

A wretched book on this wretched subject



Conversations With Americans

By Mark Lane.
247 pp. New York:
Simon & Schuster. \$6.95.

12-27-70

By NEIL SHEEHAN

This book is so irresponsible that it may help to provoke a responsible inquiry into the question of war crimes and atrocities in Vietnam. "Conversations with Americans" is a lesson in what happens when a society shuns the examination of a pressing, emotional issue and leaves the answers to a Mark Lane.

Mr. Lane is a New York lawyer who charged admission six years ago to his lectures in an East Side theater about a conspiracy behind the assassination of President Kennedy (a conspiracy Mr. Lane did not prove in his book attacking the Warren Commission report). He now purports to have assembled a collection of interviews with American soldiers and Marines who witnessed or participated in atrocities in Vietnam. The publisher, Simon & Schuster, advertised the book in the Nov. 22 issue of this review as "one of the most shocking, eye-opening books ever encountered in the annals of wartime reporting." The headline on the advertisement read: "A genera-

Mr. Sheehan, who spent three years in Vietnam, is a correspondent in The Times Washington bureau.

tion is being brutalized/ Thirty-two Vietnam veterans give first-hand accounts of what is happening to our under 30's as they are trained in savagery, sadism, torture, terrorism and murder."

In his introduction, Mr. Lane notes that "La Gangrène," a famous French account of torture inflicted on Algerians by the French police during the Algerian war, was limited to "uncorroborated but thoroughly convincing allegations . . . by the victims."

"Here the victims do not make allegations," he says of his book. "Here those who performed the acts of brutality and their friends come forward to place those acts before us. It is for us to place these acts in context. In a country where one cannot imagine the police smashing the printer's plates or confiscating this book, there is yet time for analysis, evaluation and action." Mr. Lane uses his freedom to suggest the interviews show that the Army and the Marine Corps consciously operate on a moral par with Hitler's S.S. So reader, get control of your stomach and prepare for some credible testimony on atrocities from the men who attached the electrodes to the genitals of their victims, male and female, and who

December 27, 1970

butchered women and children like chickens.

The first interview in the book is with Chuck Onan, who deserted the Marines in 1968 and fled to Sweden. Onan says he was in an elite Marine long-range patrol unit, that he went to parachute, frogman and jungle survival schools and received a special course in torture techniques. "How were you trained to torture women prisoners?" Mr. Lane asks.

"To strip them, spread them open and drive pointed sticks or bayonets into their vagina," Onan replies. "We were also told we could rape the girls all we wanted."

Onan says he deserted after he got orders to go to Vietnam and put his knowledge into practice. "I was pretty gung-ho until the last phase of the training. Then it all began to seem so sick. They just went too far."

Now here is some information that Mr. Lane did not include in his book. Marine Corps records say the only combat training Onan received was the normal boot camp given every Marine. He then, according to the records, attended Aviation Mechanical Fundamentals School at Memphis, Tenn., and next worked as a stock room clerk at the Marine air base at Beaufort, S. C., handing out spare parts for airplanes. He left Beaufort on Feb. 5, 1968, with orders to report to Camp Pendleton, Calif., for shipment to Vietnam after 30 days leave. He deserted. There is no indication in his records that he ever belonged to a long-range patrol unit and received parachute, frogman and jungle survival training. The Marine Corps contends it does not give courses in torture.

Later on in Mr. Lane's book you

will meet Michael Schneider. He says that he spent a year and a half in Vietnam as an infantry squad leader and then platoon leader with the 101st Airborne Division and the 196th Light Infantry Brigade. He tells how he shot three unarmed peasants, tortured a prisoner by hooking a hand-crank field telephone up to the man's testicles on orders from a lieutenant, and watched other men torture prisoners in similar fashion on several occasions. His battalion commander, he says, ordered the men to kill prisoners. Schneider says he was awarded the Bronze Star, the Purple Heart with oak-leaf cluster and the Silver Star, the Army's third highest combat decoration, for his Vietnam service. He subsequently deserted in Europe.

Schneider says that he was born in Germany as Dieter von Kronenberger, but his father changed the family name to Schneider when they immigrated to the United States in 1948.

"How has your family reacted to the fact that you deserted?" Mr. Lane asks.

"My father says I'm a traitor. He says you have an obligation to be loyal to any army you are in. He's a colonel in Vietnam. He recently replaced Col. George Patton as the commander of the Eleventh Armored Cavalry Regi- (Continued on Page 19)

Conversations With Americans

Continued from Page 5

ment. He was a captain in World War II. In the Nazi Army," Schneider replies.

"Your father is a colonel in Vietnam?" Mr. Lane asks.

"Right. Full colonel. Commanding officer in Eleventh Cavalry Regiment now." Schneider goes on to tell you that his father once worked for the notorious Nazi armor commander, Gen. Heinz Guderian. The implication is fairly obvious: The United States army has Nazis in command of important units.

There is no Colonel Schneider or von Kronenberger, according to the Army records. No such man ever commanded the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment. There is no trace in the records of any officer who resembles the description that Michael Schneider gives of his father.

Here is some more information from Army records that Mr. Lane also does not mention in his book. Michael Raymond Schneider left Europe last January, flew to New York and surrendered to the Army at Kennedy Airport. He soon went A.W.O.L. and was arrested by police in Denver in July on a murder warrant from Oklahoma. The records last placed him in the maximum security ward of Eastern State Mental Hospital in Vinita, Okla., in October.

Mr. Lane did not bother to cross-check any of the stories his interviewers told him with Army or Marine Corps records. I asked him why in a telephone conversation.

"Because I believe the most unreliable source regarding the verification of atrocities is the Defense Department," he said.

But what about simple and obvious facts like those in the cases of Onan and Schneider which might throw light on the credibility of his witnesses? I asked.

"It's not relevant," he said.

This kind of reasoning amounts to a new McCarthyism, this time from the left. Any accusation, any innuendo, any rumor, is repeated and published as truth. The accused, whether an institution or an

individual, has no right to reply because whatever the accused says will ipso facto be a lie. Those on the left who cherish their integrity might do well to take a careful look at Mark Lane's methods.

Simon & Schuster likewise did not compare any of the atrocity stories with the records. One editor, who asked not to be quoted by name, said the firm had relied

December 27, 1970

on the "veracity" of the interviews. He equated the idea of searching the military records with taking a radical medical theory to the American Medical Association. "They'd just say it was wrong," he said.

We were dealing here with facts, not theories, I argued. "The motives in publishing this were anti-war motives," he answered. Another representative of the firm insisted, with apparent sincerity, that Simon & Schuster had published the book as a public service. "We did not do it for profit," he said.

Will a book like this aid the cause of those who seek to stop the war? Can the opponents of the war accuse those in power of cloaking the war's prosecution in deceit and then practice deceit themselves?

It is particularly difficult to separate fact from fiction in those interviews where, to the experienced ear, the soldier or Marine obviously has seen combat and is speaking in the argot of the "grunt." The interview with Terry Whitmore, a black Marine who deserted to Sweden, is a good example.

Whitmore says he participated, among other atrocities, in a planned massacre of an entire village of several hundred Vietnamese men, women and children. Marine Corps records say Whitmore was in Vietnam over the time period he cites and in the unit he mentions. By telephone, I reached Whitmore's former battalion commander, a lieutenant colonel still on active duty, and a former platoon leader in his company, now a teaching assistant at Appalachian State University in Boone, N. C., both said no such massacre had occurred. They said that at the time Whitmore describes it as taking place, the battalion was

operating in an unpopulated area near the Demilitarized Zone.

They remembered an earlier incident involving Whitmore's company in which four Vietnamese, two women, a man and a child were shot to death in a hostile area at night. The company commander, a captain, and an enlisted man, were tried by a court martial for murder. They were acquitted on the grounds that the company had just been fired upon, and it had been impossible in the darkness to distinguish the moving figures as civilians.

Is Whitmore transmogrifying this incident into a massacre of several hundred? The conflicting accounts certainly raise the question. Similar doubts taint the credibility of other interviews Lane publishes with men who did not desert and who returned to the United States.

Garry Gianninoto, who says he was a Navy medical corps-

man assigned to the Marine infantry, describes orgies of burning and killing. "The people were terrorized by the Marines. I mean they terrorized them to death, and the people were scared."

"Did you see much of this?" Lane asks.

"All the time," Gianninoto replies. He recounts one incident in which five Vietnamese men were hanged, stabbed and then shot and their bodies tossed into a river.

Gianninoto says that, in disgust, he finally refused "to fight" and was court-martialed. Medical corpsmen normally do not fight. They do, however, often work in dangerous circumstances, saving the lives of wounded infantrymen on the battlefield and getting shot at themselves in the process.

Marine Corps records do not indicate that Gianninoto had a lot of combat experience either to fight or to witness the atrocities he describes. He was assigned to an aid station at a battalion headquarters in February, 1968, according to the records, and then court-martialed in July for twice refusing orders to work in areas where he might have been shot at. While in the brig, he signed a statement claiming that he had committed a homosexual act in the service and had taken

morphine. The statement had the effect of getting him transferred to a Navy hospital in New York City for evaluation. Otherwise, he would have had to finish his 13-month tour in Vietnam after he emerged from jail. He went A.W.O.L. from the hospital, the records continue, was court-martialed again and then given an undesirable discharge.

The records do show that there was an incident around the time Gianninoto cites in which five Vietnamese were hanged, stabbed, shot and thrown into a river. One Marine is now serving life imprisonment for the killings and Gianninoto could have learned of them from newspaper stories.

In our telephone conversation, Mr. Lane also dismissed such prosecutions as "irrelevant" and therefore unmentionable in his theater of the macabre. His lack of interest in distinctions includes drawing none between the grim but understandable brutalities of war, such as the killing of prisoners in the passion of battle (both sides do it), and far graver atrocities like the torture of prisoners by rear-area interrogators who have no excuse to hate, the killing of innocent civilians with indiscriminate air and artillery bombardments, or their direct, personal murder as occurred at My Lai. The distinction is an important one, because it

carries a degree of moral turpitude that every soldier, from private to general, senses.

Some of the horror tales in this book are undoubtedly true. Where there is so much stench, something must be rotting. Mr. Lane succeeds, however, in making it impossible to reach any factual judgment. Nevertheless, the naive and the professional moralists will derive considerable satisfaction from the book, if they can control their intestines. Mr. Lane informs us with the same sensationalism he presents everything else that drill sergeants behave like barbarians, cursing and blaspheming and training recruits to kill. To those who have not met a drill sergeant, this will be news.

It has always been my understanding that it is the task of the Army and the Marines to kill the enemies of the country when they are ordered to do so. The rub is whom they should kill, when they should do the killing and how they should do it. This is what has torn the nation apart over the Vietnam war.

The country desperately needs a sane and honest inquiry into the question of war crimes and atrocities in Vietnam by a body of knowledgeable and responsible men not

beholden to the current military establishment. Who these men are and how that inquiry ought to be conducted are questions I do not have the space to discuss here, but the need for the inquiry is self-evident. Too large a segment of the citizenry believes that war crimes and atrocities have taken place for the question to be ignored.

Anyone who spends much time in Vietnam sees acts that may constitute war crimes. One of the basic military tactics of the war, the air and artillery bombardments that have taken an untold number of civilian lives, is open to examination under the criteria established by the Nuremberg tribunal. Is it a war crime? We ought to know. And those professional soldiers who value their uniform would be wise to welcome such an inquiry.

That the men who now run the military establishment cannot conduct a credible investigation also ought to be self-evident from the Army's handling of the My Lai affair, and the Army is the principal service involved in Vietnam.

But until the country does summon up the courage to convene a responsible inquiry, we probably deserve the Mark Lanes. ■