

Vietnam, March 16, 1968. An important military achievement is reported. U.S. soldiers have killed 128 enemy Vietcong in the hamlet of My Lai, part of the village of Song My. The battle makes headline news in the United States. The commander of U.S. troops in Vietnam sends a letter congratulating the soldiers for their success and the high body count of the enemy dead.

The reported military success at My Lai was one event in the long, costly, and controversial war in Vietnam. By the end of the war, approximately fifty-five thousand Americans had been killed, three hundred thousand had been wounded, and billions of dollars had been spent.

U.S. involvement with Vietnam began after World War II. The French, attempting to regain control of their former colony, were opposed by military forces of the Communist leader, Ho Chi Minh. U.S. leaders, fearing the spread of communism in Southeast Asia, provided military aid to the French. The French efforts failed. In 1954, after losing a major battle at Dien Bien Phu, the French realized they could not win in Vietnam.

At the peace conference following the war, Vietnam was divided, supposedly temporarily, at the 17th parallel. Ho Chi Minh's military forces took control north of the line. In the south, a U.S.-supported anticommunist government headed by Ngo Dinh Diem was established. Although the fighting with the French was over, bloodshed did not end. The military struggle for control of Vietnam continued. Diem's government was unable to secure firm control of South Vietnam. He and other government officials were accused of bribery and other forms of corruption. People suspected of opposing Diem were often imprisoned. Many were tortured and killed. Most Americans were unaware of the corruption and brutality of Diem's regime. In the United States, Diem was pictured as a courageous fighter against communism.

It was U.S. policy to try to halt the advance of communism. Over the years, top officials endorsed what has been called the *domino theory*. According to this view, if one nation fell to communism, neighboring nations would soon topple like dominoes. President John Kennedy, for example, was reported to have said: "Burma, Thailand, India, Japan, the Philippines, and obviously Laos and Cambodia are among those whose security would be threatened if the red tide of Communism overflowed into Vietnam."

Within South Vietnam, opposition to Diem's government intensified. Guerrilla warfare began in the mountains, jungles, and rice

paddies. Government officials and troops came under attack from the guerrillas.

The major military opposition to the Diem government came from the *National Liberation Front* (NLF). Formed in 1960, the NLF, with increasing aid from North Vietnam, was determined to overthrow the government of South Vietnam.

NLF guerrillas, known to Americans as the Vietcong or VC, used violence to create political instability in South Vietnam. Public buildings were bombed, government officials murdered, and government troops attacked. The guerrillas frequently struck at night and seemed to disappear during the day. Government forces could not stop them.

By the early 1960s Americans were aware of the problems with Diem's rule. In South Vietnam, there was a military coup in 1963. Diem was overthrown and killed. American officials had been aware of the planning for the coup but did not oppose it. Afterward, the United States supported the succession of military leaders who took control of the government.

Initially, aid from the United States was in the form of money and military supplies. Then U.S. military men went to Vietnam as advisors to the army. Some American soldiers actually engaged in direct combat with the Vietcong. Early in the presidency of Lyndon Johnson, tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers entered the war as combat troops.

In the summer of 1964, a patrolling U.S. naval vessel briefly exchanged gunfire with North Vietnamese vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of North Vietnam. On August 7, at President Johnson's request, the Congress passed the *Gulf of Tonkin Resolution*. It was not an official declaration of war, but it allowed the president to take virtually any military action he wished in order to help South Vietnam or to defend U.S. troops who might be attacked. Saying he would not be the first U.S. president to lose a war, President Johnson took massive action.

In 1965, extensive bombing of North Vietnam began. It was hoped that Ho Chi Minh, as a result of the bombing, would try to persuade the NLF to seek peace. He would not.

By the end of the year about two hundred thousand Americans were in Vietnam and many more were to come. Soldiers of the North Vietnamese regular army also began entering South Vietnam in large numbers.

In the United States, opposition to increased U.S. involvement in the war was growing. Demonstrations against the war occurred in city streets and on college campuses. Occasionally there were bloody

clashes between demonstrators and police. Thousands of young men, believing the war was wrong, refused to serve in the military. Some fled the country to avoid the military draft; others went to prison for refusing to obey the draft laws. The war dragged on.

Conventional military strategy was ineffective in Vietnam. No clear lines of battle were established as they had been in Europe during the world wars. Instead, fighting flared up at various points around the country.

It was especially difficult to take control of rural areas. Many villagers had no respect for South Vietnamese government officials. Many supported the NLF, sometimes from fear of the Vietcong.

One tactic of the Vietcong was to avoid large scale military combat. Using hit-and-run attacks and sniper fire, they battled the U.S. and South Vietnamese troops. When U.S. troops pursued the Vietcong into nearby villages they would often find only women, children, and old men. In many villages the guerrillas had elaborated systems of tunnels and underground rooms for escaping and hiding supplies and weapons.

The guerrillas were also effective at laying mines and booby traps. U.S. soldiers were killed and wounded, sometimes without ever seeing their enemy.

In their effort to combat the Vietcong, military leaders created *free-fire zones* and sent soldiers on *search-and-destroy missions*. Free-fire zones were areas in which civilian villagers were removed. It was then presumed that any Vietnamese in the area must be the enemy and troops were free to shoot them. In search-and-destroy missions, soldiers swept through rural areas seeking Vietcong and attempting to kill them or to take them prisoner.

Although efforts were made to protect civilians from harm, such efforts were often not successful. Traditionally, Vietnamese have a powerful spiritual attachment to their villages. Often they were reluctant to leave them even if the area had been declared a free-fire zone.

Civilians were also endangered because U.S. troops could not easily tell who was an innocent civilian and who was an enemy. The Vietcong were native Vietnamese as were the villagers.

Some villagers carried weapons and supplies for the guerrillas. Informed them of U.S. troop movements, helped set booby traps, and provided other forms of assistance. U.S. troops often failed to distinguish between villagers who aided the Vietcong and those who did not.

It is impossible to know accurately how many civilians were killed during the war. According to one estimate, five hundred thousand were killed and over a million wounded by the actions of U.S., South Vietnamese, Vietcong, and North Vietnamese troops.

According to international law, civilians are supposed to be protected during war. In all wars, however, there are instances of civilians being killed. One such instance occurred at My Lai on March 16, 1968. It involved the men of Charlie Company, a unit of the Americal Division.

The Americal Division had come to Vietnam about four months earlier. Many of its soldiers were assigned search-and-destroy missions in free-fire zones. By this time in the war, because clear battle lines could not be established, military success was determined by the number of enemy soldiers killed—the body count. Units with high body counts received praise from their officers who, in turn, received praise from their superior officers.

The men of the Americal Division, soon saw some of the more brutal aspects of the war. They saw civilians suspected of being Vietcong or supporters of the Vietcong beaten, tortured, or even killed. They saw their buddies maimed by booby traps and snipers. Some came to hate all Vietnamese. One member of Charlie Company said, "Why shouldn't I? They were the enemy." Another soldier, frustrated and angry, said: "I hope they kill everybody over there."

The commanding officer of Charlie Company, Captain Ernest Medina, was regarded by his men as a tough leader. Born in poverty, Medina hoped to make the military his career. The leader of one of Medina's platoons was 24-year-old Lieutenant William Calley. Calley admired Medina and, like him, wanted a career in the military.

Charlie Company was assigned to an area believed to be a Vietcong stronghold. For weeks they saw little combat action but some of the men were ripped apart by mines. Many soldiers were convinced that local villagers had helped in the placement of mines. Although the Americans had no direct evidence of the villagers' involvement, they noted it was rare for a local resident to step on a mine.

On February 25, 1968, six men of Charlie Company were killed by mines and twelve were wounded. On March 14, one man was killed and another lost both eyes, an arm, and a leg. The next day, after an emotional funeral service, Captain Medina gave his men their orders for the following day.

Medina's commanding officer had ordered the company to move into the hamlet of My Lai. It was said that about two hundred

Vietcong were there. Medina was told by his superiors that the women and children would be out of the village by early morning. The company was to burn the village, blow up escape tunnels, and kill all animals to disrupt the Vietcong's food supply. Stiff resistance was to be expected from the Vietcong in and around the hamlet.

The men of the company later disagreed about whether or not Medina ordered them to kill everyone who was in the village. Medina denied that he gave such orders. Lieutenant Calley may have thought those were the orders for, the next day, he would direct his men to "waste" the village.

On Saturday morning, March 16, the attack began. Artillery shells were fired into the hamlet. Helicopters brought in the combat-ready troops. Lieutenant Calley and his men leaped from the helicopters firing their weapons. It was a time of noise, danger, and uncertainty.

The crackling of gunfire that filled the air was all from U.S. weapons. No return gunfire came from the enemy. Cautiously the soldiers entered the hamlet. They saw women, children, and old men. It was quiet. Some were sitting in front of their houses preparing morning rice.

The soldiers began rounding up the people. Then, without warning it happened! Some soldiers began killing the people. Calley joined in and, according to the testimony of witnesses, ordered others to do the same.

Not all obeyed the orders to kill the villagers, but most did. One helicopter pilot, horrified by what he saw, landed and flew some of the Vietnamese to safety.

In a few hours it was over. Hundreds of old men, women, and children lay dead or dying. According to some later investigations, five hundred or more were killed. The official report for that day's action at My Lai said that 128 Vietcong had been killed.

The reported success at My Lai was front page news in the *New York Times*. According to the story, the My Lai battle was part of "another American offensive to clear enemy pockets still threatening the cities." It would be a long time before the truth about My Lai was known to the public.

According to military law it is wrong to kill civilians during war. It is wrong for officers to order such killings, and wrong for soldiers to obey those orders. In addition, witnesses to wrongful acts must report them to superior officers, and those officers must investigate the charges and punish those who are guilty.

Although the military law is quite clear, during wartime there are pressures not to follow it. Some will not report crimes for fear of being called troublemakers or of having their promotions held up. Some officers are reluctant to investigate or punish possible crimes for fear the publicity would make their units look bad, affect their careers, or lessen public support of the war effort.

Some top-level officers, hearing bits of information about My Lai, made a partial investigation but did not make an extensive effort to determine what happened. A combat photographer, and a military reporter, both at My Lai, claimed that any efforts they might have made to get the truth passed up through military channels would have failed. They did not try.

Eventually, however, the truth about My Lai became known. A young helicopter door gunner, Ronald Ridenhour, was not at My Lai but heard the details of what happened from some men who were. He was deeply distressed. He became convinced that those involved should be investigated and punished, saying, "I wanted to get those people." Later he said, "As far as I was concerned, it was a reflection on me, on every American, on the ideals that we supposedly represent."

When he returned to the United States, Ridenhour told friends what he had heard about My Lai, and that he wanted to report what he knew. Most of his friends urged him not to report it. They said he should not turn in his fellow soldiers. One friend said, "Forget about it if you know what's good for you and America."

Ridenhour could not forget about it. He had always wanted to be a writer and he considered trying to sell his story to a news magazine. He discussed the matter with one of his former teachers. The teacher advised Ridenhour to report his information to government authorities. Ridenhour agreed.

In April 1969, Ridenhour sent letters to military officials, members of Congress, and President Nixon. Ridenhour described in detail what he had heard about My Lai and gave the names of soldiers that he was told were involved. Some who received the letter wondered about its accuracy and why it had been sent. One military man said: "I can't believe a guy who did not participate in something, that his conscience would bother him a year later more than the men involved." In spite of the doubts of some officials, a military investigation quietly began.

The news of what happened at My Lai began to reach the public.

On a national television show, one soldier who had been there described what had gone on. Combat photographs of the gory scene were published. The story of My Lai and the name of Lieutenant Calley became internationally known.

Many Americans condemned the massacre. Others reacted differently. Some refused to believe it really had happened. They could not believe U.S. soldiers would do such things. Some defended the soldiers. A worker in Boston said, "What do they give soldiers bullets for—to put in their pockets?" A woman in Cleveland said, "It sounds terrible to say we ought to kill kids, but many of our boys being killed over there are just kids, too."

Supporters of the soldiers and Lieutenant Calley reminded the public of the many instances of civilians being killed by the Vietcong and North Vietnamese. They said such things happen during wartime. Some said Calley should not be blamed because he was only following the orders of superior officers.

Those who blamed Calley and the others said that wrongdoing must be punished even if it occurs during the stress of combat. General Westmoreland, former commander of U.S. troops in Vietnam, stated that incidents like My Lai are "the actions of a pitiful few. Certainly the Army cannot and will not condone improper conduct or criminal acts."

The investigation led to formal charges and military trials. Lieutenant Calley, Captain Medina, and some others were charged with murder. Many of their superior officers, including the commander of the Americal Division, were charged with violations of military regulations involving the investigation and reporting of military crimes.

Of all those charged with wrongdoing, only Lieutenant Calley was convicted of murder. He was sentenced to life imprisonment. Later his sentence was reduced to 20 years. Calley never went to prison. He was allowed to serve his time at a military base. Convicted in March 1970, he was paroled and returned to civilian life a few years later.

Many U.S. soldiers in Vietnam fought with courage and dignity in what was probably the most unpopular war in the history of the United States. Events such as those at My Lai tainted their image and restrained public recognition of their bravery.

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