

Elite US army unit murdered hundreds of civilians

Ohio newspaper uncovers Vietnam war crimes

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In late October, the *Toledo* [Ohio] *Blade* published a four-part series detailing horrendous and widespread atrocities committed against civilians in Vietnam in 1967 by an elite US army unit. The revelations about the 35-year-old war crimes, discovered in long-buried American government files, appear at a particularly significant moment in the ongoing US occupation of Iraq.

Bush administration and Pentagon officials have made clear in their recent statements and actions that in the face of growing and more sophisticated Iraqi resistance they are preparing to turn to more brutal and violent methods. In brief, they are preparing new and more extensive war crimes against the Iraqi population.

One of the indications of a shift to a more ruthless policy was an internal memo recently leaked to the press in which Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld declared that “bolder measures” were needed against the insurgents.

The media has contributed its voice to this campaign. Various pundits and television talking heads, often retired generals, have chimed in, calling for the military to take whatever means are necessary to insure a US victory in Iraq.

A *Washington Post* op-ed article on October 26, entitled “The Right Fight Now: Counterinsurgency, Not Caution, Is the Answer in Iraq,” argued for the use of combat methods employed in Vietnam. The article’s authors, Tom Donnelly and Gary Schmitt, are associated with right-wing think tanks with links to Rumsfeld and other Bush administration officials. The piece continued, “The United States knows how to fight such wars.” The Vietnam experience was clearly the subtext of the article.

Another *Post* article on October 29 discussed the Bush administration’s determination to accelerate its so-called “Iraqification” program. This involves increasing the numbers of Iraqi police and soldiers providing security while freeing up US troops to “conduct raids and other concentrated attacks on resistance fighters.”

“Vietnamization” was a term coined by the Nixon administration in 1968 that referred to a strategic shift in its war effort. Through the increased use of South Vietnamese puppet troops in combat, backed by US air power and artillery, American forces were freed up to carry out deadly assaults on the Vietnamese population and forcibly depopulate vast areas of the countryside.

During this time, murderous military plans were implemented such as Operation Phoenix, which reached its height in 1969 with the execution of nearly 20,000 Vietnamese liberation fighters and supporters by death squads organized by the CIA. These operations were combined with “forced urbanization,” involving the expulsion of peasants from their land through bombing and chemical defoliation. During the notorious My Lai massacre in 1968, US soldiers killed some 500 civilians.

The conflict in Vietnam took the lives of 58,000 American soldiers, who

were conscripts for the most part, and wounded another 300,000. Tens of thousands more committed suicide in the years following their tours of duty in Southeast Asia or were mentally or morally destroyed by their experiences in the war. In 1995, 20 years after the defeat of US imperialism, the Vietnamese government claimed that a staggering 4 million Vietnamese civilians and 1.1 million soldiers were killed during the war.

The case brought to light in the *Toledo Blade* series [<http://www.toledoblade.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20031022/SRTI GERFORCE/110190169>] involves widespread atrocities perpetrated by the American military in Vietnam, actions that were deliberately buried in US government archives. The newspaper’s reporting team found that according to secret army records, a platoon known as the Tiger Force swept through the heart of Vietnam torturing and murdering an untold number of civilians from May through November 1967.

Blade reporters Michael D. Sallah and Mitch Weiss authored the series that started on October 22, entitled “Elite unit savaged civilians in Vietnam.”

After obtaining classified records from the Army’s Criminal Investigative Command detailing the platoon’s litany of war crimes, the reporters inspected thousands of declassified documents from the National Archives in Washington, D.C., as well as hundreds of additional classified papers about the case—a case they claim was not even known “to America’s most recognized historians of the war.” The investigative team also interviewed former Tiger Force soldiers and traveled to the Central Highlands of Vietnam, where they found witnesses to the platoon’s murderous rampages. The Central Highlands area is made up of several provinces, including Quang Nam and Quang Ngai.

Considered an elite arm of the 101st Airborne Division, the platoon was formed in 1965 and consisted of a small, highly trained unit of 45 paratroopers created to spy on enemy forces.

The platoon swept through more than 40 villages, including an assault on 10 elderly farmers in the Song Ve Valley on July 28, 1967 and a grenade attack on women and children in three underground bunkers near Chu Lai in August 1967. Prisoners were tortured and executed—their ears and scalps severed for souvenirs. One Tiger Force soldier decapitated an infant to obtain the child’s necklace and the teeth were kicked out of executed civilians for their gold fillings.

“Beginning in the Song Ve Valley, the platoon embarked on search-and-destroy missions, following their commanders’ orders: *Shoot everything that moves*. And they did,” write Sallah and Weiss. A former platoon leader, Sgt. William Doyle, recalled: “We killed anything that walked. It didn’t matter if they were civilians. They shouldn’t have been there.”

Unlike other areas of the Quang Ngai province, the valley was not a

center of rebellion. The *Blade* reporters point out that 1967 battalion reports and other records in the National Archives do not indicate the villagers in Song Ve Valley were hostile to American troops. Former platoon members told the reporters their mission was to stop the farming in the valley in order to deprive the Vietcong of a potential food source.

When villagers refused the Army's order to leave the Song Ve Valley, the entire basin was declared a "free-fire zone," meaning that no approval was necessary for soldiers to open fire or order air strikes on a village or region.

The *Blade* reporters conducted more than 100 interviews with former Tiger Force soldiers and Vietnamese civilians, estimating that the platoon killed hundreds of unarmed civilians during the seven-month period.

"It was out of control. I still wonder how some people can sleep 30 years later," said Rion Causey, who as a 19-year-old unit medic witnessed mass executions of unarmed Vietnamese, counting 120 civilians in one month in 1967. The reporters found that commanders in many cases had encouraged the soldiers to commit violence.

The newspaper team also discovered that, despite a four-year army investigation that began in 1971—the longest war-crimes investigation of the war—into 30 allegations of crimes violating international law, including the Geneva Conventions of 1949, no one was ever charged. Five platoon soldiers and an officer were allowed to resign during the investigation, escaping military prosecution. The only soldier to be disciplined was a sergeant who had triggered the investigation by reporting that a member of the Tiger Force had decapitated an infant. The army's findings were then sent to the offices of the secretary of the army and the secretary of defense, but no action was taken. Reports were repeatedly sent to top White House officials, including John Dean, then chief counsel to President Richard Nixon.

"To this day, the Army's Criminal Investigation Command refuses to release thousands of records that could explain what happened and why the case was dropped," the *Blade* charges. "The Army interviewed 137 witnesses and tracked down former Tiger Force members in more than 60 cities around the world. But for the past three decades, the case has not even been a footnote in the annals of one of the nation's most divisive wars."

In fact, very little punishment was ever meted out for American war crimes in Vietnam. According to the *Blade*, of the Army's 242 war-crimes investigations, there were only 21 convictions, which generally resulted in light sentences. One case in point is the My Lai massacre for which Lt. William Calley was the only soldier convicted. Originally sentenced to life in prison, he was paroled in 1975 after serving only three-and-a-half years under house arrest.

A former private, Ken Kerney, recalled in a recent interview the briefing he received before joining Tiger Force. "The commanders told me that 'What goes on here, stays here. You never tell anyone about what goes on here. If we find out you did, you won't like it.' They didn't tell me what they would do, but I knew. So you're afraid to say anything."

Villagers were massacred when they refused to go to the relocation centers, which the US State Department criticized in 1967 for lacking food and shelter. Surrounded by concrete walls and barbed wire, the camps resembled prisons. Describing the extreme brutality implemented against the villagers, former platoon medic Larry Cottingham said: "There was a period when just about everyone had a necklace of ears."

In one of the bloodiest periods of 1967, the Army launched Operation Wheeler on September 11. Under the leadership of Lt. Col. Gerald Morse, Tiger Force and three other units, dubbed Assassins, Barbarians and Cutthroats, forcefully patrolled dozens of hamlets in the Quang Nam province. The success of an encounter was measured by the number of people killed.

"I've never seen anything like it. We just came in and cleared out the civilian population," said Rion Causey.

Former medic Harold Fischer recalled: "We would go into villages and just shoot everybody. We didn't need an excuse. If they were there, they were dead."

At the end of the campaign, a story in the Army newspaper *Stars and Stripes* praised Tiger Force's Sam Ybarra for the thousandth kill of Operation Wheeler.

Ybarra was "one of the platoon's most prolific killers," but as the series points out "[d]emons of the past stalk [the] Tiger Force veterans." Upon his return from the war, Ybarra drank for days at a time, rarely leaving his trailer on a Native American reservation in Arizona until he died in 1982. His mother, Therlene Ramos, spoke to the *Blade* about her son's tragic demise: "He drank to forget about what he did. He was a normal person before he went to Vietnam. When he comes back, he was an alcoholic, smoking. He was not the same person. He was alive, but dead."

Several veterans stated that by the time they joined Tiger Force, the unit "was steeped in practices" that violated international law. "A culture existed in Tiger Force that embraced the executions of prisoners and civilians," state the authors of the series, pointing out that one in six—or some 500,000 Vietnam veterans—have been treated for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This figure indicates that the "execution culture" was not isolated to the Tiger Force platoon.

Former sergeant William Doyle, now being treated for PTSD, said he wanted his men to kill indiscriminately and without hesitation.

Former platoon medic Joseph Evans attempted to describe the reasons soldiers mutilated the bodies of their victims: "You fall into this unbelievable frustration. You're burned and you're fried and you're scared, and you do it to make light of the burden you're underneath."

One of the Tiger Force veterans, Douglas Teeters, on antidepressants and sleeping pills for flashbacks and nightmares, cannot erase the image of villagers being shot as they wave the leaflets air-dropped by the Americans that guaranteed their safety.

The average age of the American soldier in Vietnam was 19.

Toledo Blade reporters Sallah and Weiss, in investigating the case of a platoon with "the longest series of atrocities by a U.S. fighting unit in Vietnam," responsible for crimes that "reached the Pentagon and White House but never a court of law—or the American public," have provided an important public service.

However, the authors tend to view the platoon as a rogue force that went bad as military and political officials in high places turned a blind eye. Executive Editor Ron Royhab said the *Blade* felt "compelled to publish this report about American soldiers failing to live up to proper standards." But, in fact, the platoon's practices were far more common than Royhab would like his readers to believe.

In 1971, John Kerry, a former Navy lieutenant and leader of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in Washington. Kerry is currently the Democratic senator from Massachusetts and a candidate for the party's presidential nomination; he voted one year ago for the congressional resolution giving Bush authority to wage its illegal, colonial war in Iraq. Kerry told the Foreign Relations Committee 32 years ago:

"I would like to talk on behalf of all those veterans and say that several months ago in Detroit we had an investigation at which over 150 honorably discharged, and many very highly decorated, veterans testified to war crimes committed in Southeast Asia. These were not isolated incidents but crimes committed on a day-to-day basis with the full awareness of officers at all levels of command.

"They told stories that at times they had personally raped, cut off ears, cut off heads, taped wires from portable telephones to human genitals and turned up the power, cut off limbs, blown up bodies, randomly shot at civilians, razed villages in a fashion reminiscent of Genghis Khan, shot cattle and dogs for fun, poisoned food stocks and generally ravaged the countryside of South Vietnam, in addition to the normal ravage of war and

the normal and very particular ravaging which is done by the applied bombing power of this country.”

The *Toledo Blade* investigation has been largely blacked out by the major media outlets. In the November 10 issue of the *New Yorker*, Seymour Hersh commented that “The *Blade*’s extraordinary investigation of Tiger Force, however, remains all but invisible. None of the four major television networks have picked it up (although CBS and NBC have been in touch with the *Blade*), and most major newspapers have either ignored the story or limited themselves to publishing an Associated Press summary.”

Hersh reports that the *Blade*’s executive editor, Ron Royhab, told him: “We can’t have this kind of information and sit on it, because then we would be party to a cover-up.” Clearly, a majority of the media have no problem being party to a cover-up of past American wartime atrocities or, for that matter, present and future war crimes in Iraq.

New and more aggressive Vietnam-style tactics are being prepared for the war against the Iraqi people. Recently, Trent Lott, Republican senator from Mississippi and former Senate majority leader, candidly articulated the attitudes of many in the Bush administration and Pentagon frustrated with the daily attacks on US occupying forces:

“Honestly, it’s a little tougher than I thought it was going to be. If we have to, we just mow the whole place down, see what happens. You’re dealing with insane suicide bombers who are killing our people, and we need to be very aggressive in taking them out.”

During the 13 years in which the US government conducted its murderous war in Vietnam, 8 million tons of bombs and defoliants were dropped, resulting in the deaths and mutilations of millions of people. American imperialism faces a far deeper economic and political crisis than it did 30 years ago. In an effort to defend its crisis-ridden system, the US ruling elite and its military will use even greater brutality and repression today against peoples around the world and its own population.



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