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Bill Nemitz: My Lai exhibit puts us on the other side of our guns

The exhibit focuses in part on the atrocities committed by American troops in the Vietnamese hamlet on March 16, 1968.



Charles Hedrick, of Nobleboro, takes in the Veterans for Peace My Lai Memorial at Portland Media Center on Saturday. Hedrick, who served in the Navy and Naval Reserve during peace-time years between the wars in Korea and Vietnam, said the exhibit was powerful. "It's incredible," he said. "This is something we should never forget." Staff photo by Ben McCanna.

Scroll through the Pentagon's website "The United States of America Vietnam War Commemoration" and you'll eventually come upon five objectives behind the \$63 million, 10-year effort to pay tribute to a war most Americans would rather forget.

The goals mention the American soldiers who fought in Vietnam, the U.S. government officials who served there, the medical, scientific and technological advances that grew out of the war effort, the allies who fought alongside the United States for a decade and, of course, the "contributions on the home front by the people of the United States."

Nowhere, not once, is there a mention of the Vietnamese people.

“We are privileged enough to go to war in other people’s countries,” Mac MacDevitt said Friday evening as the first visitors trickled into the opening of this weekend’s My Lai Memorial Exhibit in downtown Portland. “And often we talk about our own suffering. But part of the cost of war is what happened to the people who lived there.”



Maine is the eighth stop on the exhibit’s two-year national tour. MacDevitt launched it late last winter, on the 50th anniversary of the My Lai massacre, to counterbalance the Department of Defense’s ongoing tribute to a war that ended in defeat and, in the process, tore the country apart.

Sponsored locally by the Maine Chapter of Veterans for Peace, the exhibit focuses in part on the unspeakable atrocities committed by American troops on March 16, 1968, in and around the tiny hamlet of My Lai near what was then the border between North and South Vietnam.

According to the Vietnamese government, 504 civilians, many of them women and children, were slaughtered that day by soldiers from the 23rd Infantry Division’s Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment.

After journalist Seymour Hersh reported his way through a military cover-up and broke the My Lai story in late 1969, the Army charged 26 soldiers with offenses ranging from rape to murder.

But only one, 2nd Lt. William L. Calley, was actually tried and convicted. Initially sentenced to life imprisonment, he would go on to serve only 3½ years under house arrest before his sentence was commuted and he was sent on his way.

One of the exhibit panels recalls the words of Pfc. Paul Meadlo, who served under Calley and spoke to Mike Wallace on CBS in November 1969.

“They were begging and saying, ‘No. No,’ ” said Meadlo, later identified as one of the main shooters along with Calley. “And their mothers were hugging their children, but they kept on firing – well, we kept right on firing. They was waving their arms and begging.”

The horrors of that day know no bounds:

Hundreds of villagers, none of them combatants, herded into a long irrigation ditch, only to be shot with machine guns and pelted with hand grenades.

Women and girls gang-raped, murdered and then mutilated.

Calley, according to eyewitnesses, chased after one young boy trying to crawl out of the ditch, threw him back in, raised his weapon and shot the toddler point-blank.

Three Americans – a helicopter crew led by Maj. Hugh Thompson – landed their aircraft late that morning and tried to stop the carnage. Thompson went so far as to stand between the soldiers from Charlie Company and a group of villagers, threatening to shoot his fellow Americans if they didn’t stand down.

Long before he was eventually dubbed a hero, Thompson would be vilified by American soldiers and civilians as the guy who sold out his own country.

Over the decades, many have denounced My Lai as the low point, by far, of the Vietnam era, a singular stain on our country’s honor.

But MacDevitt, a retired teacher and social worker who obtained a draft deferral because he simply couldn’t imagine participating in the war, thinks that characterization misses a much larger, equally important point.

“I see My Lai just as a lens,” he said. “Because we killed 2 million civilians in the course of the war.”

Thus, in addition to putting a microscope on My Lai, the exhibit extrapolates outward to the broader war, its other atrocities, the painful legacy left behind by Agent Orange, as well as the subsequent U.S. military forays into places like Iraq and Afghanistan.

MacDevitt's message: The United States invariably tells its war stories from the perspective of our men and women on the front lines. And, in the process, we often gloss over flawed and sometimes deceitful command-and-control systems that lead to such nightmares as My Lai or, more recently, Iraq's Abu Ghraib.

What we rarely do, MacDevitt said, is put ourselves in the place of the civilians caught in the crossfire and wonder, "What it is like for them when we do this?"

In other words, we don't get on the other side of our own guns?

"That's exactly it," he said. "Get on the other side of the gun and just try and see that these people aren't very different from me. If we really think we have to go to war in somebody else's country, our hearts should break."

Maybe you're old enough to remember My Lai. Maybe those memories have faded. Or maybe, selective as history can sometimes be, this is the first you've ever heard of the place.

Regardless, the My Lai Memorial Exhibit beckons one and all.

McDevitt still recalls the grandmother who showed up at the exhibit earlier this year with her two grandchildren in tow.

The children were around 7 and 10 – too young, by some people's standards, for the exhibit's more graphic elements. But the grandmother was insistent.

"She said, 'I want them to know about this,' " MacDevitt recalled. "And she walked through the whole thing with them. She talked with them."

We can only imagine what it was like for two young kids, safely under the wing of their grandmother, staring up at images of other young kids trapped in a world gone mad.

And we can only hope that they came away with the realization that war heroes don't always come in uniforms.

"For me, the heroes of My Lai were the mothers who stuffed their babies down in the ditch and lay on top of them to keep them quiet and then took the bullets," MacDevitt said. "They're the heroes."