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Michael Sallah and Mitch Weiss, *Tiger Force: A True Story of Men and War*. New York: Little, Brown, 2006. Pp. xi, 403. ISBN 978-0-316-15997-5.

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Michael Sallah and Mitch Weiss won the Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Journalism in recognition for their newspaper reporting at the *Toledo Blade* that led to writing *Tiger Force: A True Story of Men and War*. It is an honor well deserved. Their book chronicles the painful story of a handful of American soldiers who terrorized two provinces of South Vietnam during 1967 and got away with it.

*Tiger Force* is a compelling story about bravery, cruelty, and artful dodging. In its carefully crafted pages, Sallah and Weiss prove once again that there is absolutely nothing more dangerous than a young soldier with a rifle or more elusive than a general prevaricating over a deed that he believes should never have been exposed to the light of day. This book could have been written about events in Iraq and Afghanistan today.

The authors' narrative is remarkable on many levels. Most notable to this reader is the sheer coincidence that I was a bit player in the saga. In 1968–69, my company—the 282<sup>nd</sup> Assault Helicopter Company, the fabled “Blackcats”—fought in some of the fiercest battles in Quang Ngai Province. Song Ve Valley, the scene of devastation in the book, was one of our gateways into the mountains to the west. Two of our helicopters were shot down in Quang Ngai Province with the loss of all on board during operations in early '68 after Tiger Force had moved farther north to Thua Thien Province for more of the same. The Blackcats were tasked with replacing Tiger Force with *Hac Bao*, the elite “Black Panther” South Vietnamese ranger company in every way as ruthless as its American counterpart. The Black Panthers continued pacifying the restive region in the inimitable manner of Tiger Force long after it was gone.

Eight years later, I briefly participated in the frustrating investigation that followed the demise of Tiger Force. I was among more than 100 faceless Army investigators who fanned out across the country to bring the alleged perpetrators to justice. Ultimately it was all for naught. By then, the Vietnam War was over and justice for the Vietnamese no longer a priority.

Almost thirty years later I worked for the late Colonel David H. Hackworth, the decorated Army officer who conceived Tiger Force and ordered it into action, a legacy that haunted him until his death. He wrote about it often later in his life. While these circumstances gave me certain unadorned insights, Sallah and Weiss have clarified for me the conditions that allowed the awful excesses of Tiger Force to happen.

The investigation first came to my attention on a cold Missouri day in 1974 when U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer Robert A. “Bob” Serafin opened his daily “distribution,” a huge packet of inquiries, orders, and regulations. A veteran of World War II, Serafin was the Special Agent-in-Charge of the Saint Louis Resident Agency of the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Command—universally known as “C.I.D.” In simplest terms he was a detective. That morning he received a document with a bright blue border on the cover

warning that its contents were classified. Serafin read it without comment. That afternoon he told our two-man investigative team to find former Sergeant William Doyle, a central figure in a cast of characters accused of despicable war crimes.

Although the report said Doyle was living somewhere in rural Missouri, our office never did discover exactly where. Even if we had exposed his whereabouts, Doyle would not have had to talk to us, since C.I.D. is a military investigative agency with no jurisdiction over civilians.

Doyle was accused of complicity in the murder of a baby Vietnamese girl. In *Tiger Force*, the crime is attributed to Private Sam Ybarra, a psychopath who used a knife to murder the child. I recall that the incident report at the time said Ybarra later decapitated her with an entrenching tool. Doyle not only knew of the incident, he encouraged such excesses, the reports claimed. According to both accounts, the child died so Ybarra could steal her brass necklace to wear on his wrist. In the parlance of the time, she had “souvenired” it to him. “Someday somebody will write a book,” Serafin later observed.

What grabbed Serafin’s attention so long ago and Sallah and Weiss’s in this book was the part of the investigation of Tiger Force initiated by then Private Gary Coy during an interview with a C.I.D. investigator. Exhibit One of the “Coy Allegation” was made on 3 February 1971; it is cited frequently in *Tiger Force*. In the beginning of his narrative, Coy tells investigators what he witnessed five years before, in an unnamed Song Ve Valley hamlet that his company had just overrun:

As we passed between the huts, I overheard two men arguing inside one of the huts. I stepped into the hut, I saw two or three bodies lying on the ground, one of the bodies was that of a woman. I also heard a baby crying .... The two men were arguing about taking the baby with them or leaving it in the hut.... [Later,] I stepped back into the hut. I didn’t hear the baby crying, and then I noticed that the baby’s throat had been cut and there was a lot of blood on its throat and front. I said, “What happened?” and one of the men that had been arguing said, “Sam did it” (364).

Coy’s revelation started an investigation that lasted until 1975.

The investigative case folder is voluminous. Each allegation is identified by the some 100 witnesses who made the incriminating statements that are the centerpieces of each report. The special agents who conducted the interviews and inquiries under the direction of Special Agent Gustav Apsey attached “exhibits” supporting their findings and conclusions. Collectively the agents’ accounts make up the complete investigation.

Sallah and Weiss present the witness accounts in horrific detail, using their testimony to indict a small unit of reputedly “elite” soldiers called “Tiger Force” that rampaged through southern I Corps in northern South Vietnam during 1967. Their specialty was supposed to be reconnaissance and intelligence gathering, but in fact it was cold-blooded murder.

For seven months, the men of Tiger Force wantonly slaughtered the Vietnamese peasants that populated the fertile fields of Song Ve and Que Son Valleys south and west of Quang Ngai City, the capital of the province of the same name. My company participated in many of the resettlement efforts the Americans somewhat cynically labeled “pacification” operations. Our job was to fly the newly created “refugees” to their new homes in barren

relocation camps close to the seashore. Little more than disgusting tent cities, they served best as incubators for future Viet Cong recruits.

For several weeks, we watched both American and Vietnamese soldiers prodding reluctant peasants from Quang Ngai Province at rifle point into our helicopters. One old woman forced by space limitations to sit next to me on the gunner's seat urinated with fright when we took off. Sitting with this terrified woman for thirty minutes provided a unique opportunity to reflect on the unfairness of life in a time of war. I have never forgotten it. Twenty-nine years later, Sallah and Weiss have revealed the unfortunate peasants' misery to the rest of the world.

When Special Agent Apsey—the unlikely hero of the book—was orchestrating his huge investigation into allegations of war crimes by Tiger Force soldiers, books and public acknowledgement were far from his mind. Everything revealed in the findings stained the honor of the U.S. Army. The brass wanted the story to remain a tightly held secret, but, at least among the soldiers who fought in I Corps between 1966 and 1968, Tiger Force was no secret. In fact it was a legend. My own company often encountered evidence of their handiwork during missions into Quang Ngai and Quang Tin Provinces in 1968 and the Ashua Valley in northern I Corps in early 1969. Hamlet after hamlet where they operated lay in ruins, evidence of their grim efficiency. In war what is considered good is often also vicious. By that yardstick, the exploits of Tiger Force were outstanding. Plenty of sky soldiers from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne later laid spurious claim to membership in the supposedly elite ranks of Tiger Force. The unit had even earned a motto: “Tiger Force knows all about bad and bad is what it is all about.” Too bad it was all too true.

The authors pick up the story in 1967, almost two years after Hackworth formed the unit with men from the locked and cocked 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 327<sup>th</sup> Infantry (Airborne) he commanded. His idea was to create a small, mobile force that would “out guerrilla the guerrillas” operating in the Annamese Cordillera of northern South Vietnam. He had led a similar unit during the Korean War with considerable success. By 1967, Hackworth was in the bowels of the Pentagon writing papers about lessons learned from Tiger Force for future counter-insurgency operations. Meanwhile the lessons about counter-insurgency he had taught the original Tiger Force soldiers were forgotten or ignored. Only his legacy remained.

When Tiger Force was authorized in November 1965, its mission was to “snoop and scoot”—fighting was a last resort. Hackworth called his men “Recondos” and provided them a distinctive pocket badge and a flash to sew on over their Screaming Eagle patch. Their job was to scout for the elusive North Vietnamese Army (NVA) elements and their local Viet Cong counterparts garrisoning the rugged mountain peaks the French called the *Chaine Annamitique*. “I should know, I formed the first battalion LRRP (Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol) unit in Vietnam, the acclaimed 327<sup>th</sup> Tiger Force, modeling it after my Korean-era Raider unit,” Hackworth wrote in his (30 June 1998) syndicated column, “Defending America.”

It was deadly, dangerous work, Hackworth frequently observed. He trained his Recondos to creep into the enemy's lair, learn his habits, and get away unobserved. Stealth was the keyword. Combat was never a welcome option in a place where the Americans were outnumbered twenty or thirty to one. A patrol's discovery usually assured its demise.

By 1967, Tiger Force had undergone a metamorphosis. The enemy that had haunted the *Chaine Annamitique* in 1965 was largely beaten down, preferring to hide unless temporary overwhelming force gave it the opportunity to attack. Helpless against massive U.S. firepower, the NVA and local Viet Cong no longer brazenly walked through the southern I Corps's pastoral lowlands. All that stood between them and absolute destruction were the peasants who provisioned them. The authors describe in detail how the American colonels and generals determined these peasants had to go.

Among the Tiger Force soldiers who replaced the original handpicked teams, the emphasis had shifted from stealth to mindless barbarity. In well-reasoned terms, *Tiger Force* shows that this special unit, elite only in the minds of its brutal soldiers, was in reality a useful murdering machine. By 1967, body counts were all that mattered. Years later, when the generals who allowed the massacre realized what they had wrought, they swept the deeds of their favorite sons under the rug, where it stayed until Sallah and Weiss rooted it out.

Tiger Force's crimes are incomprehensible in ordinary times—cutting off ears for necklaces, taking scalps, decorating jeeps and barracks with grinning skulls, among other barbarities. But in war, particularly in Vietnam, nothing was ordinary. In the dark world where Tiger Force operated, atrocities sometimes seemed perfectly fitting and its soldiers became some of the most decorated infantrymen in Vietnam. Sallah and Weiss insist on knowing why: “In Tiger Force there was no end, no commanders to slam on the brakes,” they declare. “The Army *wanted* Tiger Force to terrorize the Vietnamese. The Army created a Frankenstein and then turned it loose” (278).

The authors do a good job describing war as a filthy, dirty, demeaning business. Those who wonder how the Global War on Terror can be filled with so many horrors should read this book. It shows that warfare devoid of adequate command and control quickly devolves from “necessary” killing to senseless butchery. With little hand wringing or moralizing, Sallah and Weiss explain how the line dividing the two becomes blurred.

Harder to understand is why the Army brass never took any action to punish the offenders. The authors demonstrate that Gustav Apsyey was a relentless pursuer of the guilty and a tireless champion of justice. They reach the same plane of thoroughness in their own investigation. In chronological order they detail each atrocity until the reader is overwhelmed by the immensity of the crimes.

Like every writer who has tried to explain war and warriors, they reach a place where nothing makes any sense. In the end, their story, like the original investigation, raises many questions without providing absolute answers: were the murderers victims themselves? Can morality be measured in war? Can officers who make policy be expected to ensure it is implemented? Can soldiers fighting for their lives summon compassion and restraint? Is the reader supposed to feel sorry for men like Ybarra and Doyle, who had walked tough roads before they ever arrived in Vietnam? Perhaps there are no answers except the obvious one: war is inevitably bad for all living things.

Sallah and Weiss indict the officers and top civilian leaders in the Defense Department who refused to answer their questions. Despite such obstruction, however, they make a strong case in the court of reasonable thinking for unimaginable murder by American soldiers. In doing so, they make sure their readers have enough evidence to decide what the investigation of Tiger Force means in the context of the war in Vietnam.