

My Lai Massacre, 49 Years Later. The Atrocities Have Never Stopped...

By [Mike Hastie](#)

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March 16, 2017, was the 49th anniversary of the My Lai Massacre, located in Quang Ngai Province, Vietnam. It was Saturday morning, March 16, 1968, when approximately 115 U.S. Army soldiers of the American Division's Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry, landed in helicopters just outside the village of My Lai 4. Over the course of the next four hours, these American soldiers, and their Military High Command, who were flying overhead in helicopters observing the massacre, took part in a horror show far beyond the human imagination.

They took the term, "War Crimes," and added a butcher shop to the equation of morbid extermination. In essence, they became a U.S. version of the final solution. They committed an act of barbarity that would redefine the war in Vietnam. It would take years to decipher what happened that day, as denial is the elixir that protects us from experiencing national shame. It is these two words, "National Shame," that continues to hide the truth of what really happened in Southeast Asia.

This is what the U.S. Military did on that day on March 16, 1968. I use the word "We," because our taxes paid for the massacre, and our ignorance about the war wrote the check. Among the dead were a hundred and eighty-two women, seventeen of them pregnant. A hundred and seventy-three children were executed, including fifty-six infants. Sixty older men were also murdered.

The museum at My Lai includes the accounting of another important fact: there was another village located about a mile away from My Lai 4, called My Khe 4, that U.S. soldiers from Bravo Company on the same day, also committed atrocities. So, 407 were murdered at My Lai 4, and 97 were murdered at My Khe 4, for a total of 504 Vietnamese civilians. It also must be noted, that there were twenty rapes committed, not to include attempted rapes. I have chosen not to go into detail about how those executions were committed, or the torture and extreme suffering that was committed by American soldiers under Pentagon command. This butcher shop mentality would be extremely difficult to read and comprehend by most people. I will say this, and it is a quote from Larry Colburn, who was a door gunner on Hugh Thompson's helicopter that landed on the ground during the massacre, and attempted to stop the killing. These are Larry Colburn's words:

"The only thing the U.S. soldiers did not do was cook them and eat them."

In order to understand WHY these two massacres were committed on March 16, 1968, a synopsis and history of what happened in Quang Ngai Province during the war would be

helpful for the reader. I came across an article written on October 2, 1994, by award winning author, and Vietnam veteran, Tim O'Brien. The title of the article is: "The Vietnam in Me." These are his words:

In the years preceding the murders at My Lai, more than 70 percent of the villages in Quang Ngai Province had been destroyed by air strikes, artillery fire, Zippo lighters, napalm, white phosphorus, bulldozers, gunships and other such means. Roughly 40 percent of the population had lived in refugee camps, while civilian casualties in the area were approaching 50,000 a year. These numbers, reported by the journalist Jonathan Schell in 1967, were later confirmed as substantially correct by Government investigators. Not that I needed confirmation. Back in 1969, the wreckage was all around us, so common it seemed part of the geography, as natural as any mountain or river. Wreckage was the rule. Brutality was S.O.P. Scalded children, pistol-whipped women, burning hootches, free-fire zones, body counts, indiscriminate bombing and harassment fire, villages in ash, M-60 machine guns hosing down dark green tree lines and human life behind them.

In a war without aim, you tend not to aim. You close your eyes, close your heart. The consequences become hit or miss in the most literal sense. With so few military targets, with an enemy that was both of and among the population, Alpha Company began to regard Quang Ngai itself as the true enemy—the physical place, the soil and paddies. What had started for us as a weird, vicious little war soon evolved into something far beyond vicious, a hopped-up killer strain of nihilism, waste without want, aimlessness of spirit. As Schell wrote after the events at My Lai, "There can be no doubt that such an atrocity was possible only because a number of other methods of killing civilians and destroying their villages had come to be the rule, and not the exception, in our conduct of the war."



My Lai mural.

In his book, [Kill Anything That Moves](#), by Nick Turse, he states on page 11,

"The war's casualty figures are staggering indeed. From 1955 to 1975, the United States lost more than 58,000 military personnel in Southeast Asia. Its troops were wounded around 304,000 times, with 153,000 cases serious enough to require hospitalization, and 75,000 veterans left severely disabled. While Americans who served in Vietnam paid a grave price, an extremely conservative estimate of Vietnamese deaths found them to be proportionally 100 times greater than those suffered by the United States."

Also, on page 61 of Nick Turse's book, he states:

According to Westmoreland's memoir, MacArthur "urged me to make sure I always had plenty of artillery, for the Oriental, he said, 'greatly fears artillery,'" and suggested that Westmoreland might have to employ a "scorched earth policy" in Vietnam.

As I did more research in writing this article, I had to put my mind in a place that required the attention of bearing witness. So much of the research is heart breaking, especially when you watch video of Vietnamese grieving the loss of loved ones. The shame you feel is gut

wrenching. As an Army medic in Vietnam in 1970-71, the Vietnam War completely redefined my life. I was raised in a military family, as my father was a career Army officer, and combat veteran in North Africa during World War II. I spent my early life on U.S. military bases in Japan, and Germany, to include bases on the East Coast and West Coast of the United States.

My core belief system was a direct result of that upbringing. As far as I was concerned, the United States was the greatest country in the world. I wholeheartedly believed that until I went into the Army in March 1969. By the time I got to An Khe, Vietnam in September 1970, I was experiencing the rapid deterioration of American involvement in Vietnam. I was seeing periodic casualties coming in by medevac helicopters from the field, occasional attacks from mortars and rockets, but mostly internal violence in my own unit. Heroin addiction was rampant, suicides and shoot-outs between U.S. soldiers could happen at anytime. I spent most of my time on a reconnaissance support base that included three other heavily armed fire bases. The 155mm howitzers on those bases occasionally fired into free-fire zones just like most bases throughout Vietnam. Our assault helicopters and gunships went out often on hunting missions. To this day, I have no idea the damage they inflicted on the Vietnamese people.

In early April 1971, I was working in our aid station, when a Armored Personnel Carrier (APC) pulled up to our aid station, because one of the crew members had a minor injury. On the front of that APC, the crew had painted in large white letters: KILL A GOOK FOR CALLEY. Lt. William Calley, was of course the only one who was found guilty of the My Lai Massacre. He was found guilty of war crimes on March 29, 1971, and was sentenced to life in prison. However, President Nixon pardoned him, and he eventually returned to Atlanta, Georgia to work in his father-in-law's jewelry store.

During his trial, millions of Americans believed he was not guilty, and sent thousands of letters to the White House asking for his release. Even though Calley was guilty, the one thing most people do not realize, is that you always protect the upper echelon of military command. It is an unwritten rule in the military. The military almost always blames it on a bad apple in the lower ranks. The important thing to remember, is that the My Lai Massacre was a military operation that had a predictable outcome. You do not bring the enemy to the peace table by just killing military combatants. You ultimately bring the enemy to the peace table by killing innocent civilians. They are military targets. The primary goal of the aggressor nation is to break the will of the people, and its ability to defend its homeland. This strategy is as old as warfare itself.

It is now March 16, 2017, forty-nine years after the My Lai Massacre. Since the end of World War II, my lifetime, as I am now 72, the United States has bombed 30 countries. The atrocities have never stopped. What happened at My Lai is extremely important to understand, because atrocities during the war were U.S. Policies! My Lai is a metaphor for the entire Vietnam War. My Lai was NEVER an aberration. The most important realization that has come out of writing this article, is that it always comes back to me, because My country did this.

I cannot divorce myself from this reality. When I came back from Vietnam I finally had to face the truth, that I was the enemy in Vietnam. That realization was to eventually put me in two psychiatric hospitals. My core belief system was completely dismantled. I felt like a stranger in a strange land. And, whenever I tried to convince people that We were the barbarians in Vietnam, the more people avoided me.

People don't want to hear that toxic truth, because I was violating the existing beliefs of society. I was like the 16-year-old girl who blurted out that her father raped her. This kind of information is taboo, and the only course was to blame the victim. I have met many Vietnam veterans who were involved in atrocities, and that pain was very excruciating. Some of them have worked through what happened, but the trail of suffering they went through had to be done behind closed doors with counselors. Our society is never part of that healing, because they don't want to hear the truth. And, of course, you have to ask why? They do not want to feel the shame, the National Shame, because it is so frightening. If they were to feel that shame, they would have to redefine their entire lives. In the end, I came to realize, that whenever the truth threatens one's core belief system, there is an urgent need to deny its reality. That is why denial becomes a sacred cow.

I have personally known many Vietnam veterans who were destroyed by their experiences in Vietnam. At least four of my friends died from Agent Orange exposure, to include my brother-in-law. One died from a head on car collision, one died homeless on the streets, and two hung themselves. It does not surprise me that more Vietnam veterans have committed suicide than were killed in Vietnam. According to the Veterans Administration, one veteran commits suicide every hour in this country.

The survivor, then, is a disturber of the peace. He is a runner of the blockade men erect against knowledge of "unspeakable" things. About these he aims to speak, and in so doing he undermines, without intending to, the validity of existing norms. He is a genuine transgressor, and here he is made to feel real guilt. The world to which he appeals does not admit him, and since he has looked to this world as the source of moral order, he begins to doubt himself. And that is not the end, for now his guilt is doubled by betrayal- of himself, of his task, of his vow to the dead. The final guilt is not to bear witness. The survivor's worst torment is not to be able to speak. -Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor*

In closing, I have to remind myself that Lying Is The Most Powerful Weapon In War. I am reminded of what Dalton Trumbo wrote in his famous novel, "Johnny Got His Gun." These are his words:

"If the thing they were fighting for was important enough to die for then it was also important enough for them to be thinking about it in the last minutes of their lives. That stood to reason. Life is awfully important so if you've given it away you'd ought to think with all your mind in the last moments of your life about the thing you traded it for. So, did all those kids die thinking of democracy and freedom and liberty and honor and the safety of the home and the stars and strips forever? You're goddamn right they didn't."

Viktor E. Frankl, who wrote, "Mans Search For Meaning, " was very instrumental in my healing, when he wrote, " Suffering ceases to be suffering when it has meaning." In 1994, and 2016, I made trips back to Vietnam, with special emphasis on spending time at the My Lai Massacre site. This past year, I helped raise \$8,600.00 with the help of Veterans For Peace, to restore a very large mosaic tile mural, that depicts the massacre of those civilians in the last moments of their lives. It is a very powerful piece of art.

While I was there, I met a Vietnamese woman who is the co-director of the My Lai Museum. She has worked there for 17 years, and has met countless tourists who make the journey to

this place. I told her I was a veteran, and that millions of Americans who were adamantly against the war, see this memorial as being very important. I also said to her, that as far as I was concerned, the My Lai Massacre site was sacred ground. In an instant, she broke down and cried. The emotional connection I felt was beyond understanding. I think it was the closest thing to love I had felt since I came back from Vietnam in 1971.



The "Why" medivac helicopter, 1970, in An Khe, Vietnam. Photo by author.

Shortly after I met her, she asked me if I wanted to meet one of the lone survivors of the massacre. His name is Pham Thanh Cong, who was eleven-years-old when U.S. troops came into his village that early morning on March 16, 1968. An American soldier threw a hand grenade into his family hut, and killed his mother, three sisters and a six-year-old brother. He was protected by their bodies during the explosion. He himself was wounded in three places. It was a privilege to meet him, but I have to admit, I was somewhat apprehensive, because I had been an American soldier in HIS country.

Shortly after we met, he asked me if I had been at My Lai during the massacre. I assured him that I had not, and that I was in the Central Highlands two years after the massacre. I could tell he was relieved. We talked for about ten minutes through an interpreter. There was a brief recording of that conversation made. When I began to see his eyes turn red, with tears welling up, I switched the conversation to having a picture made with him and me, and another American veteran who was with me by the name of Sandy Kelson. In the back of my mind, I didn't really know what I would say to him as we parted. In the end, I kissed him on the cheek, and told him I loved him.

Mike Hastie served as an Army Medic in Vietnam.

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Articles by: [Mike Hastie](#)

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