



The My Lai Massacre: The History of the Vietnam War's Most Notorious Atrocity

Charles River Editors

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*Includes pictures *Includes accounts of the massacre made by participants *Includes online resources and a bibliography for further reading *Includes a table of contents “I walked up and saw these guys doing strange things...Setting fire to the hootches and huts and waiting for people to come out and then shooting them...going into the hootches and shooting them up...gathering people in groups and shooting them... As I walked in you could see piles of people all through the village... all over. They were gathered up into large groups. I saw them shoot an M79 [grenade launcher] into a group of people who were still alive. But it was mostly done with a machine gun. They were shooting women and children just like anybody else. We met no resistance and I only saw three captured weapons. We had no casualties. It was just like any other Vietnamese village-old papa-sans, women and kids. As a matter of fact, I don't remember seeing one military-age male in the entire place, dead or alive.” - PFC Michael Bernhardt The Vietnam War could have been called a comedy of errors if the consequences weren't so deadly and tragic. In 1951, while war was raging in Korea, the United States began signing defense pacts with nations in the Pacific, intending to create alliances that would contain the spread of Communism. As the Korean War was winding down, America joined the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, pledging to defend several nations in the region from Communist aggression. One of those nations was South Vietnam. Before the Vietnam War, most Americans would have been hard pressed to locate Vietnam on a map. South Vietnamese President Diem's regime was extremely unpopular, and war broke out between Communist North Vietnam and South Vietnam around the end of the 1950s. Kennedy's administration tried to prop up the South Vietnamese with training and assistance, but the South Vietnamese military was feeble. A month before his death, Kennedy signed a presidential directive withdrawing 1,000 American personnel, and shortly after Kennedy's assassination, new President Lyndon B. Johnson reversed course, instead opting to expand American assistance to South Vietnam. The Vietnam War remains one of the most controversial events in American history, and it bitterly divided the nation in 1968, but it could have been far worse. That's because, unbeknownst to most Americans that year, American forces had carried out the most notorious mass killing of the war that March. On March 16, perhaps as many as 500 Vietnamese villagers in the Son My village complex - men, women, and children - were killed by American soldiers in Task Force Barker. The worst of the violence, carried out by members of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry, occurred in a small village known locally as Xom Lang. On American maps, the location was marked as My Lai (4), and when news of the killings leaked into the American press over a year and a half later in November 1969, it was under that name that the incident became infamous as the “My Lai Massacre.” The My Lai Massacre was possibly the single worst atrocity committed by American forces during the long and sometimes brutal Vietnam War, and it has been called "the most shocking episode of the Vietnam War." It became a touchstone not only for the controversial conflict but for the manner in which the American government had covered up the truth, which many felt was emblematic of the government's behavior throughout much of the war itself. Moreover, it damaged the nation's credibility, as well as the military's; as Reinhold Neibuhr put it, “I think there is a good deal of evidence that we thought all along that we were a redeemer nation. There was a lot of illusion in our national history. Now it is about to be shattered.” The My Lai Massacre: The History of the Vietnam War's Most Notorious Atrocity traces the history of one of the American military's darkest days.

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