

WHY DO THEY DO IT?

CHARLES WHITMAN



receptionist, ascended the tower, and waited for classes to break; he then opened fire on the crowd of students. It is notable that he had taken with him a variety of materials that imply he was in it for the long haul. These items included toilet paper, spray deodorant, water canteens, gasoline, rope, and binoculars as well as a variety of weapons, such as a machete, a hatchet, a .357 Magnum revolver, a 12-gauge sawed-off shotgun, two rifles (one with a telescopic sight), 700 rounds of ammunition, and other weapons.

Whitman was shooting people on the run and in places only a trained sharpshooter could hit. He shot a pregnant woman, who later gave birth to a stillborn baby. He also shot a person crossing a street 500 yards away. This is the type of shot glorified in *Full Metal Jacket*, a Stanley Kubrick film that examined the Marine boot camps of the late 1960s. There is no doubt that Whitman was an expert sharpshooter and that the Marine Corps trained him well. Unfortunately, in this case his training was used against innocent targets. Whitman continued his mass killing for a couple of hours until several police officers were able to find a way through ground tunnels and then up to the top of the tower, where they shot and killed Whitman.



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Charles Whitman's shooting spree is legendary and notorious for many reasons. He killed 15 people and injured 28 others from a landmark university tower at the University of Texas–Austin (the UT flagship campus). But what is almost more fascinating is his life story up until that fateful day.

Whitman was, by most accounts, a great person and a good soldier. He was one of the youngest Eagle Scouts ever to earn the honor. He graduated near the top of his class in high school and then went on to become a stellar member of the U.S. Marine Corps, earning the rating of sharpshooter. He used this skill when he went on his shooting rampage on August 1, 1966. It should be noted that the day before, he killed his wife and mother and left some letters (which will come up later). Then he planned out his attack on the university for the following day.

The day after Whitman killed his wife and mother, he proceeded to the main tower at UT–Austin, killed the

But why did he do it? The best guess we have, which directly relates to this chapter, began with one of his last letters. He wrote, “After my death, I wish an autopsy on me to be performed to see if there is any mental disorder.” An autopsy was performed, and as Whitman sort of predicted, he did not simply have a mental disorder but a large brain tumor (about the size of a golf ball). As we examine how vulnerable our brain functioning can be to trauma, imagine the likely effects of a large tumor on thinking and processing skills.

THINK ABOUT IT:

1. Do you believe Whitman was insane? Give your reasons why you believe so or not.
2. Given how much planning went into his attack, how much of an effect do you believe his tumor had on him at the time of the attack?