

Marine Atrocities

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PAUL CABELL

In the sector of Tra Bong Township, South Vietnam, on the night of September 23, 1966, eight U.S. Marines and one Navy hospitalman received orders to "proceed 300 yards to the junction of a certain stream and forest trail, deploy in ambush, remain in ambush until 11 p.m., abandon the ambush and check several huts for V.C. suspects and weapons, and return to the C.P. by 12:30 a.m." When they reached the ambush site, something went wrong. The sol-

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diers, trained to commit "legal murder" in time of war, decided that something was wrong with the way the war was being conducted. They decided to do something about it. They removed all military insignia from their uniforms as well as the rings from their fingers. They set out on a war of their own.

Nguyen Luu, a rice farmer and amateur carpenter, had lived in the hamlet of Xuan Ngoc for all of his sixty-one years. With him were his wife, who was nearing seventy, his two younger sisters, and two nieces, still in their teens.

The door of Nguyen Luu's one room hut was suddenly smashed in by rifle butts. A light flashed into the old man's face. A hand grabbed him by the hair. A voice yelled, "Veecee! Veecee!" He was dragged from his bed. "No Veecee! Vietnamese!" he cried. He saw his wife in the corner, her head held back by the hair. The

old man was lifted onto his feet and pushed through the front door. Two men stood outside, waiting. One of the men punched Luu in the stomach. Another hit him in the face. A gun barrel was jabbed into his neck.

Nguyen Luu saw his wife, sisters, and nieces being led away from the hut by two men. One kicked his sister when she offered her I.D. card. Luu began to explain that he knew nothing about V.C. Two men entered the empty hut and smashed the furniture. Luu rose to his knees and held out his I.D. card. A man grabbed it and tore it to pieces. After a few minutes more of shouting and beating, the nine men moved off into the darkness, in the direction of the house of Nguyen Truc.

Nguyen Truc, a thirty-eight year old rice farmer, lived in a one room hut with his wife and five children. When the front door burst open the mother leaped out of bed toward her children. A man grabbed her arm, pulling her toward the door. Truc was shoved against the wall. "You Veecee!" the man shouted at him. Truc answered that he was not and was subsequently beaten to the floor. His wife screamed from outside the hut. Truc tried to make it outside and was hit again. Then two men grabbed him by the legs and held him so that his head was off the ground. A third man gave him a kick in the face that knocked him unconscious.

When Nguyen Thi Mai, a sixteen year old girl, had heard screams coming from the direction of Nguyen Truc's home, she

and her mother and her mother's sister moved into a low-ceilinged bunker made of bamboo and sand. The bunker had been built for protection against mortar shellings. As the three women sat inside, they heard the sounds of their house being torn apart.

Suddenly, a man's face appeared at the waist-high door to the bunker. Nguyen Thi Mai was pulled out by the leg. The three women offered their I.D. cards to the men and watched them being torn into pieces. Then, three

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men grabbed Thi Mai, one holding her arms and neck, two others grasping her legs. She was thrown to the ground. Her pajama pants were ripped from her body. Her legs were forced open and one man shone a flashlight at her. The men laughed. One of them slapped her and pushed her away. She ran into the trees and watched the men leave.

Seven more huts were raided. At the last, the tenth, lived Bui Thi Huong, eighteen, the mother of a three year old boy. Her husband was Dao Quang Thinh, a young farmer too ill with a chronic skin disease to be in the military. The husband's fifty year old mother lived with the family, as well as his sister and his sister's daughter, aged five.

The door was battered in. Men rushed inside and accused Thinh of being V.C. When he denied the charge, he was beaten. The three women were dragged from the hut

In the August 8 (#264) issue of the L.A. Free Press, a story appeared which dealt with recent atrocities committed by U.S. Marines in Vietnam. The facts in the story first appeared in a copyrighted article by Norman Poirier in the August issue of Esquire Magazine. The Free Press was given permission to quote up to 500 words of the article, but, through an oversight, Poirier was not credited with the original story, although Esquire itself was credited.



onto a concrete patio. Thinh tried to make it outside to the screaming women. He was beaten unconscious with fists and boots. He was propped against the front of the hut. His sister and mother and the two children were made to sit beside him. Two men stood guard while the eighteen year old mother was dragged to the other side of the house and raped by two men before she fell into unconsciousness.

When she woke, she was being given water from a canteen. Then a third man raped her. Then a fourth. Then a fifth.

When it was over, her husband's screams were silenced by a blast of gunfire. Then, more screams from her mother-in-law, sister-in-law, and the children. Suddenly, there were more bursts of gunfire; then an explosion. Then, darkness swept in.

A short time later, the nine men returned to the tenth hut with their commanding officer, Lt. Stephen J. Talty. The men had panicked while checking out hooches, they said, and had accidentally killed civilians. The lieutenant saw the bodies of a man, a woman and two children. The body of the older woman had been blasted back into the hut. Bui Thi Huong's body was on the other side of the hut.

"My God! What have you done!" the lieutenant said.

Suddenly, one of the two blood-splattered children cried out in pain. The men turned and stared at the bodies. The lieutenant then ordered two men to take the man's body and drag it to a point one mile away. He then ordered five men to track up the area and simulate an ambush action. The lieutenant then radioed his captain that his squad had met V.C.

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in ambush. Two females and one male V.C. Pursuit had broken off, women had been dragged away by V.C. Pursuit had broken off. The lieutenant and the remaining four members of First Squad then returned to the Platoon Command Post.

When five members of the squad were busy fixing up the area around the hut to make it appear as though a battle with V.C. had taken place, they heard the five year old girl cry out again. They spread hay over the pools of blood around the body. They gathered around it and debated.

When one of the five men was questioned later by Master Sergeant Charles W. Ellis, a criminal investigator for 17 of his 23 years in the Marine Corps, the

following dialogue took place.

"Potter did it..."

"Speak up, Vogel! How do you know he did it?"

"I don't know."

"You were looking out?"

"No. Everybody turned around ...Potter was standing..."

"But they turned around and looked at Potter!"

"Potter was standing over..."

"You looked at him!"

"Yes! Yes! I did! We all looked at him!"

"And you all knew what Potter was going to do!"

"Yeah..."

"What did Potter do when you were looking at him while he was standing over the baby?"

"He had his rifle in his hands ..."

"What did he do..."

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"He said, 'Somebody count for me!'"

"Somebody count what?"

"Count! Just count!"

"Count cadence?"

"No, just count for him. So I started counting. I turned around and started counting..."

"You looked at him and then you started counting! You couldn't make it any easier."

"I said one...two...three... And then he was hitting the baby with the butt!"

"How was he doing it?"

"Dropping it down."

"Picking it up and smashing it

down or just letting it fall down?"

"Picking it up and hitting it down."

"Like a baseball bat or like he was chopping wood or straight up and down like a butt stroke? Did you ever see anyone churn butter?"

"It was straight up and down."

"Like someone churning butter."

"Yeah. Then it was quiet and someone said to Potter, 'You sure got some balls to do that.'"

Another man was questioned over the same incident.

"Potter did, sir. He stood there and went mashing up and down with his rifle. It was his own idea, sir. Nobody else could do it."

"Then what?"

"Then, sir? Nothing, sir. Nobody said nothin'. I just said as we looked down at the baby that I was glad this wasn't in the United States."

The following men were tried for the following charges:

Pfc. John D. Potter, Jr.: Murder, rape, assault, assault to commit rape.

Sergeant Ronald Vogel: Murder and rape.

Pfc. James H. Boyd, Jr.: Murder, assault to commit murder.

Hospitalman Jon R. Bretag: Rape, assault to commit rape.

Pfc. Clifton G. Hobson: Rape, assault to commit rape, assault.

Pfc. James W. Henderson: Rape, assault to commit rape, assault.

Lance Corporal Robert W. Monroe: Murder, rape, assault, assault to commit murder, assault to commit rape.

Pfc. Jerry D. Sullivan: Rape, assault to commit rape.

Pfc. Danny L. McGhen: Murder, rape, assault, assault to commit murder, assault to commit rape.

Lieutenant Stephen J. Talty: Making a false report to a superior officer, accessory after the fact of murder.

Potter was found guilty and sentenced to a dishonorable discharge "and hard labor for the rest of your natural life." He is now twenty-two years old. He is at the Federal Penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas.

Vogel was originally sentenced to 50 years in prison. Last May, the Naval Board of review reduced the sentence to ten years. Because Vogel may have been performing a humane act by pouring water on Bui Thi Huong, the rape conviction was reversed. He is now serving time at the Portsmouth naval prison.

Boyd was found by the Marine Corps—AFTER THE INCIDENT AT XUAN NGOC—to have "a long standing character and behavior disorder manifested by lack of normal interpersonal relationships, immaturity, poor judgement, and almost complete disregard for the accepted social, moral and legal codes of society. Boyd usually acts in an impulsive and immature manner without taking time to consider his actions beforehand." He was sentenced to four years at hard labor. With time off for good behavior, Boyd is now a free man.

The Navy medic, Jon Bretag, was sentenced to six months at hard labor. He is now free.

Hobson was sentenced to three years, Henderson to two. Both men had their sentences subsequently reduced to six months because, it was argued, the mere fact that they were seen lying on top of the girl does not mean that they necessarily raped her. Forcible entry would have to be proven. Both men are now free.

Monroe, Sullivan, and McGhen

were found not guilty on all charges. McGhen and Sullivan are now out of the Marines. Monroe is now a sergeant—he was recently promoted—at Camp Le Jeune, North Carolina.

Lieutenant Talty was found not guilty of being an accessory to murder. Convicted of making a false report, he was sentenced to dismissal from the Corps, forfeiture of \$100 per month in pay for five months, and loss of 300 numbers in rank. The Board of Review affirmed the conviction and set aside the sentence of dismissal. Talty is now a civilian.

Records of the Xuan Ngoc incident are in the "finished" file of the Judge Advocate General of the Navy. The facts in this story are available for public inspection in his office in Washington, D.C.