

“No Crime Is a Crime Durin’ War”

Witnessing Atrocities on Both Sides

Arthur E. “Gene” Woodley, Jr.

The year 1968 was a turning point in the Vietnam War. In January, the Viet Cong launched the Tet offensive throughout South Vietnam, even penetrating the U.S. embassy in Saigon temporarily. Although the offensive was ultimately defeated, it convinced many Americans that the war was no longer winnable.

In March 1968, troops led by Lieutenant William Calley killed 200-500 unarmed civilians in the hamlet of My Lai, even though the troops had not been fired upon. Many of the civilian bodies were found lying in a ditch, in an execution-style slaying. Calley was court-martialed in 1971 and sentenced to twenty years in prison.

While serving in Vietnam, Arthur E. “Gene” Woodley, Jr., witnessed many My Lai-type atrocities—on both sides. He describes some of the horrors that still haunt him.

I went to Vietnam as a basic naive young man of 18. Before I reached my 19th birthday, I was a animal. When I went home . . . , even my mother was scared of me. . . .

Being from a hard-core neighborhood, I decided I was gonna volunteer for the toughest combat training they had. I went to jump school, Ranger school, and Special Forces training. I figured I was just what my country needed. A black patriot who could do any physical job they could come up with. Six feet, 190 pounds, and healthy. . . .

I didn’t ask no questions about the war. I thought communism was spreading, and as an American citizen, it was my part to do as much as I could to defeat the communists from coming here. Whatever America states is correct was the tradition that I was brought up in. . . .

Then came the second week of February of ’69.

This was like three days after we had a helicopter go down in some very heavy foliage where they couldn’t find no survivors from the air. . . . We were directed to find the wreckage, report back. Then see if we can find any enemy movement and find any prisoners.

We’re headin’ north. It took us ten hours to get to the location. The helicopter, it was stripped. All the weaponry was gone. There was no bodies. It looked like the helicopter had been shot out of the air. It had numerous bullet holes in it. But it hadn’t exploded. The major frame was still intact. . . .

We recon this area, and we came across this fella, a white guy, who was staked to the ground. His arms and legs tied down to stakes. And he had a band around his neck that’s staked in the ground so he couldn’t move his head to the left or right.

He had numerous scars on his face where he might have been beaten and mutilated. And he had been peeled from his upper part of chest to down to his waist. Skinned. Like they slit your skin with a knife. And they take a pair of pliers or a instrument similar, and they just peel the skin off your body and expose it to the elements.

I came to the conclusion that he had maybe no significant value to them. So they tortured him and just left him out to die.

The man was within a couple of hours of dying on his own.

And we didn't know what to do, because we couldn't move him. There was no means. We had no stretcher. There was only six of us. And we went out with the basic idea that it was no survivors. We was even afraid to unstack him from the stakes, because the maggots and flies were eating at the exposed flesh so much.

The man had maggots in his armpits and maggots in his throat and maggots in his stomach. You can actually see in the open wounds parts of his intestines and parts of his inner workings being exposed to the weather. You can see the flesh holes that the animals—wild dogs, rats, field mice, anything—and insects had eaten through his body. With the blood loss that he had, it was a miracle that the man still alive. The man was just a shell of a person.

The things that he went through for those three days. In all that humidity, too. I wouldn't want another human being to have to go through that.

It was a heavy shock on all of us to find that guy staked out still alive. With an open belly wound, we could not give him water. And we didn't have morphine.

And he start to cryin', beggin' to die.

He said, "I can't go back like this. I can't live like this. I'm dying. You can't leave me here like this, dying."

It was a situation where it had to be remove him from his bondage or remove him from his suffering. Movin' him from

"More Blacks Were Dying"

An African-American Soldier's Experience

Don F. Browne

America experienced upheaval at home as well as abroad in 1968. Civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., was murdered in April, and race riots erupted in several U.S. cities. Don F. Browne, an African-American sergeant in the Army, tells how King's assassination affected him—and the Viet Cong military strategy.

When I heard that Martin Luther King was assassinated, my first inclination was to run out and punch the first white guy I saw. I was very hurt. All I wanted to do was to go home. I even wrote Lyndon Johnson a letter. I said that I didn't understand how I could be trying to protect foreigners in their country with the possibility of losing my life wherein in my own country people who are my hero, like Martin Luther King, can't even walk the streets in a safe manner. I didn't get an answer from the president, but I got an answer from the White House. It was a wonderful letter, wonderful in terms of the way it looked. It wanted to assure me that the president was doing everything in his power to bring about racial equality, especially in the armed forces. A typical bureaucratic answer. . . .

With the world focused on the King assassination and the riots that followed in the United States, the North Vietnamese, being politically astute, schooled the Viet Cong to go on a campaign of psychological warfare against the American forces.

At the time, more blacks were dying in combat than whites, proportionately, mainly because more blacks were in combat-oriented units, proportionately, than whites. To play on the sympathy of the black soldier, the Viet Cong would shoot at a white guy, then let the black guy behind him go through, then shoot at the next white guy.

It didn't take long for that kind of word to get out. And the reaction in some companies was to arrange your personnel where you had an all-black or nearly all-black unit to send out.

this bondage was unfeasible. It would have put him in more pain than he had ever endured. There wasn't even no use talkin' 'bout tryin' and takin' him back, because there was nothing left of him. It was that or kill the brother, and I use the term "brother" because in a war circumstance, we all brothers.

The man pleaded not only to myself but to other members of my team to end his suffering. He made the plea for about half an hour, because we couldn't decide what to do.

"There Aren't Any Rules"

Photographing an Execution

Eddie Adams

On a Saigon street at the height of the Tet offensive, Associated Press photographer Eddie Adams captured the execution of a Viet Cong soldier by Nguyen Ngoc Loan, chief of the South Vietnamese National Police. The photograph illustrated the media's frontline role in Vietnam, bringing the brutality of the war into America's livingrooms.



Nguyen Ngoc Loan executes a Viet Cong suspect in this photograph by Eddie Adams, which won a Pulitzer Prize.

We were walking down the street when we saw the South Vietnamese police walking with this guy. We started following him because it was a prisoner, and like any photographer, you stay with a prisoner until he's out of sight. They stopped on the corner, and I was thinking, "This is boring." Just then Loan walked in out of nowhere and I saw him load his pistol. And I thought he was going to threaten the prisoner, which they always do. As soon as he raised his pistol, I raised my camera. Well, later on the U.S. military studied the picture and it turned

out the moment he pulled the trigger, I pushed the shutter of my camera. It was all an accident. I just took it because I thought he was going to threaten him.

After Loan shot him, he walked over to us and said, "They killed many of my men and many of your people," and he walked away. The prisoner was later identified as a Viet Cong lieutenant. . . .

There were things a hell of a lot worse that happened in Vietnam. We had pictures that we never released. There were pictures of Americans holding heads of Viet Cong they'd chopped off. . . . Very gruesome, but this is a war. People are dying, your friends are getting blown away. In the next two minutes you could be dead. Everything is fair in love and war. There aren't any rules. It's just war.

He kept saying, "The mother——s did this to me. Please kill me. I'm in pain. I'm in agony. Kill me. You got to find 'em. You got to find 'em. Kill them sorry bastards. Kill them mother——s."

I called headquarters and told them basically the condition of the man, the pleas that the man was giving me, and our situation at that time. We had no way of bringin' him back. They couldn't get to us fast enough. We had another mission to go on.

Headquarters stated it was up to me what had to be done because I was in charge. They just said, "It's your responsibility."

I asked the team to leave.

It took me somewhere close to twenty minutes to get my mind together. Not because I was squeamish about killing someone, because I had at that time numerous body counts. Killing someone wasn't the issue. It was killing another American citizen, another GI. . . .

I put myself in his situation. In his place. I had to be as strong as he was, because he was askin' me to kill him, to wipe out his life. He had to be a hell of a man to do that. I don't think I would be a hell of a man enough to be able to do that. I said to myself, I couldn't show him my weakness, because he was showin' me his strength.

The only thing that I could see that had to be done is that the man's sufferin' had to be ended.

I put my M-16 next to his head. Next to his temple.

I said, "You sure you want me to do this?"

He said, "Man, kill me. Thank you."

I stopped thinking. I just pulled the trigger. I cancelled his suffering.

When the team came back, we talked nothing about it.

We buried him. We buried him. Very deep.

Then I cried. . . .

When we first started going into the fields, I would not wear a finger, ear, or mutilate another person's body. Until I had the misfortune to come upon [some] American soldiers who were castrated. Then it got to be a game between the communists and ourselves to see how many fingers and ears that we could capture from each other. After a kill we would cut his finger or ear off as a trophy, stuff our unit patch in his mouth, and let him die.

I collected about fourteen ears and fingers. With them strung on a piece of leather around my neck, I would go downtown, and you would get free drugs, free booze, free [sex] because they wouldn't wanna bother with you 'cause this man's a killer. It symbolized that I'm a killer. And it was, so to speak, a symbol of combat-type manhood. . . .

One night we were out in the field on maneuvers, and we seen some lights. We were investigating the lights, and we found out it was a Vietn'ese girl going from one location to another. We caught her and did what they call gang-rape her. She submitted freely because she felt if she had submitted freely she wouldn't have got killed. We couldn't do anything else but kill her because we couldn't jeopardize the

mission. It was either kill her or be killed yourself the next day. If you let her go, then she's gonna warn someone that you in the area, and then your cover is blown, your mission is blown. Nothin' comes before this mission. Nothin'. You could kill [a] thousand folks, but you still had to complete your mission. The mission is your ultimate goal, and if you failed in that mission, then you failed as a soldier. And we were told there would be no prisoners. So we eliminated her. Cut her throat so you wouldn't be heard. So the enemy wouldn't know that you was in the area. . . .

After a while, it really bothered me. I started saying to myself, what would I do if someone would do something like this to my child? To my mother? I would kill 'im. Or I would say, why in the hell did I take this? Why in the hell did I do that? Because I basically became a animal. Not to say that I was involved . . . , but I had turned my back, which made me just as guilty as everybody else. 'Cause I was in charge. I was in charge of a group of animals, and I had to be the biggest animal there. I allowed things to happen. I had learned not to care. And I didn't care. . . .

With eighty-nine days left in country, I came out of the field.

At the time you are in the field you don't feel anything about what you are doin'. It's the time you have to yourself that you sit back and you sort and ponder.

What I now felt was emptiness.

Here I am. I'm still 18 years old, a young man with basically everything in his life to look forward to over here in a foreign country with people who have everything that I think I should have. They have the right to fight. . . . They fought for what they thought was right.

I started to recapture some of my old values. I was a passionate young man before I came into the Army. I believed that you respect other people's lives just as much as I respect my own. I got to thinkin' that I done killed around forty people personally and maybe some others I haven't seen in the firefights. I was really thinkin' there are people who won't ever see their children, their grandchildren.

I started seeing the atrocities that we caused each other as human beings. I came to the realization that I was committing crimes against humanity and myself. That I really didn't believe in these things I was doin'. I changed.

I stopped wearing the ears and fingers. . . .

Before I got out [of] the service, the My Lai stuff came out in the papers. Some of who had been in similar incidents in combat units felt that we were next. We were afraid that we were gonna be the next ones that was gonna be court-martialed or called upon to testify against someone or against themselves. A lot of us wiped out whole villages. We didn't put 'em in a ditch per se, but when you dead, you dead. If you kill thirty people and somebody else kills twenty-nine, and they happen to be in a ditch and the other thirty happen to be on top, who's guilty of the biggest atrocity? So all of us were scared. I was scared for a long time.

I got out January '71. Honorable discharge. Five Bronze Stars for valor. . . .

I couldn't discuss the war with my father, even though he had two tours in Vietnam and was stationed in the Mekong Delta when I was there. . . . He had a disease he caught from the service called alcoholism. He died of alcoholism. And we never talked about Vietnam.

But my moms, she brought me back 'cause she loved me. And I think because I loved her. She kept reminding me what type of person I was before I left. Of the dreams I had promised her before I left. To help her buy a home and make sure that we was secure in life.

And she made me see the faces again. See Vietnam. See the incidents. She made me really get ashamed of myself doin' the things I had done. You think no crime is a crime durin' war, 'specially when you get away with it. And when she made me look back at it, it just didn't seem it was possible for me to be able to do those things to other people, because I value life. That's what moms and grandmoms taught me as a child. . . .

I still cry.

I still cry for the white brother that was staked out.

I still cry because I'm destined to suffer the knowledge that I have taken someone else's life not in a combat situation.

I think I suffered just as much as he did. And still do. I think at times that he's the winner, not the loser.

I still have the nightmare twelve years later. And I will have the nightmare twelve years from now. Because I don't wanna forget. I don't think I should. I think that I made it back here and am able to sit here and talk because he died for me. And I'm livin' for him.

I still have the nightmare. I still cry.

I see me in the nightmare. I see me staked out. I see me in the circumstances when I have to be man enough to ask someone to end my suffering as he did.

I can't see the face of the person pointing the gun.

I ask him to pull the trigger. I ask him over and over.

He won't pull the trigger.

I wake up.

Every time.