The My Lai Massacre
Charlie Company

- Nothing unusual--very average company
  - Mostly high school graduates between ages of 18 and 22
  - Fairly even division of black and white soldiers
  - Seemed a cross-section of American society
  - Slightly understaffed, which was typical
Ernest Medina

- Commanding Officer was Captain Ernest L. Medina
- Harsh disciplinarian, nickname “Mad Dog”
- Yet considered fair
Lieutenant William Calley

- Leader of Charlie Company’s 1st Platoon
- Middle-class, raised in Miami
- Described as boring and bland; had enlisted when draft seemed imminent
- Had some college, so sent to Officer Candidate School, didn’t do well—trouble reading maps, rated as having no leadership ability
- Tried to impress Medina
- Most men remembered him as fairly incompetent, universally disliked
Quang Ngai

- Charlie Company deployed to northern Quang Ngai Province in Jan. of 1968
- Same area of Vietnam where O’ Brien is stationed one year later
- Charlie Company assigned to locate and eliminate 48th Vietcong Battalion
- Feb. and March a difficult period--deaths and injuries, mostly through booby traps
- Culture of violence develops
Pinkville

• Speculation that 48th Battalion was hiding out around My Lai 4 (American name for cluster of villages in area designated “Pinkville” on maps)

• Intelligence reports assumed most civilians would be at market in the early morning

• Remaining villagers expected to be Vietcong or VC sympathizers
The Orders

- Medina’s orders remained vague--different men heard different things and interpreted these orders differently, especially what he said about women and children
- Certainly told to destroy the village
The Assault

- March 16, 1968: Charlie Company (105 men strong) helicoptered in
- On the ground by 7:40 a.m.
- Expected heavy enemy response, but received no hostile fire
The Massacre

- Confusion reigned: village divided by bamboo trees, banana trees, hedgerows—soldiers couldn’t see what was happening elsewhere in the village
- Numerous atrocities committed
- Babies, children, elderly shot
- Women and girls raped and sodomized
- Scalpings; torture
- Huge numbers rounded up and machine-gunned
- Dozens of bodies left in ditches
The Journalist

- American Army photographer, Ron Haeberle present
- Took color photos
- Later court-martialed for failure to stop a war crime, withholding evidence of war crimes
- Acquitted
• Best estimates that between 400-500 unarmed Vietnamese were killed that day
• Only one American casualty: a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the foot
Hugh Thompson

- Not everyone participated
- Helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson, Jr. landed between civilians and U.S. soldiers, threatened to open fire on soldiers if they didn’t stop the killing
- Reported the atrocity to his superiors
- Yet, Thompson’s report delayed, diluted, never acted upon
Cover-Up

- Major cover-up took place afterward
- After brief, perfunctory investigation, authorities concluded no infractions of military code had occurred
- Case blown open by Ronald Ridenhour, a Vietnam veteran who had heard stories, investigated rumors
- Wrote anguished, 18-page later in March of 1969 (read Ridenhour’s letter)
- Sent to 30 prominent men in Washington
Ridenhour’s letter prompted investigation by Peers Commission (read a summary of the Peers Commission report)

• Story started hitting newspapers around the country in Nov. 1969

• Life Magazine reprinted Haeberle’s color photos in Dec. 1969
Big Questions Raised

- Was My Lai indicative of the war (as protesters argued)?
- Or was My Lai an anomaly (as the military claimed)?
- Where does blame lie?
Court Martials

Army filed war crimes and obstruction of justice charges against 2 generals, 4 full colonels, 4 lt. colonels, 4 majors, 6 captains, 8 lts., and several enlisted men (read more about the court martials)

• Most enlisted men were no longer members of the military and thus immune to prosecution by court martial
Court Martial Results

- Only William Calley was found guilty
- Convicted of premeditated murder of 22 civilians
- Sentenced to life in prison at hard labor
- Sentence reduced several times, paroled in Nov. 1974 after serving fewer than 3 years, mostly under house arrest
Linda Hutcheon and Historiographic Metafiction

- In her book, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon coins the term “historiographic metafiction”
- Works are dubbed “historiographic metafictions” because of their conscious self-reflexivity and concern with history.
According to Hutcheon:

- Earliest histories contain fictional elements
- They are implicit amalgamations of fact and myth
- Composition of the word “history” itself contains the word “story”
- Yet, as realism took root, history came to represent “objective” fact and the novel came to represent subjective “fiction”
Modern and Postmodern Response to History

- Modernist and postmodernist questioning challenged the authority of histories by acknowledging that the “fact” presented is the author’s subjective interpretation.
- Historiographic metafictions are “novels that are intensely self-reflective but that also both re-introduce historical context into metafiction and problematize the entire question of historical knowledge (Hutcheon 285-286).
- Historiographic metafictions bridge the fissure between historical and fictional works by recombining the two genres.