

The Quang Ngai Province and the My Lai Massacre

The Quang Ngai Province, located on the south central coast of Vietnam, was targeted early in the Vietnam War because U.S. military officials suspected it of being a Viet Cong stronghold. By the end of 1967, most of the homes in the province had been destroyed and many thousands of civilians were homeless.

On March 16, 1968, the soldiers of Charlie Company, 11th Brigade, Americal Division, entered the Vietnamese village of My Lai six miles northeast of Quang Ngai. The company had sustained many casualties in the area over the previous weeks and emotions ran high. The troops, under the leadership of Lt. William Calley, entered the village firing although there were no reports of enemy fire. Eyewitnesses reported seeing old men bayoneted, women raped, and unarmed villagers—including children—shot in the back of the head.

Tim O'Brien served in Vietnam well after the horrific events of My Lai had taken place, but *The Things They Carried* examines the desensitization and brutality many troops experienced. In 1994, O'Brien accepted an assignment from the *New York Times* to return to Vietnam and write an article about it. "The Vietnam in Me" described O'Brien's experiences in the Quang Ngai province as a member of the 46th Infantry, and his reaction to the massacre at My Lai.

In the article, O'Brien writes:

What happened, briefly, was this. At approximately 7:30 on the morning of March 16, 1968, a company of roughly 115 American soldiers were inserted by helicopter just outside the village of My Lai. They met no resistance. No enemy. No incoming fire. Still, for the next four hours, Charlie Company killed whatever could be killed. They killed chickens. They killed dogs and cattle. They killed people, too. Lots of people. Women, infants, teen-agers, old men. [...]

Eventually, after a cover-up that lasted more than

a year and after the massacre made nationwide headlines, the Army's Criminal Investigation Division produced sufficient evidence to charge 30 men with war crimes. Of these, only a single soldier, First Lieut. William Laws Calley Jr., was ever convicted or spent time in prison. Found guilty of the premeditated murder of "not less than" 22 civilians, Calley was sentenced to life at hard labor, but after legal appeals and sentence reductions, his ultimate jail time amounted to three days in a stockade and four and a half months in prison[...]

Calley aside, only a handful of men faced formal court-martial proceedings, either for war crimes or for subsequent cover-up activities, with the end result of five acquittals and four judicially ordered dismissals. [...]

Now, more than 25 years later, the villainy of that Saturday morning in 1968 has been pushed off to the margins of memory. In the colleges and high schools I sometimes visit, the mention of My Lai brings on null stares, a sort of puzzlement, disbelief mixed with utter ignorance.

Americans first learned of My Lai in November 1969, when journalist Seymour Hersh published a story in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* based on his conversations with Ron Ridenhour. A Vietnam veteran, Ridenhour learned of the events from members of Charlie Company. He had immediately appealed to Congress, the White House, and the Pentagon, asking them to investigate the matter. In September 1969, as a result of a military investigation, Lt. Calley was charged with murder in the deaths of 109 Vietnamese civilians.

When Hersh's story hit the press two months later, it had even farther-reaching effects. As the shocking details of the massacre reached the public, support for the war began to wane, more draftees began to file for conscientious objector status, and U.S. draft policy was reexamined. A military commission found widespread failures of leadership and discipline among the troops of Charlie Company. For his story, Seymour Hersh won a Pulitzer Prize in 1970 for international reporting.