
What Happened at My Lai?

Lt. William Calley Trial Transcript

At his court-martial trial in 1970, Lt. William Calley answered questions about company casualties and operations prior to My Lai and how those events affected his attitude. A military jury found him guilty of killing 22 people and sentenced him to life imprisonment. President Richard Nixon placed Calley on house arrest and pardoned him in 1974. Below is an excerpt:

Q: Every time that the company would go, at least a company-sized unit, to try to get in that area and stay in there, they encountered hostile fire, enemy fire, suffered casualties, and were driven out?

A: Yes, sir. [Calley was asked about an incident that occurred when he was returning to his company from in-country R and R. As he was waiting for a helicopter to take him to his men, he helped unload a chopper filled with casualties caused by a mine field.]

Q: What did you see and what did you do in connection with that helicopter when it landed back there and before you boarded up to get to meet your company?

A: The chopper was filled with gear, rifles, rucksacks. I think the most—the thing that really hit me hard was the heavy boots. There must have been six boots there with the feet still in them, brains all over the place, and everything was saturated with blood, rifles blown in half. I believe there was one arm on it and a piece of a man's face, half of a man's face was on a chopper with the gear.

Q: Did you later subsequently learn that those members that were emaciated in that manner were members of your company or your platoon?

A: I knew at the time that they were.

Q: What was your feeling when you saw what you did see in the chopper and what you found out about your organization being involved in that kind of an operation?

A: I don't know if I can describe the feelings.

Q: At least try.

A: It's anger, hate, fear, generally sick to your stomach, hurt.

Q: Did it have any impact on your beliefs, your ideas or what you might like to do in connection with somehow or other on into combat accomplishing your mission? Am I making that too complicated for you?

A: I believe so.

Q: I'm trying to find out if it had any impact on your future actions as you were going to have to go in and if you did go in and reach the enemy on other occasions and if so, what was the impact?

A: I'm not really sure of what my actual feelings were at the time. I can't sit down and say I made any formal conclusions of what I would do when I met the enemy. I think there is an—that instilled a deeper sense of hatred for the enemy. I don't think I ever made up my mind or came to any conclusion as to what I'd do to the enemy.

Q: All right. Now did you have any remorse or grief or anything?

A: Yes, sir. I did.

Q: What was that?

A: The remorse for losing my men in the mine field. The remorse that those men ever had to go to Vietnam, the remorse that being in that situation where you are completely helpless. I think I felt mainly remorse because I wasn't there, although there was nothing I could do. There was a psychological factor of just not being there when everything is happening.

Q: Did you feel sorry that you weren't there with your troops?

A: Yes, Sir.

Source: Olson, James and Randy Roberts. *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1998), 52-53.

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Lewis Puller Autobiography

From *Fortunate Son: The Autobiography of Lewis B. Puller Jr.* (1991). Lewis Puller, a U.S. Marine who lost both of his legs and an arm in combat during the Vietnam War, felt that the My Lai episode stained the reputations of millions of honorable young men who had fought in Vietnam.

On November 12, 1970, at Fort Benning, Georgia, the court martial of Lieutenant William L. Calley, Jr., for the murder of civilians at My Lai began. The trial lasted for more than four months and was the focus of such intense media coverage that it became, in effect, a forum for debate over American involvement in Vietnam. Calley was portrayed by supporters of the war as a maverick acting alone and without orders, whose actions, brought on by the stress of prolonged combat and casualties in his own unit, were an aberration from the rules of engagement. The opposing viewpoint held that his actions, if not sanctioned by higher authority, were at least tolerated and were typical of the conduct of ground units in the war.

I was deeply offended by the notion that the hideous atrocities committed by Calley and his men were commonplace in Vietnam, an inevitable consequence of an ill-advised involvement in someone else's civil war. The men I had in combat, were, like any cross section of American youth, capable of good and evil, and I felt we all were, by implication, being branded as murderers and rapists. Throughout the proceedings the reportage seemed to me to accentuate the monstrous evil of a group of men gone amok without any effort to depict fairly the discipline and courage that existed along with the forces of darkness in most units.

Lieutenant Calley was ultimately found guilty of the premeditated murder of twenty-two civilians and sentenced to life imprisonment, but I felt his punishment could never right the evil he had done or the perceptions he helped foster of America's soldiers and Marines as bloodthirsty killers. At the end of the trial I wrote letters to several local newspapers protesting that it was unfair for the Calley case to have so influenced public opinion, but the grisly photographs of murdered civilians lying in a ditch at My Lai which had been so prominently displayed in newspapers across the country, spoke far more eloquently than my feeble words.

Source: Lewis Puller, "Fortunate Son: The Autobiography of Lewis B. Puller," in James Olson and Randy Roberts, *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 1998): 187-188.

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Nguyen Hieu Testimony

Nguyen Hieu was 23 years old and an eye-witness of the massacre at My Lai. The following is his testimony to the Peers Commission, the official U.S. Army investigation of the killings and cover up.

Q: What is your name?

A: Nguyen Hieu.

Q: How old are you?

A: Twenty-five years old.

Q: Are you a native of Tu Cung?

A: Yes...

Q: ...Were you in a house on the morning of 16 March 1968 when the Americans came?

A: Yes, I lived there in 1968.

Q: Were you there on the morning of 16 March 1968 when the Americans came?

A: Yes, I was there that morning.

Q: How many other members of your family were there with you in the house that morning?

A: Five.

Q: What did you do when you heard the artillery fire?

A: For the first time early in the morning I heard artillery come in here (indicating) and American helicopters come into here (indicating) on the west side of the village. They came here and they took us from the bunker.

Q: Was the bunker near your house?

A: Yes, right here (indicating).

Q: Did all the members of your family go in the bunker?

A: My mother stayed in the house. I and the children went to the bunker.

Q: How long did you stay in the bunker?

A: About 2 hours.

Q: Did you Americans come near the bunker?

A: Yes, they came into the bunker

Q: They came into the bunker?

A: Yes.

Q: And did they make you come out of the bunker?

A: When the Americans came to my house my mother came out of the house, and the Americans then raped my mother and they shot her.

Q: They shot and raped your mother?

A: Yes, shot and raped my mother. My sister ran out of the bunker and they shot my sister and two children.

Q: How many Americans were there?

A: Two Americans

Q: Were you the only one that stayed in the bunker?

A: Yes, I stayed alone.

Q: And your sister went out of the bunker and was shot?

A: My sister went out of the bunker to help my mother and was shot.

Q: After the soldiers that shot the people left, how long were you in the bunker before the other soldiers came that burned the house?

A: About 40 minutes

Q: Did they shoot any livestock? Any animals, chickens, pigs?

A: They killed two buffalo.

Q: What did you do after the soldiers left?

A: After the Americans left I buried my mother and sister.

Q: I am sorry that your family was killed like this. Thank you for coming here today to help us.

Source: *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* 94-96.

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Peers Commission Summary of Findings

After the media exposed and charged the military with a cover up of the massacre, the U.S. Army assigned Lieutenant General William R. Peers with the investigative task of determining an official account of the events on March 16, 1968 and the extent of the cover up since that day. Known as the Peers Commission, the task force interviewed eye-witnesses and personnel with knowledge of the massacre. A summary of its findings is below. "Task Force Barker," "11th Brigade," and "Americal Division" refers to parts of Charlie Company of which Lt. William Calley's was a commanding officer. For more information, see http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/RDAR-Vol-I.pdf (page 2-12 to 2-13).

It is concluded that:

1. During the period of 16-19 March 1968, troops of Task Force Barker massacred a large number of Vietnamese nationals in the village of Son My.
2. Knowledge as to the extent of the incident existed at company level, at least among the key staff officers and commander at the Task Force Barker level, and at the 11th Brigade command level.
3. Efforts at the Division command level to conceal information concerning what was probably believed to be the killing of 20-28 civilians actually resulted in the suppression of a war crime of far greater magnitude.
4. The commander of the 11th Brigade, upon learning that a war crime had probably been committed, deliberately set out to conceal the fact from proper authority and to deceive his commander concerning the matter.
5. Investigations concerning the incident conducted within the Americal Division were superficial and misleading and not subjected to substantive review.
6. Efforts were made at every level of command from company to division to withhold and suppress information concerning the incident at Son My.
7. Failure of Division headquarters personnel to act on information received from GVN/ARVN officials served to suppress effectively information concerning the Son My incident.
8. Efforts of the Division to suppress and withhold information were assisted by US officers serving in advisory positions with Vietnamese agencies.

For more information, http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/Peers_inquiry.html.