

Vietnam atrocities revealed in report

The Boston Globe

Elite unit said to kill hundreds of civilians

By Associated Press | October 20, 2003

TOLEDO, Ohio -- An elite unit of American soldiers mutilated and killed hundreds of unarmed villagers over seven months in 1967 during the Vietnam War, and an Army investigation was closed with no charges filed, The Blade reported yesterday.

Soldiers of the Tiger Force unit of the Army's 101st Airborne Division dropped grenades into bunkers where villagers -- including women and children -- hid, and shot farmers without warning, the newspaper reported. Soldiers told The Blade that they severed ears from the dead and strung them on shoelaces to wear around their necks.

The Army's 4 1/2-year investigation, never before made public, was initiated by a soldier outraged at the killings. The probe substantiated 20 war crimes by 18 soldiers and reached the Pentagon and White House before it was closed in 1975, The Blade said.

William Doyle, a former Tiger Force sergeant now living in Willow Springs, Mo., said he killed so many civilians in 1967 he lost count.

"We didn't expect to live. Nobody out there with any brains expected to live," he told the newspaper. "The way to live is to kill, because you don't have to worry about anybody who's dead."

In an eight-month investigation, The Blade reviewed thousands of classified Army documents, National Archive records, and radio logs, and interviewed former members of the unit and relatives of those who died.

Tiger Force, a unit of 45 volunteers, was created to spy on forces of North Vietnam in South Vietnam's central highlands. The Blade said it is not known how many Vietnamese civilians were killed.

Records show at least 78 were shot or stabbed, the newspaper said. Based on interviews with former Tiger Force soldiers and Vietnamese civilians, it is estimated the unit killed hundreds of unarmed people, The Blade said.

Army spokesman Joe Burtas said yesterday that only three Tiger Force members were on active duty during the investigation. He said their commanders, acting on the advice of military attorneys, determined there was not enough evidence for successful prosecution.

The only way to prosecute the soldiers was under court-martial procedures, which apply only to active military members, Burtas said.

He also cited a lack of physical evidence and access to the crime scene, since a number of years had passed. He would not comment on why the military did not seek out the evidence sooner. Investigators took 400 sworn statements from witnesses, Burtas said. Some supported each other and some conflicted, he said.

According to The Blade, the rampage began in May 1967. No one knows what set it off. Less than a week after setting up camp in the central highlands, soldiers began torturing and killing prisoners in violation of US military law and the 1949 Geneva Conventions, the newspaper said.

Sergeant Forrest Miller told Army investigators the killing of prisoners was "an unwritten law." Other soldiers

said they sought revenge in the villages after unit members were killed and injured during sniper and grenade attacks.

Soldiers often cited conflicting views of commanders as a reason they killed unarmed people. Some commanders told investigators that civilians could be targeted in certain circumstances; others said they could never be attacked. During the Army's investigation, 27 soldiers said severing ears from dead Vietnamese became routine.

"There was a period when just about everyone had a necklace of ears," former platoon medic Larry Cottingham told investigators.

The atrocities carried out by the unit came just months before the killing of about 500 Vietnamese civilians by an Army unit in 1968 at My Lai.

In the years after that, top military officials promised to take war crime accusations seriously. But records from the Tiger Force case show that did not happen, The Blade said.

The newspaper found that commanders knew about the platoon's atrocities and, in some cases, encouraged the soldiers to continue the violence. Two soldiers who tried to stop the attacks were warned by their commanders to remain quiet before transferring to other units, according to military records.

The newspaper also said Army investigators learned about the atrocities in 1971 but took a year to interview witnesses. Two investigators pretended to look into the allegations while encouraging soldiers to keep quiet, soldiers told The Blade.

Four military legal specialists who reviewed the Army's final report for the newspaper questioned the case's abrupt end.

"There should have been a [military grand jury] investigation of some kind done on this," said H. Wayne Elliott, a retired Army officer who teaches military law at the University of Virginia. "I just can't believe this wasn't a pretty high-profile thing in the Pentagon."

Former platoon members still could be prosecuted or sanctioned by the Army, but legal specialists say that's unlikely because of the time that has elapsed.

Part of the unit's mission was to force villagers to move to refugee centers so they could not grow rice to feed the enemy. Many refused to go to the centers, which resembled prisons and lacked food.

"They wanted to stay on their land. They took no side in the war," recalled Lu Thuan, 67, a farmer, sitting in his home in the Song Ve Valley.

The soldiers began burning villages to force the people to leave, The Blade said.

Kieu Trac, now 72, recalled watching helplessly as his father fell near a rice paddy. "All they were doing was working in the fields," he said, pointing to the spot where his father and the others were killed. "They thought the soldiers would leave them alone."

Of the 43 former platoon members interviewed by The Blade, a dozen expressed remorse for either committing or failing to stop the atrocities, and 10 have been diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder. ■