

Message from a Vet of My Lai Time: “Our Descent Into Hell Has Begun”

By [Tony Swindell](#)

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

A few weeks ago we got a friendly letter from Tony Swindell, a newspaper editor in Sherman, Texas. “Begin paying attention,” Swindell urged, “to stories from Iraq like the very recent one about U.S. Marines killing a group of civilians near Baghdad. This is the next step in the Iraq war as frustration among our soldiers grows — especially with multiple tours.

“I served with the 11th Light Infantry Brigade, Americal Division, and My Lai was not an isolated incident. We came to be known as the Butcher’s Brigade, and we also were the birthplace of the Phoenix Program. The brigade commander and a battalion commander were charged with murdering civilians (shooting them from helicopters, recorded in some of my photos), although both skated. If you recall from his autobiography, Colin Powell served briefly with the 11th in Duc Pho before going to division HQ in Chu Lai.

“The atrocities against Iraqi civilians are slipping under the media radar screen, but they’re going to explode in America’s face not too long from now and dwarf the Abu Ghraib (sic) incident. That was a fraternity beer bust by comparison. The Ft. Sill episode [described in JoAnn Wypijewski’s piece in our last issue] is another one of the same storm clouds on the horizon. I sincerely fear for our country.”

We asked Swindell to expand these thoughts. Here’s his powerful response.
AC/JSC

In Iraq, our descent into hell, our “Apocalypse Now” moment, has begun. First there was Gitmo, then the global rendition program, then Abu Ghraib, then the pulverizing of Fallujah, and now trigger-happy raids that are filling multitudes of sandy graves with men, women and children. Has “Kill ‘em all and let God sort ‘em out” become the mission in Babylon? Can’t anyone remember Vietnam, where we left behind more than a million dead civilians? In Iraq, we’ve way past the half-million mark, probably the million mark, if you count the 1990s sanctions. Are the American people as blind and deaf as they seem? Don’t we see ourselves walking through the gates of hell and can’t we hear the doors clanging shut on our country?

Who am I to say all this, you might ask. Fair enough, I reply. So let me tell you a story about monstrous crimes and tragedies from my generation about to be repeated in Iraq in front of

the whole world. First, understand that a single soldier can't be expected to grasp the total criminality of war because his whole universe is a tiny place right in front of his nose. So he can stay alive. If he knew everything that was going on, he would be heartbroken, and if he also knew why, he would go insane.

The narrowness of his vision is exactly how even the best and most humane soldier unwillingly becomes a monster, and the people who create war know this. Out of grief and rage, with the stench of his buddy's shredded flesh in his nostrils, the soldier stops asking questions and then begins making up his own rules with a rifle. He has touched the heart of darkness and there's no going back ever. Embracing the whore called war destroys morality, and doing all this in a dishonorable cause compounds the damage.

That's why we who have been there must speak out forcefully. If it requires a stiff punch in the mouth to jump-start some addled neocon brains, so be it. And for anyone who gets their political truth from self-inflating whoopee cushions like Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly, it will come none too soon. To remain silent this time risks the loss of everything that our country stands for.

The story I want to tell you begins on a miserably hot day in February, 1969, as I watched U.S. Army Col. John W. Donaldson put a cup of rice wine mixed with blood to his lips and drink deeply. No matter that the concoction was alive with heartworms, Donaldson never flinched. At the time, I was serving as an army combat correspondent attached to the 11th Light Infantry Brigade and my job that day was to follow Donaldson around, snapping picture after picture of the macabre festivities unfolding in front of my eyes. He was the brigade commander at a bloody punching bag called LZ Bronco next to the village of Duc Pho. The brigade base camp was part of the Americal Division, headquartered to the north in Chu Lai.

The colonel and a large contingent of other brigade and division officers were guests of honor at a Tet festival in the Montagnard village of Ba To in the central highlands southwest of Chu Lai. Nearby was a Special Forces A Team camp, an ominous triangular fortress bristling with 105 mm cannon at each corner firing flechette rounds. A snake couldn't have crawled through the maze of sharp barbed and razor tape wire surrounding the compound, and dozens of claymore mines were set in the walls. A claymore at close range will instantly render you into your constituent molecules.

The Montagnard village and A Team camp had been hit hard by concentrated North Vietnamese forces earlier in the week, and Donaldson's presence was in part a thumb in the eye to enemy commanders licking their wounds in nearby triple canopy jungle. The landscape gave me chills, because the beautiful, green-dappled hills all around the village were pockmarked with hundreds of fresh artillery and bomb craters exposing the bright red soil. I couldn't get the image of the Jolly Green Giant with a bad case of acne out of my mind. While topless Montagnard women spruced up the area with totems and bright banners to cover attack damage, a sacrificial water buffalo calf was slowly being prodded to death with a spear by the local village chief. It took about half an hour before the calf sagged to its knees in exhaustion, at that point too weak to even cry out. The chief then cut the calf's throat above a large earthen jug to catch the pulsing blood while another villager poured rice wine and stirred.

Unknown to the visitors, the Montagnards had earlier tortured to death three North

Vietnamese captives and partook of their blood in the company of Special Forces A Team troopers. These unfortunate had been impaled through their anuses with bamboo poles and given the same spear prodding. Later, their bodies were staked out along enemy infiltration trails as a mortal warning to the enemy.

This day became my own personal “Apocalypse Now” moment, a full decade before the Francis Ford Coppola’s movie was released. Not long before, we became personally aware that soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry, had rampaged in My Lai when military police ransacked our hooch looking for evidence and then hauled Rusty Calley off in handcuffs. Meanwhile, Tiger Teams were creating ruthless, bloody havoc across the Batangan Peninsula against suspected enemy cadre. Brutality against civilians was standard operating procedure. Because of the Pacification Program mass relocations, entire swathes of the countryside began to resemble the Missouri Burnt District during the Civil War.

The Phoenix Program was in full swing, and it was the horror to end all horrors. I had earlier tagged along on a Phoenix mission directed by the ARVN National Police, and will spare you the details. Trust me, you do not want to know what was being done. Standing there and watching Donaldson drink from the cup, the profound symbolism of all that was wrong in this place hit me like a blow in the face. Ironically, an anti-war rag called the *Overseas Weekly* or *Overseas* latched onto one of my pictures and captioned it, “Army Brass Drinks Blood In Pagan Ceremonies”.

By February 1969, morale in the brigade had hit rock bottom because of horrific casualties caused primarily from booby traps, and an entire battalion had been stood down as non-functional. The North Vietnamese were endlessly blasting our firebases with 122 mm rocket artillery, and LZ Bronco was soon to be hit more than 200 times during a famous assault that came to be called “Duc Pho Burning”. Mutinies, insubordination and fragging of officers became commonplace. Soldiers cracked and a few committed suicide. One grunt over the edge opened fire into the POW compound, killing a number of captured enemy. Col. Donaldson and a battalion commander, two of the highest-ranking officers in the brigade, were charged with murdering civilians from helicopters while the My Lai investigation was still underway. A young Major Colin Powell assigned to the 11th Brigade who was well acquainted with Donaldson wrote in his autobiography about being stunned by what he saw going on in the 11th. Perhaps, he had experienced his own “Apocalypse Now” moment.

There’s a numbness in my guts as I see the same nightmares becoming reality again in Iraq, and I wonder what’s happened to America’s soul. Is this what we want, another generation suckled on the poison of another renegade leadership? Gooks have become ragheads, every adult male is an insurgent eligible for torture, and every Iraqi home filled with men, women and children is a free-fire zone. Even places of worship get flattened. Once again, we’ve been marched into another lunatic asylum in the Twilight Zone.

How did it happen? Why did we sit on our hands and let our leaders initiate an unprovoked proxy war? A mushroom cloud over Cleveland delivered by a pipsqueak Iraq that couldn’t even get an airplane in the air or a dilapidated tank outside its own borders without throwing a track? Gimme a break. How could the average John Doe let himself be deceived into believing that Saddam Hussein was really a threat?

With Iran now in the crosshairs, I pray that our national amnesia is wearing off. I know that from coast to coast a growing number of people especially many combat veterans like myself feel helpless, confused, frightened, and completely out of the loop. Three years into

Iraq, why do we still keep hearing the same refrain, pre-emptive war into the next generation? On and on and on it goes, but unfortunately our emperors in Washington treat middle Americans asking hard questions like bill collectors at a funeral or, publicly skewer them as extremists and traitors. And don't even think about asking about Israeli involvement in the disaster that Dubya calls a Middle Eastern policy.

I listen in vain to hear the voices of young Americans who will be directly and immediately affected. Current events in the Middle East should be a paramount issue, but, inexplicably, the kids are completely nonchalant. Raised on the Internet and X-Boxes, maybe Iraq is just another Hollywood-style media production to them. But, I'm going to make a prediction. Our salvation will come when Selective Service notices begin arriving in mailboxes, and make no mistake, they are coming. I predict that young voices will soon become the loudest against empire as the hip-hoppers, the teeny boppers and the slackers rudely discover that involuntary combat means no video games or boom boxes, no marathon beer busts, and certainly no teenaged girls in thong bikinis.

We in the older generation can help things along. First, turn off the televisions and study a little American history, like the parts repeatedly warning us about foreign entanglements and passionate attachments. Really think about what kind of America we're handing to our children. Organize geezer squads to buttonhole politicians, and enlist a slacker cavalry to rain e-mail on every bureaucrat in sight. Let them all know we don't care about the new world order and its Manifest Corporate Destiny. Tell Washington that unprovoked, pre-emptive wars go against the grain of everything that's American, and we're no longer going to give it the Good Homicidal Seal of Approval.

While we're at it, let's make a sincere effort to tell elected representatives, loud and clear at every opportunity, that we want our government back from the political and corporate lobbies. Give the entire bureaucratic structure the message that we want the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth on anything that affects our lives fast, before another bullet is fired or bomb dropped in anger. The U.S. State Department especially needs this message drummed into their heads until they all have tinnitus.

Don't leave out the Billy Grahams, Jerry Falwells, and Pat Robertsons, (comma) and their legions of religious robots. Ask these Bible thumpers a simple question: brother, who would GEE-zus bomb, torture, rape and murder? While they choke on their own hypocrisy, direct them to the Book of John in the New Testament for a theology refresher. Christ wasn't called the Prince of Peace for nothing.

Constantly remind anyone who'll listen to you that the American Revolution blossomed with a ferocious commitment to keep a new continent free from two thousand years of empires, monarchies, feudal dictatorships, and armed religious institutions held in power by brute force and the doctrine of might makes right. People like Washington, Jefferson and Franklin instead shouted no, RIGHT makes might. That timeless concept was an invincible weapon against King George's Redcoats and it is just as powerful against nuclear weapons and carrier battle groups.

Yes, it will take guts, but what's our alternative? Either we start living up to our own ideals or the world will very soon compel us to do it. If, that is, they even think we're worth saving.

FYI, my unit was given an entire chapter in the Time Life Vietnam War collection about combat photos and correspondents. In a nutshell, we went everywhere with grunts, recon,

Special Forces, combat engineers, artillery, wherever combat was anticipated. We pretty much served as the army's eyes, kept track of action and casualty info and passed it along, etc. As a result, we had a good handle on things. Our unit was almost totally made up of experienced combat soldiers who joined the unit after service in the bush. It takes a little sand to be able to concentrate on your camera while people are shooting at you with automatic weapons or high explosive rounds. I got shot down once on a combat assault against the North Vietnamese in the 1st Huey into a landing zone so I could take pictures of the grunts coming in. In all, I participated in more than 30 full-scale combat missions, and several more aboard Medevac flights. My buddies in the unit had equally harrowing experiences, with one taking an AK round through the lens of his camera. I think all of us each earned four battle stars in 11 months, which gave a 4-week early release from Vietnam. We all had nicknames, and mine was Torch.

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