

In the air - From My Lai to Abu Ghraïb

„Just obeying orders“

Ariel Wagner-Parker

„I want Calley strung up!“ intoned my American friend, Marianne, banging out each syllable on the table with her fist.

Marianne was already outraged at what was being done in her name in Vietnam. And then, just after the horrors of the *Tet Offensive* of February 1968, came the massacre at My Lai – and the court martial of William Calley that divided America.

24-year-old Calley led a platoon in Charlie Company. On 14 March 1968, a small squad had run into a booby trap, killing a sergeant, blinding one GI and wounding several others. The next day, Charlie Company's commander, Captain Ernest Medina, told them a crack Vietcong battalion was at My Lai, that they were to engage with them and destroy the village.

The soldiers were rarin' to go.

About 700 people lived in My Lai. On the morning of 16 March 1968 they were going about their normal activities – cooking, talking together, the children playing – when the Apocalypse came. Calley's platoon stormed into their village and turned it into hell on earth, dragging people out of their homes, shouting, firing, interrogating, beating – and finally murdering.

A first victim was bayoneted, another thrown down a well, and blown up. A group of older women, kneeling in prayer in front of a temple, were shot in the back of the head. 80 or so villagers were rounded up and despite their cries of „No VC! No VC!“, Calley and another man opened fire. A few survived, covered by the bodies of the dead.

Army photographer Ronald Haeberle saw about 100 civilians being murdered, children blown up, GIs sexually abusing a

young girl. He took pictures.

Helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson saw dead and dying civilians all over the village, children being shot at point-blank range. He reported it to brigade HQ.

The massacre continued. 90-odd old men, women and children were herded together by a drainage ditch and Calley gave orders to push them in and machine-gun them. He himself joined in the killing and when one tiny toddler tried to escape, he caught him, threw him back in the ditch and shot him.

Horrified, Thompson stepped in and tried to protect the Vietnamese. He evacuated 9 survivors and later managed to save a baby girl, still clinging to her dead mother.

By noon, My Lai lay in smoking ruins, its homes and temples destroyed and all but a few villagers dead or dying. Army investigators would discover 3 mass graves containing over 500 bodies.

Later on, no soldier remembered seeing „one military-age male in the entire place“.

The cover-up began at once. Despite Hugh Thompson's allegations of numerous war crimes, the army report spoke of 20 or so civilians inadvertently killed at My Lai.

The massacre might never have been uncovered but for a young ex-GI, Ronald Ridenhour, who talked to eyewitnesses and vowed to bring those responsible to justice.

He investigated and in March 1969, sent his findings to President Nixon and members of Congress, among others. Several congressmen pressed for an enquiry and the Inspector General took over. Dozens of witnesses were interviewed and the war crimes could no longer be denied. Thompson identified Calley and on 5 September, formal charges, including 6 counts of premeditated murder, were filed against him.

By November 1969, the media had the story and a shocked US public learnt the details of the massacre. There were stories in *Time* and *Newsweek*, a TV interview with one of the men involved and *Life* magazine published Haeberle's eloquent photographs.

The Administration ordered a Pentagon enquiry: the resulting *Peers Report* recommended dozens of indictments for rape, murder and participation in the cover-up. The Army held an investigation too. Most of the men involved were no longer enrolled and couldn't be court-martialed; few came to trial. Captain Medina was one: he lied under oath and was acquitted on 102 counts of murder.

William Calley was another. His defence at his court martial was lack of premeditation, due to impaired thinking in the stress of combat and that he was „merely following orders“.

He told the jury he couldn't remember learning about the *Geneva Convention* but he did know he could be court-martialed for refusing to obey an order.

The prosecutor asked the jury „who would speak for the children of My Lai“; as a US officer, Calley had sworn not to kill innocent civilians: he spoke of „the conscience of the United States Army“.

After 13 days' deliberation, the jury found Calley guilty of all charges and sentenced him „to be confined at hard labor for the length of your natural life; to be dismissed from the service; to forfeit all pay and allowances.“ The court martial decision would be upheld on appeal on 21 December 1973.

After the verdict, in April 1971, Nixon ordered opinion polls to be carried out.

78% of those questioned were against the verdict, 56% for reasons of shared responsibility, 15% because no crime was committed. 51% thought Calley should be freed, 28% that his sentence should be reduced.

„Tricky Dicky“ took heed: he ordered Calley to be freed from the stockade (he had only spend a few days there) and placed under house arrest. He announced a review of the decision. The outraged prosecutor wrote to Nixon that „the greatest tragedy of all will be if political expediency dictates the compromise of such a fundamental moral principle as the inherent unlawfulness of the murder of innocent persons“.

Calley's sentence was repeatedly reduced and finally commuted by Nixon to time served. He was paroled on 9 November 1974.

Despite this, My Lai did matter – at least in the short term. It turned US opinion against the Vietnam War and helped put an end to it: troop withdrawal began in 1973.

But that was then. What of „the conscience of the United States Army“ today? Commanders sent troops into Iraq with the words, „No My Lais – you hear?“ But mistreatment torture and murder are routine (Guantánamo, Abu Ghraïb et al) ... and - incredibly - the US President has expressly condoned the use of torture.

Abu Ghraïb: And how did Private Lynndie England, the most visible of 11 US soldiers charged with abusing Iraqi prisoners at the prison near Baghdad, defend herself at her court martial?

She said she was „only obeying orders“.

She was convicted on 6 out of 7 counts and in September 2005 got 3 years' prison (the longest sentence was 10 years).

She was paroled on 3 March 2007.

I wonder what Marianne is saying ...



Photo: John Leanos, bad.eserver.org

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