

Preventing Atrocities

by Capt Steven D. Danyluk, USMCR

In today's environment of instantaneous communications, can a relatively minor atrocity bring down an entire military chain of command or even a government?

On the muggy morning of 16 March 1968, members of Bravo and Charlie Company's 11th Infantry Brigade, Americal Division, U.S. Army, boarded assault helicopters and embarked on a so-called "search and destroy" mission. The Quang Ngai Province, Republic of Vietnam, was located in a free-fire zone, an area within which targets could be engaged with impunity by small unit commanders. For the soldiers, this assignment promised to be an opportunity to deliver vengeance upon a phantom enemy; an enemy who up to that point had inflicted heavy casualties upon them primarily through boobytraps and sniper fire. The anticipation level was high.

Resistance in the landing zone turned out to be light. Frustrated, the troops entered the nearby village of My Lai and rounded up what inhabitants they could find; primarily women, old men, and children. What ensued at My Lai and its surrounding hamlets was a bloodbath in which 300-400 Vietnamese civilians were systematically gunned down. In fact, had it not been for the heroic efforts of an Army helicopter crew on the scene, the carnage might have been far greater. Through persistent effort, WO Hugh C. Thompson and his crew of two enlisted personnel were able to bring the bloodletting to a halt, at one point being heard over the radio stating their intentions that they would train their own weapons on the next American seen killing a civilian.

Because of the allegations brought by WO Thompson and oth-

er pilots from the Aeroscout Company supporting the operation, the Americal Division's deputy commander flew out to the scene that evening. Instead of authorizing an investigative body to look into the matter, the deputy commander requested that the brigade comman-

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der in charge of the operation provide a written account of the events. The report, which later was completely discredited by the "Peers" report of the Department of the Army, concluded that 20 noncombatants were killed by preparatory fires, and that the charge that U.S. forces shot unarmed civilians was a Viet Cong propaganda ploy.

More than 1 year passed and little of the incident was heard. Rumors of the atrocity persisted however, and in December 1969, *LIFE* magazine featured an essay with accompanying photographs of the massacre taken by an Army photographer who was present at the scene. The American public, already torn apart by the war, was thrown deeper into a tumultuous debate. Seventeen officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) were charged in the incident, but in the end, only one American soldier, Lt William Calley, was convicted by a court-martial for the personal killings of 109 Vietnamese civilians.

Why Do These Things Happen?

Atrocities in wartime are almost inevitable, especially when adrenaline and stress levels are running near their zenith. Atrocities are not something that belong uniquely to the U.S. Army either. In *With the Old Breed*, author E.B. Sledge wrote of his Marine experience during World War II. While on the island of Peleliu, Sledge recounted how his comrades used their K-Bar knives to extract gold fillings from the mouths of wounded Japanese soldiers. While war, at times, may bring out the best in a young man, it also seems capable of bringing out the very worst.

The adage goes that "those who fail to learn from history are destined to repeat it." If true, there may be cause for concern. On a recent nonscientific query of company grade officers, less than 30 percent had even the vaguest familiarity with the events surrounding the My Lai atrocity. And My Lai itself bears striking resemblance to past events.

On 29 November 1864, Col John M. Chivington led soldiers of the 1st and 3d regiments of the Colorado volunteers into an encampment of Arapaho and Cheyenne Indians at Sand Creek, Colorado. Without provocation, they opened fire, killing 200-300 (two-thirds being women and children) of the inhabitants. Like My Lai, some of the most horrific acts were attributed to small unit leaders:

During the massacre I saw three squaws and five children, prisoners in charge of some soldiers; that, while they were being conducted along, they were approached by

Lieutenant Harry Richmond, of the Colorado cavalry; that Lieutenant Richmond thereupon immediately killed and scalped the three women and the five children while the other prisoners were screaming for mercy; while the soldiers in . . . charge . . . shrank back apparently aghast.

—James Olney, *First Lieutenant, First Regiment, Colorado Cavalry, testifying for the Report of the Joint Committee, U.S. Senate, 38th Congress, 2d session.*

Lt Olney's remarks are chillingly similar to the words and thoughts of WO Hugh Thompson concerning My Lai 100 years later:

The thought was going through my mind and my crew's mind, how these people got in that ditch and after coming up with about three scenarios, one of them being artillery hit them, you wipe that out of your mind because every house in Vietnam, I think, has a bunker underneath it. If artillery was coming there they would go to the bunker, not outside. Then I said, well, when the artillery came, they were trying to leave and they got caught in that ditch. Then something just sunk into me that these people were marched into that ditch and murdered. That was the only explanation that I could come up with.

The reasons why massacres occur are numerous and have been debated for decades. Within military atrocities, three common factors exist: (1) external pressure, (2) a breakdown in small unit leadership, and (3) an overpowering sense of frustration. In Vietnam, there was the external pressure on mid- and low-grade officers to produce a "body count." At My Lai, small unit leadership broke down to the degree that an officer who would not meet the entrance standards required by today's military was leading men on the battlefield. Finally, the infantryman of that war was often frustrated by an enemy whom he rarely saw, yet who had an uncanny ability to hurt him badly.

Some sociopsychologists have theorized that military atrocities are the result of the inherent racism of the perpetrator. The argument goes that because of the different racial makeup of the participants, it is somehow easier for the instigator to dehumanize the victim. This racism is something that can be further manipulat-

ed in recruit training. They are not like us, they are less than human; therefore, killing them is not bad.

Until recently, some validity rested in the theory that cultural racism plays a role in atrocities, the Jewish Holocaust being the most obvious example. But in the later stages of the 20th century, the majority of atrocities have been committed by like peoples upon like peoples in regionally defined conflicts. Cambodia, Somalia, and even Yugoslavia are examples where the difference between the various players is not so much a racial one as it is a religious or political one. The salient ingredient is the existence of some central ideology: religion in Northern Ireland, tribalism/clanism in Somalia/Rwanda, or a political agenda such as the case in Cambodia. It is this ideology that the participant latches onto in an effort to define himself. The result is an explosive "groupism" that then enables the atrocity.

The Potential for Atrocities in the Modern World

Shifting trends in military operations are placing U.S. and NATO servicemen squarely in the middle of these ideologically based, regionally defined conflicts. Within these struggles, the enemy is neither clearly identified nor readily distinguishable from the myriad of active participants, be they civilian or military.

For years the Canadian armed forces were commonly referred to as "The World's Peacekeeping Force." Its members served, and are serving, in a variety of United Nations (U.N.)-sponsored peacekeeping missions ranging from Cambodia to the former Yugoslavia. Currently, Canadian forces are involved in nine separate and distinct peacekeeping missions worldwide. In March 1993, that image of a peaceful force was shattered when a small group of Canadian paratroopers caught Shidane Arone, a 16-year-old Somali thief, sneaking into the Canadian compound at Belet Huen and then beat him to death.

Two weeks following the incident, the first reports aired on Canadian television. Public indignation was such that a full-scale investigation was launched. Like My Lai, the first investigation was flawed, and media pressure resulted in a second, more thor-

ough investigation. One year later, following the airing of several videotapes depicting airborne soldiers taking part in hazing rituals (eerily reminiscent of the Marine Corps 8th & I and blood-winged videos), Canada's elite Airborne Regiment was disbanded, and the upper levels of the Canadian Government were tarnished by charges of coverup and inaction. Five years later the role of the Canadian military is still a contentious issue within the Canadian Parliament.

Canada was not alone with its Somali problems. Similar reports surfaced in both the Belgian and Italian press alleging illegal acts perpetrated by European peacekeepers. One Italian soldier told a major magazine that his unit fired machineguns and launched grenades into a Somali village for a full hour following the shooting death of one of his unit's officers. (Minister of Defense, Bruno Arcanna, was roundly criticized at the time for characterizing these events as "fraternity pranks.") Several years later, when a Marine EA-6B sliced a gondola wire in northern Italy that resulted in 20 civilian deaths, Arcanna called the U.S. servicemen involved "killers.") Following the publication of photographs depicting two Italian soldiers torturing a Somali in the Italian magazine *Panorama*, Gens Bruno Loi and Carmine Fiore tendered their resignations in June 1997. The "Information Age," it seems, will increasingly make it more difficult to lightly brush such incidents aside.

Can These Acts Be Prevented?

The Canadian Defense Force is a highly skilled, all-volunteer organization that, during the course of the Cold War, routinely received accolades as the most professional force within NATO. The Canadian Airborne Regiment's screening, selection, and training were the highest in the entire force, and its troops came out of a selection pool from the most industrialized nation in the world. The inevitable conclusion is that in today's environment, the training of a disciplined military force strictly for combat is not enough, and the scandal that occurred within Canada with its Airborne Regiment can just as easily happen to the U.S. Marines as well.

Canada responded quickly to the tragic events in Somalia. In 1994, a joint venture between the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of National Defence established the L.B. Pearson Peacekeeping Center in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The Center's primary mission is to provide research, education, and training in all aspects of peacekeeping. But the Canadian response was reactive in nature and came about only as a result of Arone's death and the exhaustive media coverage that followed the "Somalia Affair." Had such measures been in place earlier, the whole scandal might have been avoided to begin with.

How To Prevent

The most important and simplest step in preventing illegal acts by frontline troops involved in military operations other than war is continued emphasis on the differences between right and wrong. Simply saying that atrocities will not be tolerated is not enough; the moral and legal aspects need to be stressed as well (ideally with heavy involvement from military chaplains and attorneys).

Recently, a commander of a U.S. Marine expeditionary unit off the coast of the former Yugoslavia was insightful enough to have the unit lawyer draft a series of challenging scenarios that a small unit leader might encounter as part of the implementation force. Those scenarios were then discussed and role-played aboard ship at the small unit level. That training, however, was not standard procedure and came about with the luxury of time. A force such as deployed Marines may not have that luxury before being called into action. Those Marines and the other NATO troops who are on the cutting edge might be even better prepared for some of the darker aspects of what they might encounter (rapes, mutilation, mass killings) if the mechanics for such training are formally in place long before their deployment begins.

Officer and enlisted small unit schools should incorporate atrocity prevention/intervention training into their syllabi. As likely as the possibility is that a new second lieutenant will be participating in a peacekeeping type mission, it's regrettable that the

various Service schools do not have a syllabus dealing with atrocities. It's the ugly secret nobody wants to discuss. A 10-hour course complete with practical application and designed to teach the platoon leader what actions to take when encountering an atrocity is a good first step. Similar instruction should be implemented at the NCO schools as well (Corporals' Course and up). In the Information Age, a CNN camera is not likely to discriminate between an allied U.N. peacekeeper committing an atrocity or a Marine small unit leader who stands nearby watching. The repercussions would be great, a la Rodney King, except this time directed against the military, not the Los Angeles Police Department. It is the small unit leader who is most likely to be on the scene at such an event, and it will be that leader's decisionmaking process that will carry enormous political consequence.

Finally, as stated earlier, we are blessed with the unique opportunity to learn from others' mistakes. Canada had a very serious incident in Somalia, and the L.B. Pearson Peacekeeping Center was their response to ensure that it never happens again. While it may not be fiscally feasible for the Marine Corps to establish a similar institute, it certainly would make sense to establish a liaison position with the Canadian Center. A Marine officer serving a 3-year tour at the Center could prove a vital link into the critical research and lessons learned from previous peacekeeping operations in which Canada and our other allies have participated. The Canadian military unquestionably is an important source for information in this arena, and it makes sense to tap into it.

Conclusion

One common thread in all the atrocities discussed here is that in each case the acts were instigated by one or two individuals. A herd mentality then took over and infected the other members of that particular unit. Implementation of these steps will redirect that herd's focus and neutralize the power of the instigator. The hope is to prevent another atrocity.

If wars cannot be prevented, steps can be taken to ensure that they are at least fought in as ethical a manner

as possible. There is a higher reason for this as well, rather than a banal fear that it might result in political scandal or cause the resignation of a few flag officers.

Like a stone tossed into the center of a placid pond, the consequences of an atrocity extend far from the center. The immediate effect falls on the victims and their families, but with the fighting over, the perpetrator in a macabre twist becomes victim, too. Bringing the dark secret home with him, an internal rage builds, fueled by a contempt for the ignorant society that he believes destroyed him by sending him in to war. All around he sees shiny, happy people who represent a former life he can never regain. Severe depression, psychosis, and suicidal tendencies are a step away.

Thompson, who retired from the Army and now works for the Veterans Administration in southern Louisiana, was no doubt deeply affected by what he saw at My Lai; it's plainly visible in his face. But for whatever reason (perhaps because he descended upon the scene from above), he was able to transcend an inherent evil of the human condition. His actions were truly remarkable, and his personal integrity remained intact. Today, Thompson's life is one peppered by small pleasures: a loving girlfriend, a stray dog adopted as a pet, an insatiable appetite for southern cooking. These are the things that many of his fellow soldiers who were in the field that day lost the ability to enjoy long ago.

Atrocities are the dark secret of military culture. Nobody cares to discuss them, but they do exist. What can be done to reduce the potential of a war crime from bubbling to the surface is education and preparation. By doing this, hopefully, another tragic event such as that which occurred at My Lai or to the Canadian Airborne in Somalia won't happen to the U.S. Marines, and the young men of whom we ask so much will not return with the emotional scars from which there is no recovery.

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