U.S. among the public, along with any other negative effects. The massacre might have been covered up forever, if not for Ronald Ridenhour. Ridenhour was a soldier in Vietnam who heard about the massacre a while after the initial incident from a couple of soldiers involved. He was very upset and felt that exposure was necessary, but no one else seemed willing to unmask the situation.

**Exposing the Massacre**

Because nobody else was going to bring the events of that day to light, Ridenhour took the job upon himself. He wrote a letter to 30 government officials, including people in the Pentagon, about the My Lai Massacre on March 16, 1968. In that letter, Ridenhour was shocked that “not only had so many young American men participated in such an act of barbarism but that their officers had ordered it.”\(^{33}\) One of the people who received this letter was Colonel William V. Wilson, in the Pentagon. When Wilson read the letter, he said “if the Pinkville incident was true, it was cold-blooded murder. I hoped to God it was false, but if it wasn’t I wanted the bastards exposed for what they’d done.”\(^{34}\)

Seymour Hersh, an esteemed reporter, also heard of the massacre in My Lai. He did an investigation, found out everything he could, and wrote an article about March 16, 1968. The public first heard about the massacre on September 5, 1969, with more later in

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November.\textsuperscript{35} In his story, Hersh wrote that members of the Charlie Company had “given into a pattern of easy violence”.\textsuperscript{36}

Once the public heard about what was hidden for over a year, further examination of the massacre started. General William Peers organized an investigation, to find out the truth of March 16, 1968, and to deliver justice to soldiers who were deserving of it. Ronald Haeberle, a photographer in Vietnam, released his pictures of the massacre, shocking many.\textsuperscript{37} In an interview, Haeberle recalled seeing about 30 soldiers fire upon and kill 100 unarmed Vietnamese in My Lai.\textsuperscript{38} The public was upset that the American soldiers in Vietnam would do something as terrible as kill innocent women and children. Paul Meadlo went on national television to answer questions and give his version of what happened.\textsuperscript{39}

During investigation and continued exposure of what was going on, protests broke out among the American public.\textsuperscript{40} Many people were beginning to believe that U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War needed to end, and the argument got worse after the


\textsuperscript{40} Hersh, Seymour M. “Return to My Lai.” \textit{The New Yorker}, The New Yorker, 10 Nov. 2017, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/30/the-scene-of-the-crime?rlckid=1D1R-kzQpxyJWFSxTV1LXQupUkgS0C1IK2vOVc0&irgwc=1&source=affiliate_impactpmx_12f6tote_desktop_Viglink%2BPrimary&mbid=affiliate_impactpmx_12f6tote_desktop_Viglink%2BPrimary.
massacre was brought to attention.\textsuperscript{41} College protests were very big at that time, and on May 4, 1970, a protest at Kent State University killed four students.\textsuperscript{42}

**Investigating My Lai**

The Peers report included 20,000 pages of testimony from 398 witnesses, and 14 people could face charges for murder, rape, and keeping information from the government.\textsuperscript{43} Along with the Peers Inquiry, another investigation more official was conducted by the Army’s Criminal Investigation Division.\textsuperscript{44} The Army’s study had enough evidence to charge 30 soldiers on accounts of sodomy, rape, murder, and mutilation. But, because 17 of those soldiers had since left the Army, charges against them were dropped.\textsuperscript{45}

**The Court-Martial of William Calley**

Many witnesses came in to testify, 21 of which specifically remember that not Calley, but Captain Ernest Medina ordered them to kill the villagers.\textsuperscript{46} In testimony, Robert Maples said that he saw Calley shoot people in a ditch.\textsuperscript{47} David Mitchell went before the court to attest that villagers were brought to Calley, and then killed.\textsuperscript{48} Paul Meadlo said that two large groups of people were gathered together and shot, along with four or five smaller groups.\textsuperscript{49} Concluding the court-martial, Calley was charged with personally killing 109

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} “My Lai Massacre.” *Digital History*, www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/vietnam/vietnam_mylai.cfm.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
innocent Vietnamese, and found responsible for the death of 22 villagers. He originally had a life sentence, but upon further review, Calley was to serve four years under house arrest.

Remembering the My Lai Massacre

The Son My Memorial was built in honor of the Vietnamese in the My Lai area, those who lost their lives and those who lost their loved ones. Many people visit there every year, but it is not as well known as other war memorials in Vietnam, partially because of its somewhat remote location.

The Son My Memorial may not be as frequently visited due to the amount of people that have minimal knowledge of the massacre’s existence. Social studies curriculum passes over the subject as a basic war effort, which is not true, basic war efforts don’t involve the death of innocents, especially to the extent of what happened in My Lai. Other curriculums completely pass over the subject, which is unfair to the Vietnamese. However, military service academies teach the history of the massacre and its lesson, which is a step in the right direction of remembering the Vietnamese.

The Impact of My Lai

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53 Ibid.
54 I came to this conclusion from interviewing people who have all graduated high school, if not college. Only three of the ten people I interviewed had any knowledge of the My Lai Massacre, and two people who had lived through the time of the massacre still knew nothing of it.
56 Ibid.
I hope that people will always remember the tragic events of the My Lai Massacre, and those affected. So many lives were destroyed that day, whether killed, a survivor, or even the soldiers who have to live with that guilt.⁵⁸ Those who did survive lost their family, their home, everything they had. A soldier from Vietnam told me that “Men do many things during combat, they are supposed to obey certain rules, in this case, they did not.”⁵⁹ Calley should not have given those orders that day, he should not have killed so many innocent Vietnamese, but what was done cannot be changed. On August 19, 2009, Calley gave his first public apology for what happened in My Lai.⁶⁰ In his address, he said that “Not a day that goes by that I do not feel remorse for what happened that day in My Lai. I feel remorse for the Vietnamese who were killed, for their families, for the American soldiers who were involved and their families. I am very sorry.”⁶¹ If we cannot fix all the damage and tragedy of March 16, 1968, at least we can apologize for our mistakes, and remember those who died that day.

⁵⁹ Ibid.
⁶¹ Kulik, Gary. “Was William Calley A Scapegoat?” Osu.edu, 26 Sept. 2009, origins.osu.edu/history-news/was-william-calley-scapegoat.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


Donald Moore was a soldier in Vietnam after enlisting at 18. He told me about his overall experience, and had some interesting things to say about the My Lai Massacre in particular.


The testimony of Ernest Medina gave me a different perspective of the My Lai Massacre. I learned more about the different information and knowledge of all of the people involved in the operation, like what Medina knew of March 16.


This is the continuation of Captain Medina’s testimony, as there was a part one and a part two. I got some more information about what Medina knew of the events that were happening on the morning of March 16.


Nguyen Duc Te’s testimony gave me more background on My Lai. In his testimony, he said that there were Viet Cong in the My Lai area, and that women and children were used by the Viet Cong.
Paul Meadlo’s testimony gave me some knowledge on the perspective of the soldiers who were going into My Lai, and what they were told about the operation. I also learned about a specific event that Meadlo was a part of, when himself and Calley were shooting at villagers in a ditch.

Duong Minh was an interpreter for an American soldier in My Lai. In testimony, he recalled seeing the homes of My Lai, called hootches, burning. He also saw many dead animals, along with the people who lived in My Lai.

By reading David Mitchell’s testimony, I learned more about the briefing of the My Lai operation on March 15, and what the soldiers were told. Mitchell recalled being told to destroy everything in the village, and Medina specifically telling them to wipe out everything.

Ta Linh Vien also had information about the Viet Cong. He said that My Lai was under Viet Cong authority around the time of the massacre. He said that the surrounding area of My Lai was heavily booby-trapped, and that women and children were used to set those traps.

Secondary Sources

While this document didn’t give me much new information about the My Lai Massacre, it did reassure information that I learned from other sources. One helpful piece of information was the specific strength of the 48th Viet Cong Battalion in My Lai, or what the intelligence reports were reporting anyway.


Reading this book really helped me learn about the My Lai Massacre. I got more information about what led up to the massacre on March 16, and what happened after, like the court-martial for William Calley.


While I did not directly use any information from this page in my paper, this website did help me learn about the My Lai Massacre. It gave me a more general overview of what happened, and started my expansion of knowledge on the My Lai Massacre.

This website gave me a more in-depth view of the My Lai Massacre. In the article, it gave me a different view of the massacre when it was compared to the Rodney King incident and rioting, which had a similar consequence when brought to the public’s attention.

Hersh, Seymour M. “Return to My Lai.” The New Yorker, The New Yorker, 10 Nov. 2017,
www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/30/the-scene-of-the-crime?irclickid=1D1R-kzQpxyJWFSxTV1LXQupUkgS0C1IK2vOVc0&irgwc=1&source=affiliate_impactpmx_12f6tote_desktop_Viglink%2BPrimary&mbid=affiliate_impactpmx_12f6tote_desktop_Viglink%2BPrimary.

This article was written by Seymour Hersh, a well known reporter in times of the Vietnam War. He wrote this article in 2017, after visiting Vietnam, and what remains of My Lai today. I got some useful information from what he recalled from the reaction to the My Lai Massacre.


Digital History, 2018,
www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/vietnam/my_lai_editorials.cfm.

This website helped me understand more about what the My Lai Massacre impacted. It gave me a general overview of what happened during the massacre, along with an in-depth view of the consequences of that day.

This book gave me more information about before the massacre, and who was all involved. I learned a bit more about the background before the massacre happened.


This article was helpful to me for the information it gave me, not about the massacre itself, but what happened before it. I learned a possible reason for why the Charlie Company soldiers acted as they did on March 16, and I learned that Medina wasn’t so innocent at the briefing of the operation.


This website gave me more information about William Calley. The most interesting thing I learned from this source was the apology of Calley, which was in 2009.

Lawrence, Quil. “50 Years On, My Lai Massacre Remains A Gaping Wound.” *NPR*, NPR, 16 Mar. 2018,
I didn’t find much information from this source, but the information I did find was useful to me and my paper. I learned that the lesson of My Lai is taught in military service academies, which I did not previously know.


This website gave me a lot of information about the preparation before going into My Lai, and what happened that morning, before the killing started. I also got a better understanding of the details of the cover-up of the My Lai Massacre.

Linder, Douglas. “Other American Soldiers at My Lai.” Microsoft VOICE, 2009,

This website featured a part of Dennis Conti’s testimony, along with a portion of Paul Meadlo’s. In those sections of testimony, Conti and Meadlo were talking about watching over a group of civilians, and then having to kill them. I learned a lot, and understood how the soldiers felt.

Maxwell, Gus. “Making Sense of the My Lai Massacre.” Regis University:

EPublications at Regis University, 2011,
This article had a lot of useful information about the My Lai Massacre. I learned more about the view of the villagers in My Lai, and what was happening to them.


While this website had great information about the actual massacre, I found other information to be more useful. The website had a lot of interesting information about the effect of My Lai, in Vietnam and America, along with other information about what happened after the massacre.

“My Lai Massacre.” *Digital History*,

www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/vietnam/vietnam_mylai.cfm.

This website gave me very specific information about the massacre in My Lai. I learned the approximations of deaths per age group and gender at the massacre. I also learned about what many soldiers did to the innocent Vietnamese.


This website taught me about the different survivors of My Lai. I got many different accounts from survivors at My Lai, and what they went through in order to survive.

This book was very useful in background of the Vietnam War in general. It didn’t have a lot of information specifically about the My Lai Massacre, but I got a lot of background knowledge about what was happening in Vietnam.