Vietnam Veterans of America

Chapter 324 - PO Box 18631 - Milwaukee, WI 53218

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Meeting Notice

16 October, 2024

5555 W. Good Hope Rd.
Board Meeting 6:30 p.m.
Chapter Meeting 7 - 8 p.m.
18 October, 2024
Future Meetings 2024
November 20, December 18
Chapter web page: www.vietnamvetschapter324.co
National web page: www.vva.org

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Newsletter: John Zutz john(at)zutz.org
John is listed in the phone book - good luck finding one

War Criminal or Scapegoat: William Calley and the Enduring Memory of the My Lai Massacre

VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA
Milwaukee Chapter 324
September 18, 2024

Meeting called to Order at 7:00 pm by President Pat Ciofani
Minutes of July 17, 2024 meeting reviewed and accepted
Treasurer's Report – Pat Moore - $5374.29 in our checking account

COMMITTEE REPORTS

Fund Raising – September 8th $1700 split with American Legion gave us $850 – September 29th we collected $628 with our share being $314
Website – Contact Pat Moore to post items of interest to the chapter

OLD BUSINESS

VVA National verified that they received our financial and election reports

NEW BUSINESS

Meeting Location - New leadership at the Elks Lodge has decided that we are not covered by their liability insurance. They are considering charging us on a per meeting fee Should this be enacted, we would have to look into our own liability coverage or consider a new meeting location We await further information from the lodge.

Adjournment – 7:30 pm

Calley from front page

By Blake Stilwell. Military.com, July 31, 2024

Former Army Lt. William Calley Jr. may be one of the most infamous officers in U.S. military history.

Calley was the only U.S. service member convicted for participating in what would be remembered as the 1968 My Lai Massacre, which saw American soldiers brutally and indiscriminately slaughter more than 500 Vietnamese civilians in what's often referred to as "the most shocking incident of the Vietnam War." He would spend only three years in prison, and, after leaving the Army, he avoided the limelight until his death on April 28, 2024, in Gainesville, Florida, at age 80.

Calley was both demonized and lionized in the very public court-martial that followed the revelation of the massacre in 1969. Though other atrocities in Vietnam have since come to light, the events that unfolded at My Lai and the men who perpetrated it would shape the American public's long-term perceptions of the Vietnam War.

In the early months of 1968, morale among American troops in Vietnam was on the decline. They had just fought off the Tet Offensive, a massive, countrywide assault on American bases and South Vietnamese cities that was launched during the Tet holiday in January. The soldiers of Company C, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 23rd Infantry (Americal) Division, led by Calley, lost 28 of their own during the fighting.

At the time, Calley and his men were deployed in South Vietnam's Quang Ngai province. Intelligence believed the province was a stronghold for the Viet Cong insurgents, and as a result, it was heavily mined, bombed, strafed and sprayed with Agent Orange. In March 1968, U.S. forces were ordered to attack the village of My Lai, a "search and destroy" mission in Quang Ngai -- and Calley was determined to make good on those orders.

Calley led 100 soldiers from Charlie Company to the village of My Lai on March 16, 1968. At his court-martial, Calley claimed his orders were to consider everyone still in the village a Viet Cong insurgent, and that this order came from his commanding officer, Capt. Ernest Medina -- a charge Medina denied and was later acquitted of giving. Despite meeting no resistance, the Americans opened up on the village with small arms, machine guns, grenades and M-79 grenade launchers. American troops raped women and bayoneted babies.

Initially, the Army glossed over the details of the mission itself, calling it "a successful search-and-destroy mission." In 1969, however, Army veteran Ron Ridenhour tried to inform President Richard Nixon and members of Congress about what he'd heard about the massacre. In November of that year, journalist Seymour Hersh, acting on a tip about Calley's court-martial, began to uncover the facts by interviewing soldiers present at My Lai. When

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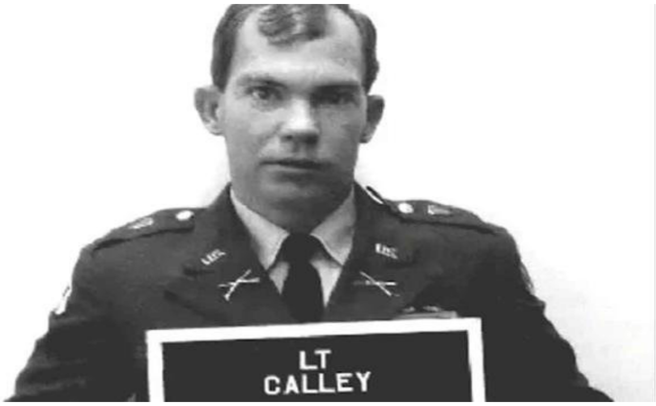
the Cleveland Plain-Dealer obtained and published Army photographer Ronald Haeberle's personal color photos of the massacre, the incident finally caused a nationwide outrage.

In response to the media's coverage and the protests it sparked, the Army would charge 14 officers with crimes related to My Lai and its subsequent cover-up. Calley's trial lasted four months and dominated the national conversation during that time, with many convinced that Calley was a scapegoat for the Army brass.



Second Lt. William L. Calley's booking photo. (National Archives)

In 1971, a court-martial found Calley guilty of 22 counts of premeditated murder. He was originally sentenced to life in prison at the U.S. military's Disciplinary Barracks at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. His commanding general cut the sentence to 20 years before Secretary of the Army Howard H. Callaway cut it to 10 years; he was paroled after serving a third of the sentence. In 1974, a federal judge ruled that publicity surrounding the event prevented Calley from getting a fair trial and overturned the conviction entirely. Although the conviction was upheld the following year, Calley never spent another day in prison.

For decades after the messy trial and the even messier sentencing, historians have speculated just what led these 100 soldiers to slaughter unarmed civilians indiscriminately. Then-Pfc. Paul Meadlo, who testified against Calley at the trial after receiving immunity from the prosecution, once said, "It was just revenge, that's all it was."

But Marshall Poe, a historian and professor who has taught at Harvard, Columbia and the University of Iowa, believes our broader cultural history of the massacre tends to remember the event very differently from what actually happened.

"[The consensus] is basically that American troops were driven kind of insane by the nature of the fighting in Vietnam and the difficulties in telling friend from foe," Poe tells Military.com. "They called it 'Vietnam War Syndrome,' that the GIs were somehow mentally deranged and these crazy GIs went into a village and killed a lot of civilians in some sort of bloodlust. But that's not what happened."

Poe runs the New Book Network, a podcast that interviews scholars about their new books. A military historian himself, he recently published, "The Reality of the My Lai Massacre and the Myth of the Vietnam War," which delves into the full story behind the incident and America's cultural memory of the war. He studied 18,000 pages of official documents, testimony and investigations conducted by the Army, along with 5,000 more pages of official documentation

Continued next page

Calley continued

and found the soldiers at My Lai, rather than motivated by revenge or the insanity of war, were simply following the orders they were given.

"The soldiers were not unthinking animals, overtaken by mob mentality," he says. "They were told by their superiors to completely raze the village and kill anything that moved; the military intelligence erroneously stated that only Viet Cong sympathizers remained."

The photo (previous page). showing mostly women and children dead on a road, was taken by U.S. Army photographer Ronald L. Haeberle on March 16, 1968, in the aftermath of the My Lai Massacre. (Ronald L. Haeberle/U.S. Army photo)

Poe said much of the research surrounding My Lai is what he calls "end around": memorials recounts of the massacre, the cover-up and the trial of Calley. He was interested in the U.S. military's actual operations in the area at the time. He found the Peers Report, the result of the Army's own investigation into the massacre, conducted by Lt. Gen. William R. Peers.

With the help of civilian lawyers, Peers' "damning" exhaustive report put much of the blame on the Army for its order and for trying to sweep the incident under the rug. He found 13 factors that contributed to the massacre, which included a lack of proper training, lack of discipline, racist attitudes toward Vietnamese people, the ambiguity between combatants and civilians, and a poor command climate up to the highest levels.

The Peers Report provides a minute-by-minute reconstruction of what happened at My Lai, which Poe believes doesn't align with the prevalent national memory of the Vietnam War. According to Poe, the popular image of crazed soldiers in Vietnam murdering civilians actually stems from anti-war Yale psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton's work interviewing Vietnam war combat veterans.

"It's from this that you get the image of the crazy Vietnam veteran, which you see all over popular culture," Poe said. "Rambo is the best example. You've seen 'Taxi Driver,' right? Is it any surprise that Travis Bickle is a Vietnam vet? Not really. You just see this everywhere, and it really stems from this moment, when people were thinking about the My Lai Massacre and what to do with it in terms of assimilating it to American culture."

An American soldier burns a Vietnamese dwelling. (Photo by Ronald L. Haeberle)

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