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# “And Babies?”: The Representation of Mỹ Lai in Vietnam War Comics

HARRIET E. H. EARLE

## Abstract

The Mỹ Lai Massacre holds a special place in the history of the Vietnam War. But the events of that day have never been made coherent, with a stable place within the American popular consciousness. This paper considers the ways in which this event—and its myriad understandings and misunderstandings—is represented in popular culture in general, and in comics in particular. I perform close analyses of two comics. In “Headcount” (*Our Army at War* #233 [1971]), Mỹ Lai is reimagined as Alimy, a fictional French town during the Second World War, and the massacre plays out against a different backdrop. In “Burn” (*The 'Nam* #75 [1992]), two Americans discuss the recent trial of Lt. Calley. My close analysis focuses on two questions: How is the Mỹ Lai Massacre used in comics? And to what end?

**Key Words:** Comics; Vietnam War; massacre; 1970s; trauma; military

On March 16, 1968, soldiers from Charlie Company of the 23rd (Americal) Infantry Division entered Sơn Mỹ village, a collection of hamlets and small homesteads, including Mỹ Lai and Mỹ Khê. The previous evening, there had been a briefing with Captain Ernest Medina. Sơn Mỹ and the wider surrounding area of Quảng Ngãi province were a known National Liberation Front (NLF; alias Viet Cong) “stronghold”; such was its notoriety that it earned the nickname “Pinkville” for the color of the area on military maps. Medina claimed that all civilians would be gone from the village by 07:00 a.m. and only NLF soldiers or sympathizers would remain. Though later reports would differ on his response, many witnesses have stated that Medina either directly or implicitly suggested killing any inhabitant, regardless of whether they were “walking, crawling or growling” (“Calley’s Trial Puts Emphasis on

CO"). Over the course of four hours, Charlie Company systematically murdered the inhabitants of the village. As PFC Paul Meadlo later famously admitted, no one was spared—men, women, children, “and babies” (Turse 228). The soldiers raped women and girls, destroyed homes, and polluted the water supply. There was no returned fire—indeed, no resistance at all—and the soldiers were even able to take a lunch break. Afterward, the bodies of the deceased civilians were piled in a large drainage ditch just outside the hamlet. American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr later claimed that “[t]his [was] a moment of truth when we realize[d] that we [were] not a virtuous nation” (McFadden 56).

Initially, the U.S. military would have been happy to ignore the massacre and carry on without any further action. The Hiller OH-23 Raven helicopter crew (Hugh Thompson, Jr., Lawrence Colburn, and Glenn Andreotta) actively tried to stop the massacre as it was occurring. Though they made their superiors aware of the massacre before 11 a.m. on the same day, the launch of an investigation took a considerable amount of time. In the meantime, the company’s captain, Ernest Medina, received a commendation, and a combat action report declared the “operation” a success with 128 enemy combatants killed; General Westmoreland issued a formal congratulations to Charlie Company for “outstanding action,” a stance he would later withdraw (Bourke 196). It took a further six months for proper investigations to begin, prompted by two soldiers writing independently of each other to various officers and, in the case of Ronald Ridenhour’s letters, members of Congress. One Congressperson, Mo Udall, pressed the House Armed Services Committee to demand the Pentagon investigate, which they did, and the army charged Lieutenant William Calley, Jr., the leader of 1st Platoon in Charlie Company, with six counts of murder. The true death count is now listed as 504 Vietnamese civilians.

Matters were complicated further on November 13, 1969, when Seymour Hersh published a story in thirty-five newspapers (through the Dispatch News Service) that featured extensive interviews with Calley. Coupled with the publication of army photographer Ronald Haeblerle’s personal photographs of the event in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* one week later, on November 20, 1969, the Mỹ Lai Massacre became a matter that the military could not ignore.

Public outrage at the massacre fanned the flames of anti-war feeling in the United States, though some have wryly suggested that it was not the massacre itself but the fact the U.S. Government tried to, in the words of then-Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, “sweep it under the rug” that was considered more offensive (Turse 228). Toward the end of Calley’s court martial in 1971, NBC news anchor Frank McGee declared that Mỹ Lai was “a name now seared into the American consciousness” (NBC Nightly News). However, this has proved to be largely untrue and “[w]hat was once an image of incandescent horror has become at most a vague recollection of something unpleasant that happened during the

Vietnam War" (Oliver 3). Writing in the early 1990s, Christian Appy claimed that Mỹ Lai "has virtually disappeared from public debate or memory" (277). Not only are the details of the massacre forgotten, but so is the name Mỹ Lai itself. Ronald Ridenhour wrote that the massacre "was an operation, not an aberration" (qtd. in Turse 5), and Nick Turse suggests that "the real aberration was the unprecedented and unparalleled investigation and exposure of Mỹ Lai. No other American atrocity committed during the war—and there were so many—was ever afforded anything approaching the same attention" (5). The massacre is remarkable for being the only one that made any kind of media impact and, conversely, for slithering out of the American memory of the war with such apparent ease. The popular memory for massacre is short.

This article considers the place of the Mỹ Lai Massacre in American comics narratives of the war. However, before I turn to this specific event, I wish to briefly discuss the way the war more broadly is represented. Pop-culture representations of the war in Vietnam are many but the themes they address and the types of characters they give voice to are limited in scope. The vast majority of Vietnam War films and literature follow a similar *Bildungsroman*-esque trajectory: a young American man joins the military as a naïf, and, through his time in the theater of battle, he is forced to mature before returning home a changed man. Of course, not all texts of the war follow this format closely, while others play with the conventions of the genre—for example, Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Still, there is tremendous parity in the sorts of stories told about the war. And, furthermore, the represented characters follow a narrow demographic: typically White, almost entirely cis male, straight, and young. So, too, do we find the same voices given space in both fiction and memoir: the war serves as a proving ground for White American masculinity. Though it is not the purpose of this article to define and debate the ways in which the Vietnam War has been understood, misunderstood, and represented in American popular culture in broad terms, it is important to note that the power of American publishing and cultural creation far outstripped anything that Vietnam was able to counter, both during the war and since, giving the United States a clear advantage to take control of the war's international narrative.

In comics, too, the U.S.-centric narrative became the dominant one. The war in Vietnam is a key milestone in American comics history, as it marks a significant upsurge in the popularity of superheroes and their return to prominence. The 1956 implementation of the Comics Code Authority censored many of the most popular genres, including crime and horror comics. For example, the CCA guidelines expressly forbid "[a]ll scenes of horror, excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, [and] masochism," as well as "[a]ll lurid, unsavory, gruesome illustrations" (Nyberg 167), which were commonplace in horror comics. Removing them meant the end of this genre's pub-

lication. Superhero narratives were rebooted to fill the gap left in publication catalogs (Reynolds 9). Long-running titles, such as *Our Army at War* (DC, August 1952 to February 1977), *Fightin' Army* (Charlton Comics, January 1956 to November 1984), and *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos* (Marvel, May 1963 to December 1981), all of which were set during the Second World War, remained popular throughout the conflict in Vietnam.

As with film, comics about Vietnam were especially popular in the 1980s and 1990s. Richard Young writes that

[b]y the 1980s, film representations of the war began to create a new, less stigmatised image of the veteran. Aligning with broader public and political efforts to welcome veterans home, these representations of the war explored the discourse of maltreatment and wounding. (76)

The addition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to the American diagnostic vocabulary was undoubtedly helpful in creating a space for this representation of the veteran.<sup>1</sup> The only two comics series that focus solely on a Vietnam War narrative are *The 'Nam* by Doug Murray and Mike Golden (1986–1992), and *Vietnam Journal* (1987–1991) by Don Lomax, both of which began their publication runs in this period. For Young, *The 'Nam* “highlighted the continued contestation of the war’s memory” (90) and “sought to reintroduce issues about the war which had largely been removed from the discourse of memorialization” (89)—something that had not been possible earlier as the memory of the war and its direct effects on American service members was too immediate. However, both *The 'Nam* and *Vietnam Journal*, as well as other shorter narratives of the war from this period, such as the Marvel crossover comic *The Punisher Invades The 'Nam* (1988, 1992), the dark superhero / mercenary *Jon Sable Freelance* (1983–1986), and the very short-lived indie publication *In-Country Nam* (1991), still place focus solely on American men and the U.S. experience of the war, erasing other voices and perspectives.

More recently, the accepted narrative is being challenged by comics that present a narrative of the war that focuses on the Vietnamese as active participants in a conflict from which the popular U.S. narrative had previously erased them. Both GB Tran’s *Vietnamerica* (2010) and Thi Bui’s *The Best We Could Do* (2016) use “their own family histories to reposition the Vietnamese as central players in the conflict and create a narrative that demonstrates the costs of the war on the ordinary citizens of Vietnam” (Earle, “New Face” 91). However, as I explore elsewhere, “[p]art of their success in subverting the classic Vietnam narrative is due to their infiltration of the cultural system that built it in the first place” (“New Face” 91). Both Tran and Bui are writing in English and publishing in the United States: these works are not translations of Vietnamese comics.

In many ways, the Mỹ Lai Massacre and its pop-cultural representations have become a microcosm of the wider war. Kendrick Oliver writes:

<sup>1</sup> For further information, see Earle, *Comics, Trauma, and the New Art of War*.

The story of the massacre progressively evolved into a story about Americans, about the burden of blame carried by Calley, Medina and their men, and about the wider distribution of guilt upwards, through the ranks of those who had managed the war, and horizontally across American society as a whole. The actual victims of the massacre were displaced from the center of debate and concern and thus rendered powerless to make their claims upon American memory and conscience stick. (9)

The official narrative of the massacre increasingly centered Americans, erasing the Vietnamese from the story as anything more than bodies and, because of this, the massacre has a tenuous relationship with popular culture. Central to this dynamic is the question of how one tells a story of a war crime to an audience of the war criminals' compatriots. The majority of filmic representations are documentaries, making use of audio-visual material including interviews but without dramatizations and the requirements for writerly intervention and interpretation that are central to these kinds of production. Two dramatizations (docudramas, perhaps) have been released: *Judgment: The Court Martial of Lieutenant William Calley* (1975) focused specifically on the courts-martial, while *Mỹ Lai Four* (2010) was adapted from Seymour Hersh's 1970 Pulitzer Prize-winning book. A film to be directed by Oliver Stone, tentatively titled *Pinkville*, was scrapped in 2007; at present, there is some suggestion in the Hollywood press that a forthcoming film, *Two Wolves*, will focus on helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson, Jr. (Ravindran). The massacre is given as a reason for a character's suicide in a 1971 episode of *Hawaii Five-O*, and, in 1975, *The Lieutenant*, a Tony Award-nominated rock opera that followed the massacre and courts-martial, opened on Broadway to generally positive reviews. Furthermore, the "Vietnam War Song Project" has identified over one hundred songs about the massacre and Lt. Calley; in the time period from the massacre to 1973, pro-Calley songs outnumbered anti-Calley songs at a ratio of two to one (Brummer).

As these examples demonstrate, the events in Mỹ Lai have not been completely ignored within Vietnam War-related popular culture, but they have not stood out as a central event. Instead, Mỹ Lai is often used as a sort of narratological shorthand for a "bad thing" or a starting point for a wider discussion of the characters' views of conflict more broadly. The massacre makes brief appearances in only a few of the more than 450 comics of the war, including *Enemy Ace: War Idyll* by George Pratt (1992) and *Punisher Kills the Marvel Universe* by Garth Ennis and Doug Braithwaite (1995). In Pratt's reimagining of the WW I flying ace Hans von Hammer as an old man nearing his death, the massacre appears on a television news report. Von Hammer discusses it with a reporter as a way for the two to bond over their mutual experiences of warfare. In Ennis and Braithwaite's comic, vigilante Frank Castle ("the Punisher") battles Captain America, who attempts to bring Castle to his senses by appealing to him as a soldier. He responds, "I guess I'm just having a Mỹ

Lai kind of day,” before shooting Captain America in the head (Ennis and Braithwaite).

The only other comic (beyond the ones analyzed in detail below) that discusses the massacre in closer detail than a passing mention is Tom Veitch and Greg Irons’s *The Legion of Charlies* (1971), a disturbing underground comic that is intensely critical of the U.S. government and the military, while framing Calley (here named “Rusty Kali”) as a messiah for traumatized vets (Veitch and Irons).<sup>2</sup> The opening pages provide a series of parallel bandeau panels that juxtapose the Mỹ Lai Massacre (March 16, 1968) and “Manson Family Murders”<sup>3</sup> (August 8–10, 1969). The final page of this short introduction shows Charles Manson strapped into an electric chair, being executed for “the unspeakable murders of America’s movie stars, and for the heinous corruption of our daughters.” In contrast, Kali is awarded the silver star, “although [he] thoughtlessly snuffed the lives of 400 gook women and children” (Veitch and Irons). The rest of the comic follows Kali as he “hears the Word of Charlie” and is compelled to recruit other Vietnam vets to his cause: taking over the world by eating world leaders, starting with Spiro Agnew.

In the remainder of this article, I perform close analyses of two comics: “Headcount” (*Our Army at War* #233) and “Burn” (*The ’Nam* #75). These two comics were chosen because, along with *The Legion of Charlies*, they are the only ones that engage with the massacre and its aftermath in a substantial way, as more than just a passing mention. I focus on two questions: How is the massacre used in comics? And to what end?

### Ahistoricity and Mixed Images in *The ’Nam* #75

*The ’Nam* issue #75 is the only time that the series deals with the Mỹ Lai Massacre. The issue itself is split into four stories, each one dealing with a different aspect of the massacre and the response. The first story, which is titled “Burn,” follows two soldiers, who are discussing the massacre and giving their opinions on Nixon’s decision to pardon Lt. Calley.

The first eleven pages of “Burn” show a rendering of the massacre from the point of view of the soldiers who were there on that day. The narrator’s voice is contained within caption boxes, showing that the narrator sits at a different diegetic level to the visual action: the speakers are not present within the action shown, but are describing and discussing the events from outside of it. The action within the panels is silent; no character participating in the visual action is granted a voice. It is not immediately clear who is speaking, though parts of the dialogue suggest that they are soldiers—or at least have experience of combat, as shown when one voice asks, “You never saw a kid toss a grenade into a handful of soldiers?” (Murray and Lomax 5). The discussion outlines the aftermath of the massacre, Ridenhour’s letter-writing campaign, and the courts-martial. As the visuals show Mỹ Lai burning, one speaker asks, “Why is Mỹ Lai a war crime and Nagasaki isn’t?” (13). Neither speaker offers an answer.

<sup>2</sup> “Underground comics (also underground comix): (noun) adult comics that emerged in the United States in the 1960s that were published independently of and in reaction to the mainstream publishing sphere and encouraged a loosening of formal and thematic restrictions of the dominant mainstream comics publishing industry, such comics were exempt from the comics code and other forms of traditional industry censorship” (Pedri 102).

<sup>3</sup> The “Manson Family Murders” are also referred to as the “Tate-LaBianca Murders.” Across two nights in August 1969, seven people were murdered by members of a cultish group nicknamed “The Family.” The victims’ names are Sharon Tate (whose unborn child, Paul, also died), Jay Sebring, Abigail Folger, Wojciech Frykowski, Steven Parent, Leon LaBianca, and Rosemary LaBianca.

The opening scene that presents the massacre is presented in natural coloration and without censor. In one full-page panel, American soldiers shoot a group of Vietnamese civilians at close range, and blood sprays from their falling bodies. The page is visually arresting as the image of bleeding bodies fills it, but it is a bordered panel—the image is contained within a frame and not presented as a bleed that reaches the edge of the page. Bleeds are often used to give a sense of endlessness in an image. Adding the frame contains it and presents it as a snapshot of time, a contained event, like a photograph. There is little focus on the Americans themselves. For example, the image depicts body parts of soldiers, often wielding a gun, but few faces. At one point we see an inset panel of a man lighting a cigarette; the caption makes it clear that this is supposed to be Lt. Calley, and his head is bowed to the flame of his lighter. In the background, civilians are being shot in a drainage ditch. Where American faces are shown, they are front-facing, with little emotion visible in their expression. In several panels which show Calley facing forward, the brim of his helmet casts a shadow over his eyes. The half-obscuring of his face is sinister, drawing on *noir* aesthetics to suggest nefarious deeds through the obscuring of the eyes in shadow. The same effect is seen in his “mugshot” on the cover of a newspaper shown later in the comic.

As the conversation between the two speakers reaches the unanswered question of war crimes, the diegetic level shifts and the speakers enter the visual plane: two soldiers in Saigon, looking at a newsstand and walking to a bar, still in conversation. It is only when we are several pages into the story that the reader realizes that the discussion is between two soldiers on leave (known as “R&R” in military slang) in Saigon several years later. The suggestion is that this story is set on the day after Calley received a presidential pardon in early 1974. The way that these two American soldiers describe the event is unambiguously anti-Calley. The soldiers’ dialogue and their facial expressions indicate their outrage at the Mỹ Lai Massacre. For example, at one point, one soldier says that Calley is “America’s most beloved war criminal... [he] was doin’ his job” (Murray and Lomax 18). The other replies, with no sense of irony, “since when is shooting unarmed children part of the job of being an American soldier?” (19). The discussion between the two soldiers asks whether Calley was right to act as he did, whether he is the only one to blame, and what the proper moral response to the massacre is: there is no answer to these questions. This lack of answer mimics the response of the American public. Many Americans *did* support Calley; several state governors publicly disagreed with his sentencing. The governor of Alabama, George Wallace, petitioned President Nixon for a pardon. A 1971 Gallup poll of the American public found that 79 percent disagreed with the verdict against Calley (“Poll”). Most of those who were against Calley were in the military, though there were many perspectives here, too, as shown in the discussion within “Burn.”



There are two storylines running in parallel in this section of the narrative. First, the conversation between the two soldiers as they enter a bar and drink beer, as just described. Second, outside in the pouring rain, a monk has taken a seat cross-legged on the floor outside the bar. He is accompanied by a gas canister, dousing himself in it. The heavy rain makes it impossible for him to light a match. The crowd gathering outside brings the soldiers out so that they can watch the self-immolation of the monk. Across two pages of the comic, the reader watches him flicking his lighter, trying to get it to catch light in the pouring rain. He sets himself alight as the crowd screams and cries. The end of the comic sees the two soldiers turn and walk away from the burning body. One soldier says, “[b]ut in the end, the Mỹ Lai Massacre and William Calley, it’s so much smoke and flame [...] just like our friend here [...]. It’ll eventually burn itself out” (Murray and Lomax 30).

The choice to die by immolation, as Thích Quảng Đức famously did on a Saigon street on 11 June 1963, is a conscious choice of protest. Thích Quảng Đức was the first—but certainly not the last—to die by self-immolation in protest of the war’s many long-reaching political tendrils. Though this particular act was not an explicit act of anti-war protest, it *was* protesting political machinations that were put in place because of the installation of the U.S.-supported government. In the aftermath, the act became an anti-war protest by the readings and messages that were imprinted upon it. The Malcolm Browne photograph of Thích Quảng Đức’s death is among the most famous and powerful images of protest taken during the war in Vietnam and it featured on the cover of Rage Against the Machine’s first album. This album was released in 1992, shortly before the publication of *The Nam* #75. The cover of the comic shows the monk on fire, playing on the fame of the original photograph and, I suggest, the popularity of the RATM album.

Several issues arise from this rendering of the image of the burning monk. The first is that it cannot be put in conversation with what happened in Mỹ Lai. One was a protest, a defiant and definite act that was chosen personally by a willing participant. The other was a massacre in which many hundreds of innocent people died and had no say in the matter. There is no act of protest on their behalf; it was just murder. The choice to die is present for the monk. But it was not present in Mỹ Lai. Thus, in using the “burning monk” in this context, it is silencing all of those who did self-immolate in protest, and it creates a false equivalency. It is a patent misunderstanding of what happened on the street corner in 1963 and in the hamlet in 1968. Furthermore, by the time this comic is set in 1974, there were hardly any protest immolations. Most of them had taken place in 1963 and 1964, and the protest was against the Diệm Regime and the persecution of Buddhists.<sup>4</sup> It was not strictly an anti-war protest, although, of course, the war was a large part of how the regime had been installed and was being kept in place. The belief that the protest was purely about American intervention and the American

4 The Buddhist Crisis happened in South Vietnam between May 8 and November 1963. The period was characterized by political and religious tensions between Buddhist monks (on behalf of the Buddhist majority in the country) and the pro-Catholic Diệm Regime, beginning with a protest against the Regime’s ban on the Buddhist flag and ending with Diệm’s assassination.

presence in the country is false. And the use of the burning monk in this comic to suggest that his protest has something to do with Calley and Mỹ Lai is disingenuous.

It decontextualizes an incredibly famous photograph, a powerful act of protest, and instead makes it an ahistorical image of atrocity that is missing all context of what was really going on. It is not so much that the monk's death is being used for different purposes, but that it is silencing the original protest in trying to make a new protest out of a similar act, while relying on the iconic weight of the photograph of Thích Quảng Đức for its impact. Furthermore, in ending the comic with the punchline "it'll eventually burn itself out," it further decontextualizes both the image and the act and suggests that it is purely included for the punchline.

The double page spread in which this monk commits his act carries tremendous visual power. On the verso page, two tiers of thin panels contain images of the lighter being flicked on and off, while the rain and the tears on the monk's face merge, along with the petrol that has just been poured over him. On the recto page, the gutter is deep pink. A frameless panel at the bottom of the page shows the monk burning bright white, in sharp contrast to the background. While he burns, text boxes show the voice of the American soldier:

Nobody in America wants to take the blame [...]. Not Calley [...]. Not the officers above him [...]. Not the country he was 'defending,' not even the president. Nobody to blame. Nobody did nothing wrong. (Murray and Lomax 29)

There is a clear distinction between what is being said about Calley and the massacre on the one hand, and about the act of immolation on the other. The dereliction of responsibility for the massacre contrasted with the visceral self-directed death creates a disjunction that both is deeply affective and makes clear the self-centered nature of the American response: there is little consideration for the impact on the Vietnamese people, only for the American military.

"Burn" accomplishes two things. First, it creates a way for the series to discuss Mỹ Lai, and to do so without involving any character directly involved in the event itself. Second, in giving the "narrator" role to two soldiers, it circumvents the problem of the public opinion of Calley. He was, at the time of his arrest, popular with the public and the general feeling was that he deserved to be released and pardoned: he was either following orders or was being treated as the military's whipping boy. A poll in 1971 published in the *New York Times* "showed that 77 per cent believed Lieutenant Calley was singled out for court-martial and punishment although the Mỹ Lai incident involved others including his superior officers" ("Poll"). Even stronger feeling is shown in "one survey of citizens in Minnesota in which forty-nine percent of respondents believed that the Mỹ Lai story was false" (Cookman 160). By the time this

comic was published in 1992, this attitude had changed. At the time of the massacre and subsequent trial, the harshest opinions of Calley were held by veterans and active service members, as “Burn” demonstrates. There is a curious tension in responses to Calley’s crimes; while it is highly likely that he was used as a scapegoat by the military, this does not absolve him of responsibility. “Burn” offers no clarity on this opinion, nor does it explicitly state where the comic’s creators stand on the matter, but the characters’ discussions give the reader enough information to decide for themselves.

Within the same issue, a later arc titled “Tragedy: The M̃y Lai Incident” recounts the story as told by army photographer Ron Haeberle. Haeberle is brought into a discussion room with two army investigators and a projector. They show him his pictures; he is asked to describe what happened when he was taking them and his understanding of the way the massacre played out. There is no break in the conversation at any point: Haeberle answers the questions put to him without hesitation or verbal corrections. Because Haeberle had taken the photographs with his personal camera equipment, he owned the rights to them. The panels switch between the faces of the men, cast in a blue-yellow light from the projector, and redrawn images of the photographs themselves, rendered in natural color; the film in Haeberle’s personal Nikon shot color photographs, while the army-issued Leica shot black and white. As he talks through his pictures, it becomes clear that he was confusedly trying to decide what to do during the massacre. Haeberle states, “[t]his was my first search and destroy mission. I remember wondering if this was the norm” (Murray and Lomax 38). However, despite the uncertainty and confusion of what happened around him, he remained professional and unemotional. At one point, he says:

A Spec-5, who rode in that morning with Charlie Co was as confused as I was. He was a combat reporter for the 11th Brigade, and we spent quite some time trying to decide if what we were witnessing was a war crime or not. [...] After about two weeks of soul searching, we decided to say nothing about what we’d witnessed. (40)

It beggars belief that Haeberle could honestly believe that what he had witnessed was *not* a war crime, but also speaks honestly to the way in which this atrocity was covered up. As Cookman argues, the response was “understandable given the cherished myth of the perfectly balanced American warrior [...] either the violence at M̃y Lai was grossly exaggerated or simply did not occur” (Cookman 160). The final page of this short arc has no speech bubbles and instead includes captions, which state the number of soldiers charged with the massacre and the treatment received by Calley. The final panel of the comic shows Haeberle sitting in a chair, cast in blue light, looking despondent. The caption reads, “Sergeant Ronald L. Haeberle is never charged” (Murray and Lomax 41).

Why is this arc included here? It is very uncommon for *The 'Nam* to include "real" people as active speaking characters in the series. The photographs of the massacre taken by Haeberle became a central part of the courts-martial and the massive public outcry. Not only are these images of vital importance to the conclusion of the events of the Mỹ Lai Massacre, but they are also among the most widely circulated and emotionally impactful images of the entire conflict. Their inclusion here not only serves to authenticate the narrative of the massacre that *The 'Nam* puts forward, but also to demonstrate the methods that were used by the military in the aftermath. The single-panel renderings of the photographs, some in close-up, sit next to the unnaturally lit faces of the investigators. The differences in coloration make the photographs appear more realistic; the coming together of the two creates a harsh visual effect that is uncomfortable to view. In relation to the excessively blue panels, the photographs draw the eye. These panels are both visually compelling and horrific.

*The 'Nam's* framing of the Mỹ Lai Massacre circumvents the problem of having direct character involvement with the events. As *The 'Nam* mimics the tour of duty in the way it cycles new characters in and out of country, these are characters that the readers will have been familiar with for some time. Having a character directly involved in this massacre would necessitate asking complex moral questions, as well as flatly contradicting the historical narrative. Furthermore, delaying the series' engagement with the massacre until after Calley's pardon not only avoids the problem of direct character involvement, but it also gives an opportunity for a perspective to be superimposed on the narrative. We read the narrative through the eyes of a service member. As suggested in "Tragedy: The Mỹ Lai Incident," it was the veterans and service members who wanted the harsher punishment for Calley; this is made plain in "Burn." It is made most clear when he is referred to as "America's most beloved war criminal."

Unfortunately, this unequivocal anti-war comment is then confused through its conflation with the image of the burning monk. What could have been a massively important discussion of unspoken atrocity at the hands of the Americans becomes something hugely different—an ahistorical pastiche of protest imagery that, in attempting to make one big point, destroys others. The creative team for *The 'Nam* was aware of their readership. The comic was created within the guidelines of the Comics Code Authority (therefore banning swearing, drug use, and gore, among other things) in order to appeal to a wider age range of readers, aimed mainly at teenage boys (Young 76). However, it was with older male readers that the comic found its key readership demographic. Many of these readers were likely to be veterans of the war, but not all, so putting the anti-Calley rhetoric into the mouth of a soldier is a risky move as it could have alienated some readers. However, as this is an opinion that many soldiers *did* hold, it speaks more to the "truthfulness" of the series

and not the opinions of the creative team. For the analysis of my second case study, the narrative of Mý Lai is placed into a different war context altogether.

### Mý Lai in France

I now move to my second case study within this article: *Our Army at War* #233. This DC series is among the longest-running of all war comics, published from 1952 to 1977, and Sgt. Rock is one of the most famous fictional American soldiers to fight in the Second World War. The character first appeared in *G. I. Combat* #68 (January 1959), before moving to *Our Army at War* #81 in April 1959, where he is joined by his unit, Easy Company; it is never made clear which U.S. Army infantry regiment Easy Company belongs to. Given that *Our Army at War* is primarily a Second World War series, readers would not expect to find an issue that deals with Mý Lai, but it does make an appearance, albeit in a circuitous manner. Mý Lai makes its appearance in the guise of the French town of Alimy during WW II and not within Vietnam or the Vietnam War at all.<sup>5</sup>

In the story arc “Headcount,” Rock recounts the events of Easy Company’s tenure in this small “enemy-held” town. As the story opens, soldiers from the company are carrying the deceased body of Pt. Johnny Doe on a stretcher. A senior officer announces: “We are here... to pay our last respects to Pt. Johnny Doe! It was his outstanding heroism that resulted in the capture of this enemy held town... Alimy!” (Kanigher and Kubert 1). The next panel immediately undercuts this announcement, as Sgt. Rock states:

[I am] here... to tell you the story behind Johnny Doe’s “outstandin’ heroism.” Y’see... a medal’s got two sides! I’m goin’ to tell you the gut-truth... The underside of Johnny Doe’s decoration! (1)

In a flashback, we receive the story of Doe, a renegade young man obsessed with guns, who takes his military role especially seriously. At one point, while enemy soldiers are surrendering, Doe shoots them down. When asked if he is responsible, he replies, “sure I killed ’em... That’s my job” (Kanigher and Kubert 5). Doe moves through his duties with an insouciance and a vague adherence to military regulations that borders on treasonous. Narrating the story, Sergeant Rock goes on to say that Doe volunteers for every patrol and shoots at presumed enemy targets with unrestrained enthusiasm.

As the story reaches its climax, Easy Company enters Alimy and is met with a barrage of gunfire. As Rock begins to organize a search mission, Doe climbs up on a roof. Within the building, a voice calls out: “Americaine... d-do not shoot! We are being held hostage! We are women and children!” (Kanigher and Kubert 11). Rather than listen to the screaming woman, Doe believes that these are Nazis who are trying

<sup>5</sup> Alimy is an anagram of Mý Lai. On the front page, the name of the town is prominently displayed which I would argue serves to emphasize the wordplay for all readers.

to avoid capture and decides to throw an "egg" (a grenade) down the chimney. Just as Doe is about to throw the grenade down the chimney and blow up the entire building, he is shot. In three uniform panels, the action plays out in close-up images. Doe raises the grenade; Rock shouts at him to stop; a gun barrel shoots Doe from the roof. It is not clear who is holding the gun; the reader does not know if it is Sgt. Rock's gun.

The final image of the arc asks, "Was Johnny Doe a murderer or a hero? That's one question you'll have to decide for yourselves!" (Kanigher and Kubert 12). The image shows the deceased soldier covered in a tarpaulin with just his boots visible. The suggestion here is that Johnny Doe is a renegade who is hell-bent on killing Nazis and sees this as his sole job. Indeed, this is not technically wrong. Part of the job of the American soldier in the Second World War was indeed to protect civilians from enemy forces, including the Nazis. However, Doe does so while also racking up a vast number of civilian casualties, and with no regard for the rules of engagement or the orders of his commanding officers.

The reader can draw a parallel between Doe and Calley, despite the disparity in rank and role within the company; the suggestion that the two men's actions are seen as comparable is clear. Ultimately, this comic asks readers to decide whether the actions of Doe are heroic or murderous; within the comic it is left unanswered. That said, there is an overwhelming implication, through the character of Rock, that it is murder without due cause. Indeed, as the cover image asks, "does any GI deserve a medal for murder?" (Kanigher and Kubert). Doe dies and is marked as a hero. Here, the story ends, and the reader is left to infer that no action is taken to investigate the events. The official American line then becomes one of American military normalcy—soldiers doing what is expected. Although in the case of Mỹ Lai, from the outset, many doubted this narrative and stood against it, as Sgt. Rock does. In this respect, we may see him as a proxy for (and composite of) such men as Hugh Thompson, Jr., and Ronald Ridenhour.<sup>6</sup>

The link between these two events—the massacre at Mỹ Lai and the aborted mass killing at Alimay—is problematic. The Vietnam War and the Second World War have little in common. The European theater of the Second World War was at the time, and remains, one of the most often covered conflicts in comics; it is among the easiest wars to frame in the light of the Manichaean dualism of good versus evil. The enemy is clearly marked. And both sides engage in specific iconography and visual codes that make for striking clarity in storytelling. In terms of visual representation, the Second World War works well on the page and screen. The enemy is clearly demarked by his uniform and thick "Germanic" accent; he is typically blond, fair-skinned, and icy in his demeanor. They are undoubtedly evil, given to violence and acts of extreme inhumanity. This figure is probably most easily summed up in the character of the almost cartoonish evil SS officer Hans Landa in *Inglourious Bastards* (2009).

<sup>6</sup> Thompson was a helicopter pilot who tried to stop the events in Mỹ Lai; though he was not successful directly, he was able to give accurate and damning testimony in the courts-martial. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross in 1969. Ridenhour was not present on the day but heard about the massacre during his tour. He started a one-man investigation into the events of that day, collecting witness statements and collating information, before submitting it to President Richard Nixon, five officials at the State Department, and twenty-four members of Congress.

Moreover, when it comes to the Second World War, it is extremely hard to argue that both sides were equally at fault. Indeed, it is probably the easiest conflict to label a “just war.”<sup>7</sup> The war in Vietnam, however, is both a war against colonialism and civil war, albeit with international intervention for both sides. The boundaries between enemies are blurred. Bringing together these two distinct conflicts and trying to see them as comparable through the actions of Johnny Doe / William Calley and the town of Alimy / Mỹ Lai yet again creates a false equivalence. The Second World War remains a key focus for American comics, precisely *because* it is so easy to render it upon the page and to create narratives that fit with the “good vs. evil” framework that is central to many of the key genres of the form, such as superheroes and crime. Vietnam remains a difficult conflict to cover in comics because it does not fit these frameworks, and any attempt to force it to fit leads to ahistoricity.

Finally, this rendering of Mỹ Lai plays into the “one bad apple” trope. A common reading of the massacre sees Calley as the “bad apple” and the rest of Charlie Company as swept up in the action and going along with his decisions because of his leadership role, rather than standing against what was being done. The suggestion in the Sgt. Rock arc, with the death of Johnny Doe, is that all it takes for a bad man with a gun to be stopped is a good man with a gun. Indeed, we know that this is not the case and that humanity’s relationship to atrocity and the occurrence of such acts is far more complicated and situational. To conflate Calley and Doe—to suggest that Calley was the “bad apple”—removes all agency and responsibility from both his superior officers and the soldiers who served under him. Doe does not have similar connections—he is the renegade who acts based solely on his own decisions. The *Our Army at War* understanding of Mỹ Lai through Alimy condenses the events to remove these difficult connections and to create a story that simply does not work as a reimagining of the massacre because the contexts and relationships are too different.

## Conclusion

What do these two case studies tell us about the way the Mỹ Lai Massacre is remembered and represented in comics? We may think of it as an extraordinary event within the fuller trajectory of the Vietnam War, but this is not the case. As Oliver writes, “[i]n Vietnam, horrors were often routine” (11). Despite the war being broadcast into the homes of millions of American news viewers, this did not mean that what was shown was the raw, unfiltered truth. Atrocities committed against the Vietnamese were not of any particular interest to American journalists, so press coverage heavily favored stories of American service members. Though this may make sense—that television news audiences would be more interested in their own people—the erasure of the Vietnamese from their own war is central to creating a U.S.-centric view of the war,

<sup>7</sup> See Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*; Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*.

condensing the complex and long-running war against colonialism to a twee battle of "us versus them."

And if we see comics as a barometer of social feeling and a mediator of "the truth of war"—if not based on the beliefs of the creators, then certainly on their belief of what would sell in the U.S. market—then what narrative is being put forward? We see White cis male soldiers from lower socio-economic backgrounds engaging in camaraderie and the "typical" masculine bonding of brothers in arms. They are, overall, decent men: not monsters, nor war criminals. An event like Mỹ Lai complicates this narrative massively because it is an atrocity, a war crime, and an event in which Americans performed astounding evils against civilians. There is no way to repackage this to remove the atrocity, so, instead, narratives that discuss the massacre as a discrete event within the comic generally downplay and soften it. Where there is a story that engages with Mỹ Lai, there is a "bad apple": William Calley and Johnny Doe both occupy this role. Their actions are individual evil and youthful folly, not representative of the wider actions of the U.S. military. Indeed, the wider military is absolved of responsibility. The event is depicted as an aberration and an atrocity—but only because of one single individual.

More generally, however, we can see that there is an erasure of this event from the official war narrative put forward in U.S.-published comics about the war. In approximately five hundred individual comics that directly discuss the war in Vietnam, there are only three that discuss Mỹ Lai; none of these do so "head on." U.S.-perpetrated war crimes do not fit the narrative that comics publishers want to put forward, and so they are conveniently erased. As Oliver writes,

[w]ith the victims of atrocity essentially excluded from the culture, there were no wounds on display or spectacles of bereavement and loss to chasten its inclination to incorporate such crimes into the standard Bildungsroman of the US soldier in Vietnam, to project the (rarely original) wisdom acquired as a result as an equitable return upon the killing of innocent life. (235)

The massacre is one among many: a synecdoche for the violence enacted by the U.S. military upon all Vietnamese people. And as with all other massacres and U.S. war crimes in Vietnam comics, it may be conspicuous by its absence, but for the fact that these comics are not about the "Vietnam War," but rather "America at war in Vietnam."

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