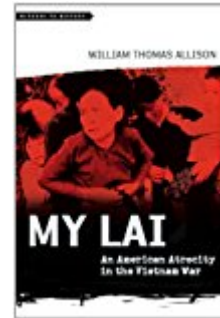


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**William Thomas Allison.** *My Lai: An American Atrocity in the Vietnam War.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012. 184 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4214-0644-2; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4214-0645-9.



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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey

Conducting a military operation requires precise adherence to planning procedures, rehearsals for actions on the objective, and a review of the details down to the lowest man involved. Despite preparations at all levels, no amount of training can turn off the emotions exhibited by soldiers when faced with taking the life of the enemy. For the soldiers of First Lieutenant William L. Calley Jr.'s platoon involved in the search and destroy mission of the area surrounding My Lai, revenge does not begin to describe what went wrong with the operation of March 16, 1968. William Thomas Allison offers a descriptive, but brief, overview of the events as they happened and shows how the atrocities became known to the army and the American people. For the purpose of providing the undergraduate student with a general understanding, the book is easy to read and also well researched. Allison provides individual soldier actions during the mission as well as detailed courtroom proceedings. He creates a suspenseful picture surrounding the trial of Calley that is sure to captivate both the student and newly interested reader.

Described in gruesome detail are the actions of the junior soldiers and the leadership of Charlie Company, 1-20 Infantry, the unit responsible for planning and conducting the mission that saw close to five hundred South

Vietnamese citizens murdered. Personal testimony from Calley's own men is a testament to the fact that they had not responded blindly to orders given, but instead acted under their own accord. The intent is not to show that more soldiers, not just Calley, should have been punished for committing murder, but instead to demonstrate that the soldiers involved displayed a clear level of personal responsibility. Without revealing biased opinion, Allison presents the other side of the argument to show that experts believed that the typical Vietnam era soldier lacked the necessary education to always determine right from wrong.

The decision to disregard the rules of engagement during the My Lai operation is a reflection of the substandard training that the 1-20 Infantry received prior to deployment. Many of the units that fell under the Americal Division also received low-quality training after arriving in country. Replacement training was conducted for every unit upon arrival in Vietnam and the traditional division level units had better established Vietnam orientation programs. The intent was to quickly adjust soldiers and leaders to Viet Cong tactics, techniques, and procedures, as well as provide training based off lessons learned from units in theater. Very little instruction, however, was provided for such subjects as

cultural awareness and booby traps/landmines to the 1-20 Infantry. Many units, including those of the Americal Division, experienced the difficulty associated with training shortfalls and the yearlong rotation schedule. This often set back the training gains made by the 1-20 Infantry and continually fostered an environment constrained with inexperience. Within the Americal Division, the lack of consistently ineffective leadership produced the possibility for an incident, such as that at My Lai, to occur.

Allison's portrayal of the operation, investigation, and trial proceedings all reveal a failure in leadership at every level for those involved in My Lai. For this reason, the book has the potential to be used as a tool in educating leaders about how to handle the hardships of actual combat and to carry out a swift yet thorough investigation. Prior to the My Lai operation, soldiers from Calley's platoon fell victim to booby traps and enemy sniper fire. Although tragic, many infantry units dealt with similar circumstances. Allison could have provided more insight about how other units that faced those circumstances dealt with the loss and conducted remedial training on their respective Fire Base. It was loss of life experienced as a part of combat operation that the leadership of Charlie Company did not capitalize on. Allison instead depicts Captain Ernest Medina and the unit leadership as preparing for the My Lai operation as if American strategy had become one of total war. Even during the trials, Medina, the commander of Charlie Company, refused to admit to his choosing to shoot first before confirming an enemy presence. Lies, cover-ups, and the desire for ad-

vancement all supplant the desire to do the right thing. From this perspective, the book is also useful for senior leaders within the military. Allison portrays many of the officers involved as being concerned first about how the massacre and investigation would affect their own careers. Self-preservation is a natural human reaction to crisis, and regardless of the emphasis placed on it by the author, the book shows how a leader lacking honor and integrity fails himself and his organization.

While straying little from the intent of providing a general understanding for the student reader, the book places more importance on the investigations and trials of those involved than it does on the planning or training conducted prior to the operation. Much of the book focuses on how the senior leaders within the Americal Division came to learn about the events as well as the trial proceedings for those charged with war crimes. The book will raise many questions concerning U.S. Army trial and investigative procedures and the effectiveness of the army during the Vietnam War. For the more junior scholar or student, the book will spur further investigation into the event and the desire to search for a deeper explanation of how a military unit could commit such brutalities. Allison has written a very balanced account of the My Lai massacre but could have related the events more to the conflicts in which the U.S. military is currently engaged. This will not only help students remember and understand the event, but also put it in context and see how far the military has come in its discipline and wartime preparation.

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