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Calley and That Old Bitterness

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By Peter P. Mahoney

When the United States Court of Military Appeals recently upheld the conviction of William L. Calley Jr. for the murder of at least 22 Vietnamese civilians at My Lai, my old bitterness and disgust were stirred.

My background was very similar to his. I was a drifter of sorts before I enlisted in the Army in April, 1968. I was looking to find myself, or whatever it is that an eighteen-year-old looks for when he leaves home for the first time.

Soon after I joined, the Army offered to send me to Officer Candidate School because the loss of so many junior officers in Vietnam had forced it to lower the standards of admission. I accepted because it was the most challenging thing the Army had to offer me, and I figured that if nothing else the Army could teach me to be a man. I graduated as a second lieutenant at the ripe old age of 19.

The Army has a rather peculiar way of teaching prospective officers the qualities of leadership. If a person can tolerate being treated as the lowest form of life on earth, being subjected to incredibly sophomoric and often sadistic forms of discipline, and being told that nothing he does could ever possibly be correct, then somehow

after six months this qualifies him to lead men into battle.

The reason for all this, they say, is to teach men to think under pressure. But this method doesn't teach how to think, it teaches how to obey—blindly and unquestioningly. In addition, many candidates get the mistaken impression that this is how to run their own platoons, which accounted for, I think, so many lieutenants in Vietnam dying from gunshot wounds in their backs or grenades under their bunks.

We had to try to reconcile this obedience with another crucial lesson. Everything in Officer Candidate School is against the rules, so a candidate soon learns that rules must be broken for things to get done—a handy tip for the future in Vietnam. The only rule that was always followed was this: Don't get caught. It was a big game; senior officers would obligingly look the other way if we showed "ingenuity," but if we were too blatant we would be "caught." Lieutenant Calley got caught.

The court rejected his appeal that he was only following orders when dozens of villagers were shot in March, 1968. I cannot defend him for what he did, but I can understand the circumstances under which it happened. I never participated in any so-called atrocity while I was in Vietnam but that was only a coincidence of time

and circumstance. I could have—I had been trained for it.

The only guide that confused young men like Lieutenant Calley and I had in Vietnam was morality, and the Army had done its best to eliminate such a defective idea. If you do not disobey an unlawful order, you get into trouble, but all orders are considered lawful unless you can prove otherwise, usually at your own court-martial. Nobody seems to have pointed out that the Army probably would have been more willing to try Lieutenant Calley for *not* killing those people.

Lieutenant Calley was foolish, but so were we all. How can we isolate and punish instances of criminality in a war that was totally criminal? Where is the logic of sending one man to jail for killing civilians with bullets and making heroes of others for killing civilians with bombs? Of course, that is the way of our society. Those who give the orders are never punished; only those who get caught obeying them are allowed to be crucified.

Peter P. Mahoney, a former national coordinator for Vietnam Veterans Against the War/Winter Soldier Organization, was one of the Gainesville Eight, who were acquitted of conspiring to disrupt the Republican convention.