

*Tiger Force: A True Story of Men and War*, by Michael Sallah and Mitch Weiss, Little, Brown & Company: New York, May 2006, 416 pages, ISBN: 0316159972 (nonfiction) ISBN-13: 9780316159975 (general), \$25.95 (hardcover)




During the Vietnam War, “Tiger Force” was the code name of an elite platoon of the 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division. Tiger Force was intended to “outguerrilla the guerrillas,” scrapping the techniques of conventional warfare to take the fight to the enemy in the jungle. Along the way, it also scrapped the rules of war.

The battalion executive officer organized the 45-man volunteer force in 1966, and it became one of the war’s most highly decorated units, paying for its reputation with heavy casualties. In 1967, the Tiger Force platoon went on a seven-month rampage through South Vietnam’s central highlands that left more than 325 civilians dead—mostly children, women, and old men.

Unlike other elite units such as the Special Forces, Tiger Force was made up of a mixed lot, elite only in the fighting sense. Many had served jail time, and many Tiger Force veterans died young from cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, or suicide. Commanders set the tone, and Tiger Force leaders were close to psychopathic in their hatred for Vietnamese people, no matter what side they were supposed to be on. *It is a free-fire zone; if it moves, it is VC. Kill it!* And that they did. Most of the murdered Vietnamese appeared to be guilty only of being peasant farmers who didn’t want to leave their land.

The real atrocities began with the routine and relentless use of free-fire zones: 105- and 155-millimeter howitzer random harassment and interdiction fire; helicopter gunships; Puff, the Magic Dragon; fighter and attack jets and their napalm; the B-52 carpet bombing, etc., etc., ...

From 1971 to 1975, the Army mounted an investigation that documented the crimes. Our civilian leadership decided that “nothing beneficial” could result from prosecuting the platoon members or their leaders.

The atrocities in this book are as bad as My Lai. Basically, My Lai was a one-day incident where an Americal Division line outfit went berserk and killed somewhere around 500 people; these Tiger Force atrocities occurred over a period of months. Their commanders clearly knew what they were doing and encouraged it. How far up the ladder it went, I don’t know, but I wish I did. 

*Reviewed by Mr. Jeffrey L. Rosemann, an instructional systems specialist with the Officers Education Branch, Department of Training Development, United States Army Engineer School. A retired infantry Soldier, he also served as the 2d Infantry Division historian during the beginning of the 50th Anniversary of the Korean War.*