



Tiger Force: A True Story of Men and War

Michael Sallah , Mitch Weiss

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At the outset of the Vietnam War, the Army created an experimental fighting unit that became known as "Tiger Force." The Tigers were to be made up of the cream of the crop-the very best and bravest soldiers the American military could offer. They would be given a long leash, allowed to operate in the field with less supervision. Their mission was to seek out enemy compounds and hiding places so that bombing runs could be accurately targeted. They were to go where no troops had gone, to become one with the jungle, to leave themselves behind and get deep inside the enemy's mind.

The experiment went terribly wrong. What happened during the seven months Tiger Force descended into the abyss is the stuff of nightmares. Their crimes were uncountable, their madness beyond imagination-so much so that for almost four decades, the story of Tiger Force was covered up under orders that stretched all the way to the White House. Records were scrubbed, documents were destroyed, men were told to say nothing.

But one person didn't follow orders. The product of years of investigative reporting, interviews around the world, and the discovery of an astonishing array of classified information, *Tiger Force* is a masterpiece of journalism. Winners of the Pulitzer Prize for their Tiger Force reporting, Michael Sallah and Mitch Weiss have uncovered the last great secret of the Vietnam War.

Tiger Force: A True Story of Men and War Details

Date : Published May 15th 2006 by Little, Brown and Company

ISBN : 9780316159975

Author : Michael Sallah , Mitch Weiss

Format : Hardcover 416 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, War, Military Fiction, Military, Military History

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Tin Wee says

The book is about a lesser known atrocity in the Vietnam war which was covered up by Army immediately after the war. A cautionary tale of what can go wrong when soldiers who are out in the field for too long lose their voices of conscience, watch their comrades die without understanding why, and resentful of a HQ that does not seem to understand the difficulties on the ground. A good investigative piece - I was left feeling very indignant because justice was never done for this case.

Dustin says

This is an unbelievably well researched book about how soldiers already on the edge of sanity can quickly lose it all when they're set loose with no restraints. One person in particular was just pure evil in the jungle, and his exploits are sickening. It's worth reading just for the sake of knowing what really happened. Vietnam sucked for literally everyone involved, and the Tiger Force was a large reason why for many unfortunate villagers that had no stake in that pointless war.

Tom says

A disturbing read

Matt says

There is a quote, attributed to Ernest Hemingway, that war, no matter how necessary or justified, is always a crime. While the sentiment (war is terrible) is understandable, the statement is not strictly true. In the law, murder is an unjustified killing. In war, the killing of combatants is sanctioned by governments; accordingly, it is not murder.

Of course, that doesn't mean it's a free-for-all. To the contrary, there have always been rules of warfare (ignore those legal isolationists who argue that the Nuremberg Tribunals were *sui generis*). From the Book of Deuteronomy ("thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof by forcing an axe against them: for thou mayest eat of them") to the Lieber Code promulgated during the American Civil War to the Hague Conventions to the Geneva Conventions, there has always been a line that soldiers cannot cross. That line, though, can get a little blurry. How much difference, for instance, is there between a soldier shooting a woman and her baby (a crime) and a pilot dropping a bomb packed with Uranium-235 on a city full of women and babies (a triumph)? I guess that's a discussion for a different book.

Tiger Force is the story of a bunch of men who definitely crossed the line. Written by Michael Sallah and Mitch Weiss, it started as a Pulitzer Prize-winning piece of reporting in the *Toledo Blade*. The *Blade* articles uncovered an investigation by the Army's Criminal Investigation Division into members of the so-called

"Tiger Force" (1st Battalion (Airborne), 327th Infantry Regiment). During a period of several months in 1967, the Tiger Force murdered, tortured and mutilated (scalpings, ear necklaces, etc.) countless Vietnamese civilians. These were old men; women; children; infants (one man reportedly cut the head off a baby).

Winning hearts and minds, indeed.

I believe the incidents described occurred. Moreover, I would not tender any defense to the actions of these soldiers (there are certain philosophical schools to which I do not belong, among them: in order to make omlettes (war) you have to crack a few eggs (innocent civilians); and "America: right or wrong").

That being said, I was very disappointed with this book.

The problem begins and ends with its genesis as long-form newspaper reporting. Even when you get more than a column in a newspaper or magazine, a long-form writer still has serious space concerns. This necessitates certain elisions and requires the sacrifice of depth for scope. In the case of *Tiger Force*, the book-length expansion does not strengthen the weaknesses inherent in any newspaper article.

I knew the book was going to be problematic right from the start. For some reason, *Tiger Force* never takes the time to properly and accurately describe the titular band of brothers. What is Tiger Force? The authors say that it was a platoon founded by Colonel David Hackworth (a war hero and author) especially to fight guerrillas. But how did Hackworth do this? By act of Congress, creating a new unit? By going through some chain of command? The authors state that there was special training and a rigorous application process, but later say that these were shelved and anyone could join. What was that special training? Even later in the book, the authors state that Tiger Force was actually an unofficial force, more akin to a gang I was in while attending fifth grade called The Best Best Friends.

Not to get all *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* on you, but who are these guys? Not only did the authors fail to provide the actual status of Tiger Force (official or non-official), they also failed to delineate their duties. Were they special forces? Were they recon? (it seems they were, so it might have been helpful to explain what a recon platoon does).

From this trembly set-up, the book plunges into the vortex of madness described on the book flap. Except it doesn't. The story that is told is lifeless and meandering. A string of killings is described, but the brutality of these actions is nonexistent. I attribute this to a couple things. First, the authors, while probably exceptional journalists, are not exceptional writers. Their spare "prose" is just-the-facts and, frankly, plodding for a book this length. Also, there is a dearth of tactile details. In a newspaper article, it's fine to report that a troop of soldiers went to this village and killed two people. In a book, however, a lot more is necessary. I need to know more than simply what happened; I need to know what it felt like to be there. This lack of detail made it hard to engage this book. However, I also have the nagging suspicion that it is a function of the reporting, and of the witnesses telling their stories. That is, there is a certain fuzziness in the retelling of these killings that smacks of men trying to forget, and of men trying to shift blame.

Another problem in *Tiger Force* is the lack of definable characters. Despite a modest effort, the men in this book all meld together. They're names, and nothing more. I kept having to flip back to the dramatis personae in front to remind myself who was good (Lieutenant Wood) and who was bad (Lieutenant Hawkins). The only instantly identifiable person in the book is Sam Ybarra, and this comes from the fact that he embodies the unfortunate archetype of the mentally tortured, alcoholic Indian point-man. (I can imagine Adam Beach playing this role, in the eventual movie).

The authors are reporters, not soldiers, and it shows. Obviously, their profession doesn't disqualify them from writing a military history. (In fact, the journalist Rick Atkinson has absolutely nailed the first two volumes of his "Liberation Trilogy" about the American Army in World War II).

The problem, though, is that these guys didn't do the lifting required to intelligently write about such matters. Not to belabor the point, but this isn't a newspaper story any more: It's a book. That's why the pages are stuck between two hard covers with a ludicrously high suggested retail price. The authors display an obvious discomfort in writing about the Army, which probably dovetails with my earlier criticism on their failure to define Tiger Force. For instance, they refer at one point to a "carbine .15 rifle." What's that? Is it a carbine or a rifle? (Or is it a typo, because this book was slapped together to capitalize on the Pulitzer Prize?). Later, they make reference to a .15 carbine. Again, what is this? I'm not a gun aficionado by any means, so I need a little help here. It appears to be a .15 caliber weapon, but what kind? A Colt Automatic Rifle? A paint gun? This might be a small point, but throughout the book there are gaps like this; points where the reader can only pause and scratch his or her head in vain supposition.

The book ends with a tired whimper. This isn't all the fault of the authors. At this point, the realities of the world step in to ensure there is no justice. The perpetrators go unpunished. They either die of natural causes or leave the Army. The Pentagon seals the records. The dead remain dead.

The story in *Tiger Force* is no great shocking revelation. The only thing that's shocking is that no one is ever, ever responsible. Trace the line from Sand Creek to the Phillipine Insurrection to No Gun Ri to My Lai to Haditha. It comprises a gallery of the dead who have no killers. Most of these places, these hamlets and villages left in smoke and ash, are forgotten by Americans. They are not, however, forgotten by the people who live in those places. And that's worth bearing in mind when we think about our spot in history.

So, in that sense, I praise the existence of *Tiger Force*. Unlike the Army's CID, it uncovers evidence; it lays out the argument; it renders judgment and assigns guilt.

It just didn't work as a book.

Sean says

It was unfortunate that these men were the scapegoats of circumstance... bad leadership, a few crazy bastards that wore necklaces of ears and indiscriminately sprayed hooches and zapped villagers. But, to think of these actions as something that were done by the entire military in Vietnam is just plain wrong. This was an elite unit of men that were frustrated over the way the war was being prosecuted, infected by a few psychotic soldiers (that were crazy long before they entered the army), and intentionally "let off of the leash" by the Army brass who then egged on the atrocities while they turned a blind eye.

Is the book graphic? Yes. Is what the unit did a shame? Yes. Was it their fault? Read for yourself.

Dean Aceto says

Excellent book. Told an amazing tale and really gave a face to the people involved without demonizing them. I think it was terrible what the military did to our men sent over during Vietnam. While some choices

were their own, many of them were pushed into things that they otherwise may not have done.

Chris says

This is an outstanding book that should be studied by all military professionals and anyone interested in Vietnam. It describes a rouge platoon that has lost the sense of right & wrong and committed atrocities. The story begins many years after the war, and the reader discovers that of the men who made it out of Vietnam, not many made it out of the 70s. Guilt was the biggest killer and manifested itself through drugs, alcohol, and domestic violence. These men had criminals for leaders and they were forever damaged. The leadership lessons in this book are invaluable, and if they had been thoroughly absorbed in today's military maybe defeats like Abu Garib and Hadithia would have been different. I am a huge proponent of this book, I recommend it to every junior officer that works with me, and I think it should be studied at our educational institutions.

Melissa says

I had to temporarily stop reading this book about half-way through because the atrocities it describes were so disturbing. The second half of the book focuses more on the military investigation of the war crimes committed by the unit Tiger Force in 1967 in Vietnam. The book is engaging and an important account of not only the war in Vietnam but the lack of political will by the 1970s to prosecute war crimes.

Cynthia says

This review can also be found on my blog, The Spastic Writer: <http://thespasticwriter.blogspot.com/...>

Tiger Force throws no curves; it is a straightforward book that delivers what Michael Sallah and Mitch Weiss promise to deliver right from the front of the cover. The “true story of men and war” presents itself in a simplistic, chronological structure that nevertheless does justice to a highly disturbing story.

The book begins with a prologue that sets up the after-story of one of the most notorious killers on Tiger Force (a reconnaissance platoon of the 1st Battalion/327th Infantry developed for the largely guerilla nature of the Vietnam War)—Sam Ybarra. In 1975, following the anticlimactic conclusion of the Vietnam War, Ybarra, an alcoholic suffering from PTSD, is living with his mom on the San Carlos Indian Reservation. An agent from the CID called Gustav Apsey has arrived for an interview, but Ybarra turns him away.

Flashback to 1967; the signs of mental cracking are already beginning to manifest. Replacements fill in for the two killed and the twenty-five wounded Tigers after the Mother's Day Massacre. In addition to Ybarra and his best friend Kenneth Green, the reader is introduced to the surviving and new members of the platoon. There is happy-go-lucky surfer Kerrigan, tough-love sergeant Doyle, idealistic medic Bowman, and many more. Later on, these succinct profiles melt away until only the killers and the anti-killers remain.

The book is essentially divided into three phases: The Song Ve Valley, Operation Wheeler, and the post-war investigation. In the South Ve Valley portion, Tiger Force receives the mission to relocate villagers living in the fertile, rice paddy, which feeds the Viet Cong. Despite the many leaflets and the promise of food and

shelter at the relocation camps, the Tigers are met with resistance. By the end of the South Ve Valley, ten unthreatening farmers are killed; elderly men are beaten until their brains come out; hamlets are torched; and ears are cut off and collected for trophies and necklaces. The killings only escalate with Operation Wheeler, a search and destroy missions during which the entire area of Quang Tin becomes a free fire zone. The most grotesque of atrocities, one that is repeatedly underscored during future investigations, is the beheading of a baby by Ybarra.

The third phase of the book, the investigation, opens in 1972. The reader follows the diligent and relentless CID agent Gustav Apsey. In order to get the reluctant ex-Tigers to talk, Apsey faces long hours in the office, numerous flights to track down Tigers who have scattered to other outposts in the army or to civilian life, and even gunpoint at the home of an unstable veteran. Then, just as his work comes to fruition, he is shipped away to Korea. The case is closed. No one receives justice.

For a book of this moderate size, *Tiger Force* packs in a hefty blow of information to the gut. It leaves the reader at once reeling and numb from the sheer amount of information and the horrid nature of the events described. Its inconclusive ending may drive the reader to look up more information on Tiger Force. As the book would suggest, however, an Internet search on Tiger Force turns up an unfortunate dearth of information. As a result, it is only more incredible that Sallah and Weiss were able to write in the third person narrative, fleshing out details of events, backgrounds, and in-the-moment actions.

As expected from Sallah and Weiss, both of whom received the Pulitzer for their journalism detailing Tiger Force, the writing is streamlined, frank, and at times, dry. The dryness, however, serves the story well, for what takes the stage in the book is what happened. Though it brushes on some of the psychology of war and men, *Tiger Force* is not by any means a book unraveling the beauty of life and the ugliness of war. Any flowery language would detract from its mission: why did the atrocities happen? Why did nobody stop them?

However, in asking the question why? Sallah and Weiss flaunt the weakest point in the book.

While an empathy link between the reader and the soldier in any book of war is incredibly difficult—even foolish—to establish (after all, no amount of living vicariously through words will truly recreate that fine tightrope between life and death), sympathy toward men of war can and has been achieved in other war books. *Tiger Force*, however, vacillates between portraying the Tigers as men who committed the atrocities because they were frayed to the quick and men who committed atrocities because a factor in their psyches and backgrounds made them susceptible to becoming bloodthirsty, twisted killers who beheaded babies. At times, Sallah and Weiss seemed to favor the latter explanation, tossing out hypotheses not limited to abusive parents and rocky childhoods. In addition, the clear distinction made between Tiger Force's story and My Lai's make it harder for the reader to attribute the killings to "madness" brought about by weeks of being picked off by snipers and booby-traps (which seemed to be the favored explanation in the beginning). In particular, the reader may be confused as to how to view Sam Ybarra. His post-war days are tragic, flooded with alcohol, nightmares, and guilt, but Sallah and Weiss do not expand that into point about personal punishment versus punishment by justice.

The problem with *Tiger Force* is that it is minimally biased in details, word choice, and tone. That is all very well—for journalism. *Tiger Force*, however, is not journalism. As a book, it should be doing more than to inform; it should offer a unique perspective from the authors themselves on the subject matter. The problem with *Tiger Force* is that it suspiciously resembles a collage of news articles from the authors' work in the Toledo Blade's Tiger Force series.

Thus, the praise of Edward Nawokta serves as a double-edged sword:

“Tiger Force is a shining example of how journalism can fulfill its most noble aims: informing and, consequently, empowering the public.”

Perhaps the point of the authors is there is no answer to the why.

Perhaps the point of the authors is that it all happened. And not a thing was done about it.

Clark says

References to marines as "soldiers" and to shooting "carbine .15 rifles" make you acutely aware this book contains errors. The book constantly makes statements about what combat soldiers feel, how they interpret events, and how they develop distinct bonds - but there's nothing provided to substantiate the claims. Finally and most problematic for a "non-fiction" book, the narrative offers several accounts of the interior thoughts, motivations, and feelings of people moments before they were killed. Clearly, these can't be known - but they are presented as facts.

Add in a dearth of citations and you have a really large piece of modern journalism that pretends like it's historical non-fiction. I'd rate most of the book as "informed opinion". Given the inflammatory and divisive subject matter, I would expect more academic rigor (to say the least) in a published book-length account. The choice of piling notes in a chapter-by-chapter summary at the end of the book is unfortunate. It reads more like "inspired by true events" than historical fact.

Merely asserting that "lots of Tigers" said something does not make it factual. Presenting collective experience as factual when it is based on limited testimony of one or a few people in the general area - testimony offered years later - does not make it factual. Asserting the case was not prosecuted because of a conspiracy to cover up does not make it a conspiracy to cover up. Maybe there just wasn't any actionable intelligence - exactly like one senior prosecutor stated.

T.C. Misfeldt says

Sallah and Weiss have compiled a superb work of investigative journalism about the Tiger Force during the Vietnam war.

The first part of the book reads like a typical war story detailing the exploits of an elite military force faced with the perils of fighting a guerrilla war in inhospitable conditions. What struck me as an after thought was how little those of us who did not serve in 'Nam knew about what it was like for those who did. Many of my high school classmates are veterans of "our" war but few open up about what lasting impressions the hostilities have made in their lives.

The second part of the book covers the Aspey investigations into the war crimes akin to the My Lai massacre that captured American headlines and helped precipitate the end of the conflict for the United States. Is it any surprise that the investigation failed to lead to any charges against soldiers or their commanders when there was already a groundswell of negative publicity about Vietnam and America's role? Hardly, but the cover-up continues to nag at one's conscience.

Were they really war crimes? What else is being covered up?

It was, most certainly, an interesting read about what soldiers are capable of in hostile territory. Does it change my opinion of whether it is better to shoot first and ask questions later in times of war? Other stories of 'Nam gain relevance when it comes to the thought of kill or be killed.

Mary Wescott says

My Dad had me read "Strong Men Armed" I learned so much and had a whole new appreciation of my Grandfather and his life in service. However, This book is about a platoon and their atrocities in Vietnam. It didn't sink in until Chapter 12 when I realized it wasn't just a few random acts of violence. That's what the whole book was about, so I quit reading it. While I'm not naive enough to believe that these atrocities didn't happen, I don't want to read about them. My Dad is a Vietnam Vet, and I'm going to believe that he was one of the ones who "didn't cross the line". Not just because he's my Dad and I want to think the best of him - but because of his life since 1966. He hasn't destroyed his life drowned in Alcohol or spent it trying to forget. He's admitted it was a bad deal - he did what he had to - it was a struggle - and conscious free - his life went on. So until any military investigative reporter proves otherwise - My Dad was a good soldier. Although I hated the content, (which is deserving of one star) I gave it two stars because it was well-written, and I do feel for the innocent Vietnamese whose life were changed by those out of control in the name of war.

Bob says

This story is appalling and heart breaking, detailed, and told well. You don't know whether to be disappointed/disgusted with the men who committed atrocities against Vietnamese civilians or furious with the leadership that let it happen and covered it up. I fully acknowledge that the North Vietcong were no saints and committed many atrocities of their own, but we were supposed to be the "good guys." I hope the army learned something from these experiences and we don't have to read books like this in 20 years about atrocities in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Caitlin Seaman says

This book reminds me of a horrific accident. Unbelievably graphic, there were days when I refused to read on because I was disgusted at what I was reading. Despite this, I knew I had to keep reading; I wanted to know everything that happened, I was captivated by what the men of Tiger Force were going through. The psychological and physical war that these men went through is incomprehensible.

debbie says

this was a superb book...it tells the story of Tiger Force, a platoon of US army special forces soldiers...in the beginning they are an elite group of men, doing special "jobs"...by the middle of the book they have lost control completely and are performing heinous acts such as murder of civilians, rape, and mutilations...the second part of the book tells of the quest to bring those involved to justice...this never happened even though

the investigation went on for years and was well documented...instead it was swept under the rug to keep America from coming apart over the Vietnam War....i highly recommend this book to everyone...
