MY LAI AT THE MILLENNIUM

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

JOHN OVERMYER

"America still inhabits solitude; for a long time yet her wilderness will be her manners."
~CHATEAUBRIAND (1827)

A long time ago in another place when I was to some extent another person, I carried a rifle and wore a helmet. I lived in mortal fear of death on a primitive plain of human relations and wept openly over the deaths of men who had been my friends, at the same time trying extremely hard to be cold toward the deaths and pain of Vietnamese I helped kill or injure. It did not matter whether I considered myself compassionate or humane; it made no difference I really did not want to kill or injure Vietnamese because I was unable to convince myself they were my enemy.

What did matter was I did those things to people I really had no reason to do them to except I had made a decision that gave me the opportunity: I reenlisted in the USMC specifically for Vietnam.

For several years afterward I was publicly repentant. It took awhile to move away from the merely confessional. I don't believe I will ever be completely free of the onus of guilt I still feel 40 years later about the things I did while at war. Yet somewhere along the line I finally began to realize that confessions on an individual level quite often perpetuate iniquity on a mass scale: personal guilt makes it easy to hold a single person responsible for an entire nation's genocidal attitude toward other peoples.

Over the years many of us leprous voices in the wilderness found ourselves coming closer together, beginning a slow evolution beyond our confessionals, understanding them to be intricate blocks against eradicating the iniquities themselves. By contenting ourselves with only disclosure and not with unearthing the diverse, complex roots of the grotesqueries we participated in, we only allowed ourselves and those who listened to conveniently beat our breasts against the wailing wall, and do little more, safe in justification of our powerlessness.

The evolution was slow and hard. Many of us who fought as oppressors in one war — which indeed we were to the Vietnamese we claimed to protect — found ourselves oppressed in another, this time a war against a war in the streets of the homeland. The riflemen became victims. Our heads were bloodied in mass antiwar demonstrations, which were in themselves a sense of masturbating ineffectively against a power structure more able and willing to flex greater muscle and violence than we could either muster or withstand.

Perhaps most of us who fought in Indochina needed to face the clubs in the streets. It began to make us understand, through fear and pain of being unarmed and helpless when charged by heavily armed police and National Guardsmen, a sense of what it was like to be Vietnamese whenever we blitzkrieged through their villages with rifles and torches (our Zippo lighters).

The slaughter of Iraqi civilians by U.S. Marines in the small village of Hidatha awakened old nightmares from when I first returned from Vietnam nearly 40 years ago. Back then the nightmares assaulted me like machinegun bullets, one endlessly after another. Time has calloused the strungout nerves and disbelief and guilt at having lived when it seemed everyone else died. (I used to half-wish I had been killed in-country, there would be no nightmares stenched with horror.) I don't really know if I killed anyone but I certainly was in on the killing of hundreds, maybe thousands, whose villages I helped search and destroy —villages we disdainfully called *déjà vu* because they all seemed the same.

Hidatha is being compared to the slaughter of at least 500 civilians at My Lai in Vietnam in the spring of 1968. Everybody in the USA surely remembers My Lai — after My Lai (and the Tet Offensive by North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong that immediately preceded it) most Americans began to lose heart about the war.

Americans don't like to believe that American soldiers could ever cold-bloodedly butcher innocents. We deny the culpability of Americans to slaughter without extreme provocation, yet passively allow our leaders to bully the world with nuclear erasure, presiding over an immense complex of technological, indiscriminate mass-genocide. Is there any difference between the death of one murdered man, woman or child or 500? Is death at riflepoint worse than death by bombs dropped from the sky?

By the time My Lai was revealed more than a year later most of us who had already been in Vietnam knew our small roles we had played in Indochina. Many seemingly accepted what we had done and tried to get on with the rest of their lives as if Vietnam was a brief and not at all definitive aberration. Others clung to their beliefs that no matter how hideous the atrocities, the war was just. But others of us, as a result of our experience, and through long and torturous sessions with conscience and brain, knew the fear and horror that had made us, each in our individual tours of terror, the final extensions of American foreign policy.

For years we had told of the wholesale atrocities committed as a matter of policy against Vietnamese, and later against Cambodians and Laotians, but hardly anyone believed us; for years we clashed in the streets with police as well as soldiers whom we felt were sent to chop down their own brothers. Then came the disclosure of My Lai and the immediate response was that it was an aberration, it had never happened before and never would again, the soldiers of that massacre were monsters not Americans — and if indeed they were

A LESSON OF LOST INNOCENCE

BY RON RIDENHOUR

March 16, 1993

March 16 marks the 25th anniversary of the My Lai massacre, an event that shattered the fondest illusions of many Americans, myself included.

Foremost among those illusions was the notion that the war crimes committed at My Lai — an event I now think of as a terrible, terribly accurate metaphor for our conduct of the entire Vietnam War — 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." *

But shortly after 7a.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, I, and I believe, most other Americans didn't think American soldiers would do: massacre an entire community of unarmed, unresisting civilians.

Over the four hours that followed, however, Charlie Company, supported by two other infantry companies, artillery and a helicopter battalion, all under the direction and the watchful gaze of nearly 20 senior officers, systematically slaughtered almost 500 people. The vast majority were women, children and old men.

At one point, a young 2nd lieutenant, William L. Calley, ordered the machine-gunning of dozens of villagers who were standing under guard on the edge of a ditch. It was, a friend who had been there later told me, "a Nazi kind of thing."

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

My personal education into the hard nature of modern reality, it is fair to say, began with my arrival in Vietnam, which was the mother of all object lessons in just how far from truth government officials are willing to stray to get their way.

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.

While the My Lai massacre was the logical consequence of the smaller, far more numerous day-to-day atrocities I had witnessed up to then as a helicopter door gunner, hearing the story from men I knew and trusted, fellow soldiers who saw and participated in My Lai, staggered me like nothing before.

America's education, at least that nasty, brutish part of it, began 18 months later when the story of My Lai broke into the headlines of newspapers all over the world. With few exceptions, Americans were as stunned by My Lai as I had been.

American officialdom, compelled to concede that the My Lai massacre was indeed real, quickly began doing everything they could to shift full responsibility for the slaughter onto the lowest ranking officer, Lt. Calley.

But My Lai was not the consequence of a lowly 2nd lieutenant who went berserk. It was instead the inevitable outgrowth of overall U.S. military policy in Vietnam. My Lai and My Khe were two of many such massacres during the course of the war and, without question, the specific acts and responsibilities of officers far higher up the military foodchain than Calley.

Although he was the only officer convicted for his conduct at My Lai, subsequent official investigations concluded that at least a dozen officers higher in the chain of command bore direct responsibility for the massacre.

But those conclusions were ignored for the most part until after Calley was convicted, until after the officers above Calley who issued, transmitted or remained silent about the massacre orders were either acquitted or not tried — and the public was no longer paying attention.

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

No matter how you say it, it seems to me, that spells cover-up.

In that vein, it always strikes me as particularly ironic to hear American newspeople, writers and pundits cluck their collective tongues when they talk about the reluctance of German society to embrace the brutal and tragic history of Germany's war crimes during World War 2.

Seldom do you hear or see any of the same folk raise similar questions about American conduct in Vietnam or America's reluctance to cast an unflinching eye on what we did there.

We will serve ourselves and future generations well, in my view, if we openly and honestly examine those similarities and the questions they raise.

More important, what happens if we don't. Can we ever truly become the society of justice and equality that we claim to be if we do not deal openly and honestly with who and what we have really been.

Ron Ridenhour, after being honorably discharged from the U.S. Army in 1969 following a tour of duty in Vietnam, wrote a letter of complaint that initiated the investigation and subsequent revelation of the My Lai massacre. He helped originate Dispatch News Service after Congress and the media initially ignored his charges. Seymour Hersch wrote the original article about My Lai for DNS, which was disseminated worldwide. Ridenhour returned to Vietnam as a reporter for DNS, and revealed the widespread use of Agent Orange as a defoliant. He died several years ago, for the most part ignored and unacknowledged for the two great services he provided for the nation.

**Hugh Thompson, who landed his helicopter at My Lai in an attempt to stop the slaughter, died in 2005.*

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