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Tiger Force | Article published October 22, 2003
THE SERIES: Elite unit savaged civilians in Vietnam

c THE BLADE, 2003

It was an elite fighting unit in Vietnam - small, mobile, trained to kill.

Known as Tiger Force, the platoon was created by a U.S. Army engaged in a new kind of war - one defined by ambushes, booby traps, and a nearly invisible enemy.

Promising victory to an anxious American public, military leaders in 1967 sent a task force - including Tiger Force - to



(THE BLADE)

These Tiger Force soldiers fan out while patrolling the Song Ve Valley in a 1967 photo taken by a former platoon member. The unit committed an untold number of atrocities in the valley as part of a seven-month campaign of terror.

[ZOOM 1](#) | [ZOOM 2](#)

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Massacre story needs to be told

(Executive Editor commentary)

Spec. William Carpenter



This southeast Ohio

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native was a
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Sgt. Gerald Bruner



This former Tiger Force member and native of Colon, Michigan recorded a tape about his recollections of Vietnam in 1988.

He died in 1997.

MP3 Audio Files
[Describes village
attack](#)

 [Describes village
attack](#)

Sgt. William Doyle



This Tiger Force team leader currently lives in Missouri.

MP3 Audio Files
["The way to live
is to kill."](#)

 [Describes killing
farmers](#)

 [Describes rifle
misfiring](#)

fight the enemy in one of the most highly contested areas of South Vietnam: the Central Highlands.

But the platoon's mission did not go as planned, with some soldiers breaking the rules of war.

THE SERIES

DAY ONE

The farmers of the Song Ve Valley thought they would be safe. They were too old to serve in the military and not aligned with the North Vietnamese. But the farmers were wrong. Tiger Force soldiers killed farmers, villagers, and prisoners in the valley and across the Central Highlands in the longest series of war crimes of the Vietnam War.

DAY TWO

The cover-up began before the killing ended. And by the time the Army finished its investigation - which was sent to the Pentagon and the White House - no one was ever charged. A justice system that promised to prosecute war criminals ended up protecting them.

DAY THREE

Thirty-six years later, the reminders of Tiger Force's rampage through Quang Ngai province are everywhere, and the stories of their atrocities are still told by Vietnamese villagers. To this day, the shooting deaths evoke anger in those who survived the attacks - with some calling for the former American soldiers to be prosecuted.

DAY FOUR

Many former Tiger Force soldiers say they're haunted by their memories of the killings and mutilations of prisoners and unarmed villagers in 1967. Ten have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Some have turned to alcohol and drugs to ease their pain.

Women and children were intentionally blown up in underground bunkers. Elderly farmers were shot as they toiled in the fields. Prisoners were tortured and executed - their ears and scalps severed for souvenirs. One soldier kicked out the teeth of executed civilians for their gold fillings.

Two soldiers tried to stop the killings, but their pleas were ignored by commanders. The Army launched an investigation in 1971 that lasted 41/2 years - the longest-known war-crime investigation of the Vietnam conflict.

The case reached the highest levels of the Pentagon and the Nixon White House.

Investigators concluded that 18 soldiers committed war crimes ranging from murder and assault to dereliction of duty. But no one was charged.

Since the war ended, the American public has been fed a dose of movies fictionalizing the excesses of U.S. units in Vietnam, such as *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon*. But in reality, most war-crime cases focused on a single event, like the My Lai massacre.

The Tiger Force case is different. The atrocities took place over seven months, leaving an untold number dead - possibly several hundred civilians, former soldiers

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Map of Vietnam



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and villagers now say.

One medic said he counted 120 unarmed villagers killed in one month.

For decades, the case has remained buried in the archives of the government - not even known to America's most recognized historians of the war.

Until now.

Starting today and continuing over the next three days, The Blade will tell the platoon's troubling story.

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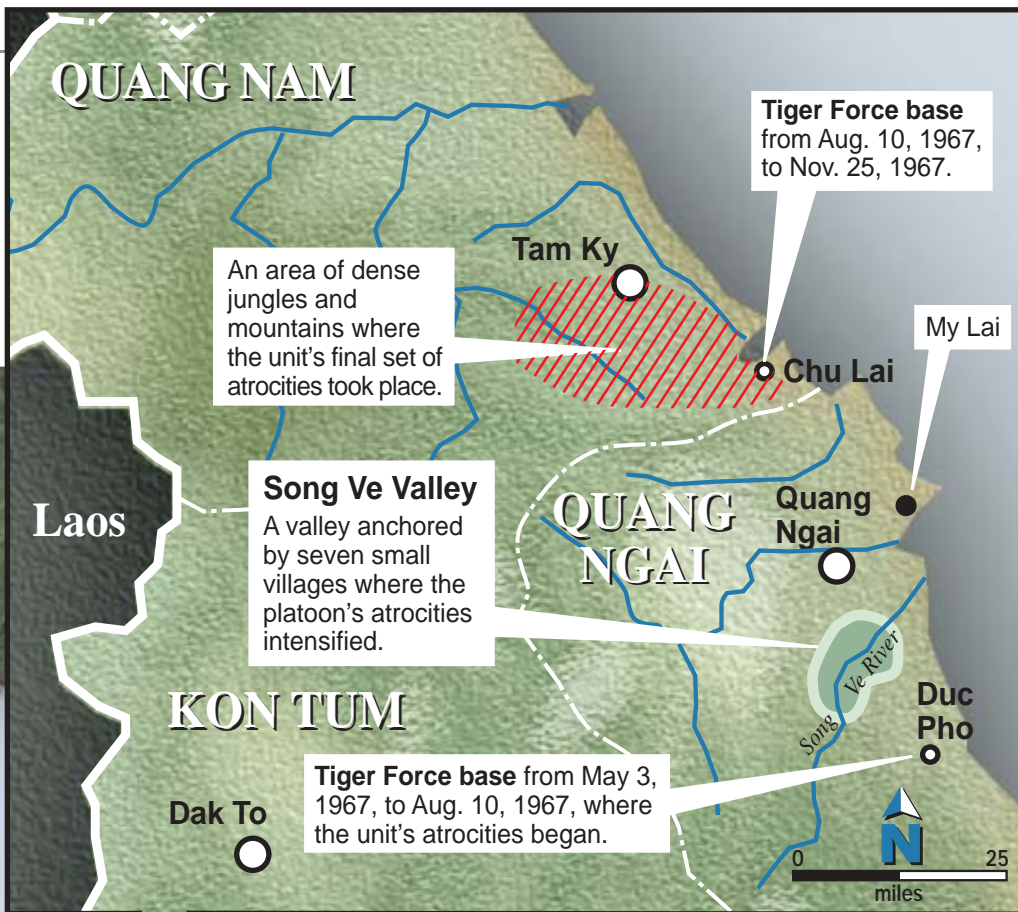
Trail of atrocities

From May through November, 1967, Tiger Force swept across the Central Highlands torching hamlets and rounding up villagers to send them to relocation camps. Those villagers who stayed behind became frequent targets, according to an eight-month Blade investigation.



The mission:

Fearing the North Vietnamese would take control of the Central Highlands and cut South Vietnam in two, Gen. William Westmoreland in February, 1967 created Task Force Oregon — made up of numerous Army units including Tiger Force — to clear out enemy troops and relocate civilians. As part of the 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry, Tiger Force arrived in Duc Pho on May 3 to begin a series of search-and-destroy missions that would last until Aug. 10. The unit then moved to Chu Lai to continue its operations.



Seven months of war crimes*:

- Government records show that those in red were substantiated by Army investigators.
- Those in blue were uncovered by The Blade through interviews with former Tiger Force soldiers and with villagers in Vietnam, or by reviewing Army investigative records never revealed to the American public.

MAY

- **May 6/ Song Ve Valley** • George Hatten mutilates dead Vietnamese.
- **May 8/ near Duc Pho** • After capturing and torturing a prisoner, soldiers order him to run and fatally shoot him.

JUNE

- **June/ Song Ve Valley** • Sgt. Terrance Kerrigan executes a prisoner.
- **June/ near Duc Pho** • Spec. Kenneth Green tortures and kills a bound prisoner.
- **June/ Song Ve Valley** • Soldiers kill an elderly man and place a grenade on his body to disguise him as an enemy.

JUNE – JULY

- **June-July/ near Duc Pho** • Pvt. Sam Ybarra and Spec. Kenneth Green capture, kill, and scalp an enemy soldier.
- **June-July/ near Duc Pho** • Pvt. Sam Ybarra kills and cuts off the ears of an unarmed 15-year-old boy.

JULY

- **July/ near Duc Pho** • Losing a bet that he can knock out a prisoner with one punch, Sgt. Robin Varney and two others kill the prisoner with a bayonet.
- **July/ Song Ve Valley** • Pvt. Sam Ybarra and Spec. Kenneth Green kill a prisoner instead of evacuating him.
- **July 18/ Song Ve Valley** • Sgt. William Doyle admits to killing a wounded Viet Cong fighter after the prisoner asks for water.
- **July 23/ Song Ve Valley** • Sgt. Harold Trout clubs Dao Hue, an elderly, unarmed carpenter, with his rifle and Lt. James Hawkins shoots Dao Hue in the face.
- **July 24/ Song Ve Valley** • An unarmed man is wounded while approaching the unit's night position. Sgt. Harold Trout fatally shoots the man.
- **July 27/ Song Ve Valley** • Soldiers execute two prisoners on the order of an officer.
- **July 28/ Song Ve Valley** • The platoon opens fire on 10 elderly, unarmed farmers, killing four. Others are injured.
- **July 28/ Song Ve Valley** • Soldiers stop a 12-year-old boy, Vo Tai Can, leading two unarmed, partially blind men. The boy is evacuated, but the soldiers execute the men.

AUGUST

- **Early August/ Song Ve Valley** • Lt. James Hawkins orders troops to fire on two unarmed, elderly women approaching camp. One woman is injured.

- **August/ near Chu Lai** • Unit members kill suspected Viet Cong fighter and then find the man's elderly father. Pvt. James Cogan wounds the father before another platoon member kills him.

- **August/ near Chu Lai** • Sgt. William Doyle shoots an unarmed teenager in the back after ordering him to leave. Sergeant Doyle also shoots a North Vietnamese prisoner assigned to the unit as an interpreter.

- **August/ near Chu Lai** • Soldiers drop grenades into three underground bunkers filled with Vietnamese men, women, and children.

- **August/ near Tam Ky** • Sgt. William Doyle shoots a farmer in the forearm, then orders troops to kill the man as he begs for his life. The man is executed.

- **Aug. 21/ near Chu Lai** • Soldiers tie up and torture a prisoner and tell him to run. He is fatally shot as he runs away.

- **Late August-September/ between Tam Ky and Chu Lai** • Pvt. Sam Ybarra and Spec. Kenneth Green sexually assault a 13-year-old girl before killing her.

NOVEMBER

- **November/ near Chu Lai** • After searching a village for weapons and finding none, exiting soldiers come under fire from a distant hillside. They return fire, and then turn their guns on the village, killing six civilians.

- **November/ location unknown** • Pvt. Sam Ybarra decapitates an infant in a village hut.

- **Nov. 11 - Nov. 21, Quang Nam province** • Tiger Force radio logs list 49 "Viet Cong" killed, but in 46 deaths no weapons are seized. Former platoon members now say that civilians were killed and radio log information was fabricated.

UNKNOWN

- **Unknown date/ Chu Lai** • Sgt. James Barnett executes a young mother on the order of Sgt. Harold Trout.

- **September to November/ unknown location** • Pvt. John Colligan shoots an unarmed, elderly Vietnamese man to test a present he had received — a 38-caliber handgun.

- **September to November/ near Tam Ky** • A soldier beheads one elderly man and medic Barry Bowman fatally shoots a wounded man in the same village.

Total known dead from Tiger Force atrocities: 81

Soldiers do not know how many people died in the bunkers, and several said they kept no count of what were widespread civilian deaths. Former medic Rion Causey said 120 were killed by his team during just one month.



*The four Geneva Conventions of 1949 prohibit the inhumane treatment of noncombatants — defined as civilians, prisoners, and enemy soldiers injured in battle. Noncombatants cannot be executed or treated cruelly. The wounded must be medically treated. Prisoners must be evacuated from the war zone. And enemy corpses may not be mutilated.