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Lewis Puller Autobiography

From *Fortunate Son: The Autobiography of Lewis B. Puller Jr.* (1991). Lewis Puller, a U.S. Marine who lost both of his legs and an arm in combat during the Vietnam War, felt that the My Lai episode stained the reputations of millions of honorable young men who had fought in Vietnam.

On November 12, 1970, at Fort Benning, Georgia, the court martial of Lieutenant William L. Calley, Jr., for the murder of civilians at My Lai began. The trial lasted for more than four months and was the focus of such intense media coverage that it became, in effect, a forum for debate over American involvement in Vietnam. Calley was portrayed by supporters of the war as a maverick acting alone and without orders, whose actions, brought on by the stress of prolonged combat and casualties in his own unit, were an aberration from the rules of engagement. The opposing viewpoint held that his actions, if not sanctioned by higher authority, were at least tolerated and were typical of the conduct of ground units in the war.

I was deeply offended by the notion that the hideous atrocities committed by Calley and his men were commonplace in Vietnam, an inevitable consequence of an ill-advised involvement in someone else's civil war. The men I had in combat, were, like any cross section of American youth, capable of good and evil, and I felt we all were, by implication, being branded as murderers and rapists. Throughout the proceedings the reportage seemed to me to accentuate the monstrous evil of a group of men gone amok without any effort to depict fairly the discipline and courage that existed along with the forces of darkness in most units.

Lieutenant Calley was ultimately found guilty of the premeditated murder of twenty-two civilians and sentenced to life imprisonment, but I felt his punishment could never right the evil he had done or the perceptions he helped foster of America's soldiers and Marines as bloodthirsty killers. At the end of the trial I wrote letters to several local newspapers protesting that it was unfair for the Calley case to have so influenced public opinion, but the grisly photographs of murdered civilians lying in a ditch at My Lai which had been so prominently displayed in newspapers across the country, spoke far more eloquently than my feeble words.

Source: Lewis Puller, "Fortunate Son: The Autobiography of Lewis B. Puller," in James Olson and Randy Roberts, *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 1998): 187-188.