

MY LAI –IN PERSPECTIVE

MY LAI A VILLAGE IN VIETNAM MAY REMIND SOME OF YOU OF HADITHA IN IRAQ. BOTH BECAME INFAMOUS FOR ALLEGED ATROCITIES –KILLING OF INNOCENT CIVILIANS-DURING BATTLE ACTIONS INVOLVING THE US ARMY IN THE FORMER AND THE MARINES IN THE LATTER. SIMILARITIES ABOUND BECAUSE OF THE NATURE OF THE TWO WARS. BOTH SMACKED OF COVER-UP AND MUCH SHOWED THE DIFFICULTY OF DETERMINING FRIEND FROM FOE, INNOCENTS FROM INSURGENTS. MY LAI TOOK PLACE IN MARCH OF 1968 IN VIETNAM AND RUINED THE CAREERS OF THE COMMANDING GENERAL, SAM KOSTER DOWN THROUGH THE RANKS TO THE PLATOON LEADER, 2D LT WILLIAM CALLEY WHO WENT TO PRISON VIA A GENERAL COURT MARTIAL. RECENTLY THE PRESS-REGISTER AIRED AN APOLOGY BY CALLEY, NOW FREED, IN A PRESENTATION IN COLUMBUS, GEORGIA AT A KIWANIS MEETING. HADITHA HAD DISCIPLINARY ACTION BUT THE JURY IS STILL OUT ON MUCH OF IT. LET ME SPEAK TO THE MY LAI INCIDENT.

IN EARLY 1968(JUST AFTER THE FAMOUS TET OFFENSIVE)I JOURNEYED WITH THE CRID(CAP ROK INFANTRY DIVISION)G3(OPERATIONS)-OUR COMBAT LIAISON UNIT WAS SUPPORTING THE ROKS-TO LEARN OF COMBAT ACTIONS BY THE AMERICAL DIVISION AS TO KILL RATIOS. BODY COUNT(AN UGLY EPIGRAM)WAS IN VOGUE FOR THE NUMBER HAPPY McNAMARA DEFENSE DEPARTMENT TO ASSESS WINNING OR LOSING, ETAL. WE WERE BRIEFED BY COLONEL ORAN HENDERSON(1ST BDE, 12TH INFANTRY) AND HE INFORMED OF A RECENT SEARCH AND DESTROY MISSION IN A HAMLET CALLED MY LAI. “QUITE SUCCESSFUL WITH A BODY-COUNT OF OVER 100 IN A ‘SEARCH AND DESTROY OPERATION; THOUGH HE LAMENTED THE MANY TIMES THIS HAMLET HAD BEEN ATTACKED, CLEARED, AND ONLY TO RETURN FINDING ANTI-PERSONNEL MINES ,PUNJI STICKS AND OTHER OBSTACLES. OFTEN, THE RESIDUE WAS THE OLD, THE LAME, THE WOMEN AND CHILDREN WITH NO FIGHTERS PRESENT.” IRONY HERE TEARS AT MY MIND.

UNDER GENERAL PETRAEUS, COUNTER-INSURGENCY BECAME AN ART FORM IN IRAQ. THE PLAN ASSUMED THE (SURROUNDING, SEIZING, CLEARING AND HOLDING OF THE AREA); UNITS REMAINED AND THE 'BAD GUYS' WERE KEPT OUT. OFTEN IN VIETNAM IT WAS MIXED AND MY LAI, TYPICAL OF FREQUENT ATTACKS LEADING TO LOSSES AND ANGRY RESPONSE BY ATTACKING AMERICANS. IRONY THEN WAS THE VERY EFFECTIVE MARINE COMBAT ACTION UNITS WHO REMAINED IN THE SEIZED HAMLETS THEREBY PROVIDING SECURITY AGAINST THE RETURN OF THE VIET CONG. ONE COULD ARGUE THIS TACTICAL PLAN HAS BEEN VERY SUCCESSFUL IN IRAQ.

EVERY WAR HAS ATROCITIES; INHERENT IS THE FACT WAR IS AN ATROCITY. I ADDRESSED THIS IN AN EARLIER ARTICLE EXPLAINING HOW THESE THINGS CAN HAPPEN EITHER ON PURPOSE OR BY ACCIDENT. TIME HAS CLOUDED THE MY LAI TRAGEDY –THE MOST GREIVIOUS BEING THE COVER-UP; HADITHA APPARENTLY SHARES IN THIS FACT AS WELL. AS A YOUNG ENLISTEE IN WWII, I WENT ON TO SERVE AS AN INFANTRY COMMANDER IN TWO MORE WARS AND MOST OF US ARE PROFESSIONAL AND HAVE AN HONOR CODE, YET CIRCUMSTANCES CAN THWART EVEN THE BEST OF INTENTIONS. IN THE CASE OF MY LAI AND HADITHA THEY SHOULD HAVE BEEN VIEWED CAREFULLY, A THOROUGH AFTER-ACTION REPORT CONDUCTED. A RESPONSIBLE COMMANDER SHOULD DO NO LESS. FOG OF WAR, HEAT OF ACTION, AND DEATH LURKING CAN ALTER ALL THIS.

AS I SAID IN MY EARLIER ARTICLE: "WE WHO HAVE FOUGHT IN WARS KNOW IT IS RARELY CHIVALROUS, OFTEN BRUTAL, SOMETIMES VINDICTIVE AND HAS MANY OF THE RUDIMENTS OF THE BLOOD-LETTING OF ROMAN GAMES, WHERE HUMANS WERE SACRIFICED VIA BATTLE WITH OTHER HUMANS AND/OR ANIMALS. A KILL OR BE KILLED CREDO."

AND YET, THERE IS HOWEVER, A HIGHER HONOR AND DECORUM MOST OF US PRACTICE.

