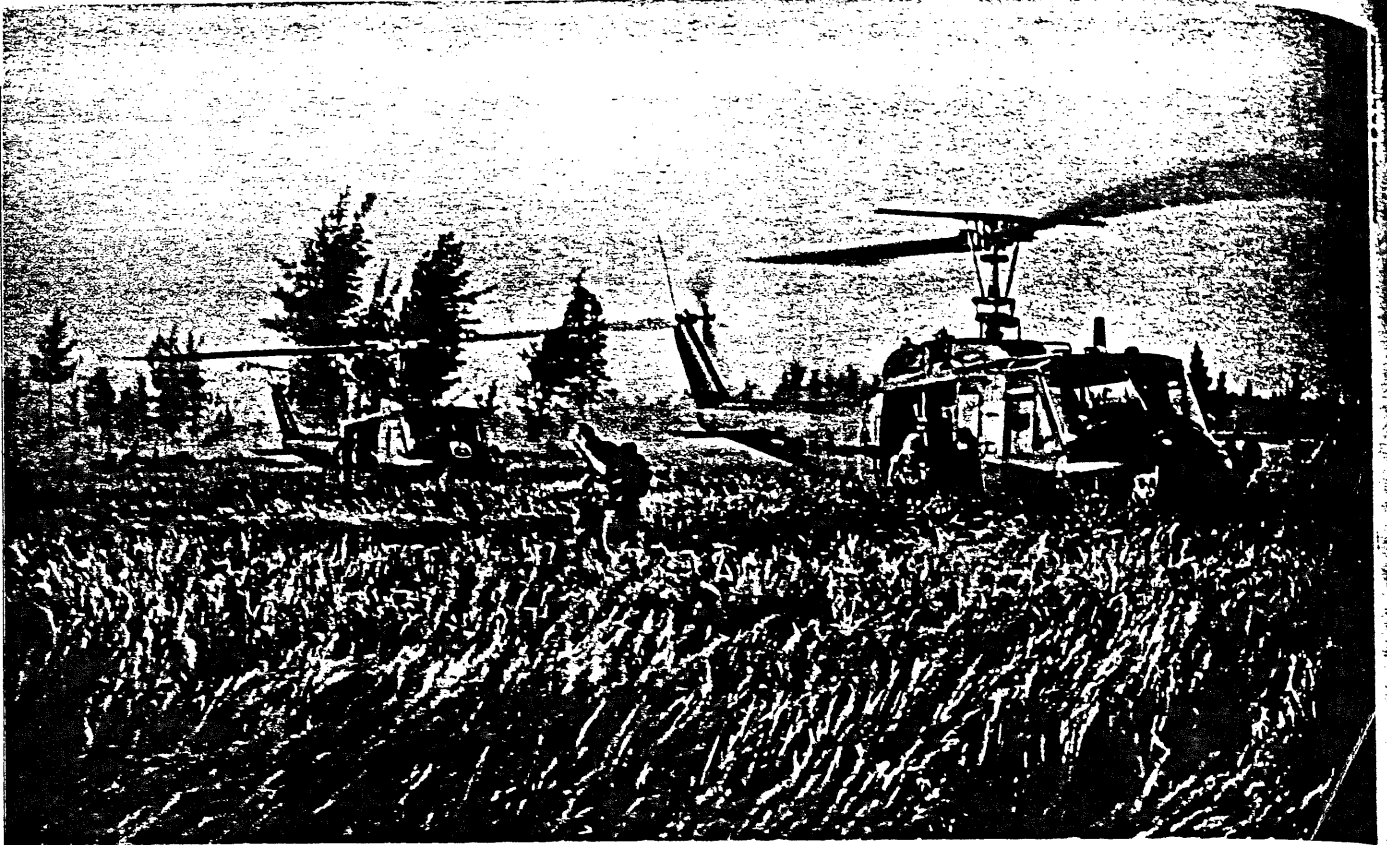


Exclusive pictures, eyewitness accounts

# The Massacre at Mylai



Sprinting for cover, men of Company C left the helicopters that ferried them in for the assault on Mylai.

The action at Mylai received only a passing mention at the weekly Saigon briefing in March of 1968. Elements of the Americal Division had made contact with the enemy near Quangngai city and had killed 128 Vietcong. There were a few rumors of civilian deaths, but when the Army looked into them—a month after the incident—it found nothing to warrant disciplinary measures. The matter might have ended there except for a former GI, Ron Ridenhour, now a California college student. After hearing about Mylai from former comrades, he wrote letters to congressmen warning that “something rather dark and bloody” had taken place. Now an officer has been charged with murder of “an unknown number of Oriental human beings” at Mylai, and 24 other men of Company C, First Battalion, 20th Infantry are under investigation. Congressmen are demanding to know what happened at Mylai, who ordered

it, and whether or not U.S. troops have committed similar acts in Vietnam.

Because of impending courts-martial, the Army will say little. The South Vietnamese government, which has conducted its own investigation, states that Mylai was “an act of war” and that any talk of atrocities is just Vietcong propaganda. This is not true. The pictures shown here by Ronald Haeberle, an Army photographer who covered the massacre, and the interviews on the following pages confirm a story of indisputable horror—the deliberate slaughter of old men, women, children and babies. These eyewitness accounts, by the men of Company C and surviving villagers, indicate that the American troops encountered little if any hostile fire, found virtually no enemy soldiers in the village and suffered only one casualty, apparently a self-inflicted wound. The people of Mylai were simply gunned down.

Photographed by RONALD L. HAEBERLE

“Guys were about to shoot these people,” Photographer Ron Haeberle remembers. “I yelled, ‘Hold it,’ and shot my picture. As I walked away, I heard M16s open up. From the corner of my eye I saw bodies falling, but I didn’t turn to look.”

PHOTOGRAPHIC © R. L. HANSEN



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PHOTO: HARRIS/ST. LOUIS POST-DEMO

Haberle found the bodies above on a road leading from the village. "Most were women and babies. It looked as if they tried to get away."

"When these two boys were shot at," says Haberle, "the older one fell on the little one to protect him. Then the guys finished the



# 'The order was to destroy Mylai and everything in it'

*These photographs and the first detailed eyewitness account of Mylai were brought to light by Joseph Eszterhas, a reporter for the Cleveland Plain Dealer. He helped prepare the following article, based on his own interviews with Photographer Ron Haeberle and reports from LIFE Correspondents Dale Wittmer, John Saar, Tom Flaherty and Reg Bragonier and Stringers Kent Demaret and Jane Estes.*

**O**n the day before their mission the men of Company C met for a briefing after supper. The company commander, Captain Ernest Medina, read the official prepared orders for the assault against Mylai and spoke for about 45 minutes, mostly about the procedures of movement. At least two other companies would also participate. They, like Company C, were elements of Task Force Barker, named for its commander, Lt. Colonel Frank Barker, who was to die in action three months later. But only Company C would actually enter the cluster of huts known as Mylai 4.

"Captain Medina told us that this village was heavily fortified," recalls one of his squad leaders, Sgt. Charles West. "He said it was considered extremely dangerous and he wanted us to be on our toes at all times. He told us there was supposed to be a part of the 98th NVA Regiment and the 48th VC Battalion there. From the intelligence that higher levels had received, he said, this village consisted only of North Vietnamese army, Vietcong, and VC families. He said the order was to destroy Mylai and everything in it."

Captain Medina was a stocky, crew-cut, hard-nosed disciplinarian whom his men called "Mad Dog Medina." Men respected him: to Charles West he was one of "the best officers I've known." Most of them had served under Medina since the company had formed the previous year in Hawaii as C Company, First Battalion, 20th Infantry, 11th Light Infantry Brigade.

"As far as I'm concerned, Charlie Company was the best company to ever serve in Vietnam," says West. "Charlie Company was a company, not just a hundred and some men they call a company. We operated together or not at all. We cared about each and every individual and each and every individual's problems. This is the way that we were taught by Captain Medina to feel toward each other. We were like brothers."

Mylai 4 was one of nine hamlets, each designated by a number, which were clustered near the village of Songmy, a name sometimes used also for the hamlets. The men of Company C called the area "Pinkville" because it was colored rose on their military maps and because these fertile coastal plains long had been known as Vietcong territory. Pinkville was only seven miles northeast of the provincial capital of Quangnai, where, during the Tet offensive only a month before, Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops had boldly occupied portions of the city. Soon Company C would use the name Pinkville not only for the entire area but for the single hamlet Mylai 4.

Company C had seen its first real combat in

the previous weeks, all of it around Pinkville. A couple of weeks before, sniper fire from across the river had killed one man. His buddies believed the fire had come from Mylai 4. Two weeks before, enemy land mines had killed five men and wounded 22. Several days before, in a hamlet near Mylai 4, a booby trap made from an unexploded artillery shell had killed one of the GIs' favorite squad leaders, Sgt. George Cox.

"I was his assistant squad leader," recalls Charles West. "On the way back to camp I was crying. Everybody was deeply hurt, right up to Captain Medina. Guys were going around kicking sandbags and saying, 'Those dirty dogs, those dirty bastards.'"

At the briefing, says West, "Captain Medina told us we might get a chance to revenge the deaths of our fellow GIs." Afterward the men held a memorial service for George Cox, but the ritual of mourning was more like a pep rally for the forthcoming action.

"Captain Medina didn't give an order to go in and kill women or children," says West. "Nobody told us about handling civilians, because at the time I don't think any of us were aware of the fact that we'd run into civilians. I think what we heard put fear into a lot of our hearts. We thought we'd run into heavy resistance. He was telling us that here was the enemy, the enemy that had been killing our partners. This was going to be our first real live battle, and we had made up our minds we were going to go in and with whatever means possible wipe them out."

Shortly after sunrise on March 16, 1968, a bright, clear, warm day, the helicopters began lifting approximately 80 men of Company C from the base camp at Landing Zone Dottie and delivering them 11 kilometers away in the paddies west of Mylai 4.

Army Photographer Sgt. Ron Haeberle and SP5 Jay Roberts, both of the 31st Public Information Detachment, came in on the second helicopter lift. Haeberle, who had been drafted out of college, had only a week left on his tour in Vietnam. Neither man had seen much action. They had volunteered for this operation because the word was out that it would be "a hot one." The squad the two were assigned to was getting its orders by walkie-talkie from Captain Medina. Haeberle was carrying three cameras—one for the Army, two of his own. (He turned in his black-and-white film to the Army. The Army took no action at that time but apparently intends to use the film as evidence in the court-martial proceedings.) Roberts, a college student who had volunteered for the draft, took pad and pencil. Their

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ss Haeberle, as if am off."

"This man was old and trembling so that he could hardly walk. He looked like he wanted to cry. When I left him I heard two rifle shots."



## 'You don't call them

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mission was to prepare news releases and a report for the brigade newspaper.

"We landed about 9 or 9:30 in a field of elephant grass," says Varnado Simpson, then a 19-year-old assistant platoon leader from Jackson, Miss. Gunships had prepped the area with Miniguns and grenade launchers. It was clear and very warm and it got warmer. "Our landing zone was the outskirts of town, on the left flank. There were about 25 of us and we went directly into the village. There wasn't any enemy fire. We'd come up on a hooch, we'd search it to see if there was someone in it. If there was no one in it, we'd burn it down. We found people in some, and we took some back to the intelligence people for questioning. Some ran, we tried to tell them not to run. There were about 15. Some stopped. About five or six were killed."

Haeberle and Roberts moved through the rice fields toward a hill in back of the village area. Haeberle was with 10 or 15 GIs when he saw a cow and heard shots at the same time. The shooting was straight ahead. A GI shot a cow and then others kept pumping bullets into the cow until the cow finally fell.

"Off to the right," says Haeberle, "a wom-

an's form. a All the other at her, firing had slumped stick out of was a prope to question shooting at ing in the ai shook our h

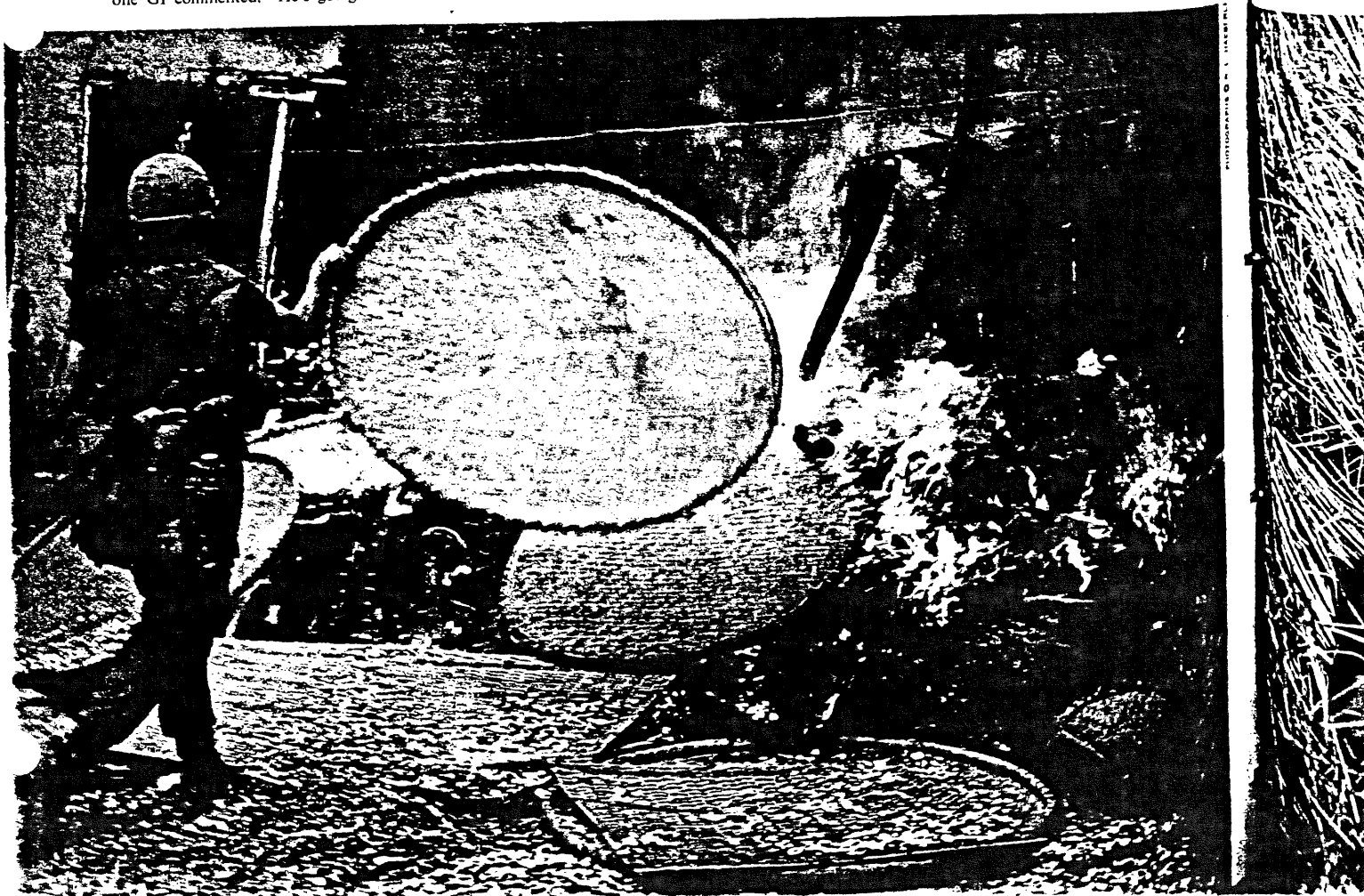
"There were ple that I esp West of his were at this ly after I can and the peoj the Vietnam plain a lot e something a

Charles A through the of gunfire. T winding trai for booby t trail and the Vietnamese. ward them. us," he says



Haeberle remembers that the body in front of a burning house (*above*) kept twitching and that one GI commented, "He's got ghosts in him."

Intent on destroying everything that might be of use to the Vietcong, a soldier (*below*) stokes a fire with the baskets used to dry rice and roots.



PHOTOGRAPH BY G. L. HAEBERLE

# all them civilians—to us they were VC'

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an's form. a head, appeared from some brush. All the other GIs started firing at her, aiming at her, firing at her over and over again. She had slumped over into one of those things that stick out of the rice paddies so that her head was a propped-up target. There was no attempt to question her or anything. They just kept shooting at her. You could see the bones flying in the air chip by chip. Jay and I, we just shook our heads."

"There were a whole lot of Vietnamese people that I especially liked," recalls Sgt. Charles West of his year in Vietnam. "Most of them were at this orphanage I used to visit frequently after I came off field duty. I'd go down there and the people would try to teach me more of the Vietnamese language and they would explain a lot of customs that I wanted to know something about."

Charles West led his squad of 13 men through the rice paddies and heard the sound of gunfire. They were coming down a sharply winding trail and were keeping a close watch for booby traps. They turned a curve in the trail and there, 25 feet ahead of them, were six Vietnamese, some with baskets, coming toward them. "These people were running into us," he says, "away from us, running every

which way. It's hard to distinguish a mama-san from a papa-san when everybody has on black pajamas." He and his squad opened fire with their M16s. Then he and his men kept going down the road toward the sound of the gunfire in the village.

"I had said in my heart already," says West, "and I said in my mind that I would not let Vietnam beat me. I had two accomplishments to make. The first was to serve my government and to accomplish my mission while I was in Vietnam. My second accomplishment was to get back home."

"There was a little boy walking toward us in a daze," says Haerberle. "He'd been shot in the arm and leg. He wasn't crying or making any noise." Haerberle knelt down to photograph the boy. A GI knelt down next to him. "The GI fired three shots into the child. The first shot knocked him back, the second shot lifted him into the air. The third shot put him down and the body fluids came out. The GI just simply got up and walked away. It was a stroboscopic effect. We were so close to him it was blurred."

"The people who ordered it probably didn't think it would look so bad," says Sgt. Michael

A. Bernhardt, who asserts he refused to take part in the killings.

As he entered the village, Bernhardt recalls, a plane was circling above, warning the people in Vietnamese to leave. "Leaflets were dropped ahead of time, but that doesn't work with the Vietnamese people. They have very few possessions. The village we went into was a permanent-type village. It had hard walls, tile roofs, hard floors and furniture. The people really had no place to go. The village is about all they have. So they stay and take whatever comes."

"It was point-blank murder. Only a few of us refused. I just told them the hell with this. I'm not doing it. I didn't think this was a lawful order."

"To us they were no civilians," says Varnado Simpson. "They were VC sympathizers. You don't call them civilians. To us they were VC. They showed no ways or means that they wasn't. You don't have any alternatives. You got to do something. If they were VC and got away, then they could turn around and kill you. You're risking your life doing that work. And if someone kills you, those people

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"This man and two little boys popped up from nowhere," says Haerberle. "The GIs I was with opened up, then moved in close to finish them."

PHOTOGRAPH BY R. L. HAEBERLE





PHOTOGRAPH BY H.C. HAEBERLE



SP4 VARNADO SIMPSON

**Someone will always  
be pointing a finger  
at me and saying,  
'He was one of them'**

Varnado Simpson of Jackson, Miss. hasn't forgotten the old woman and the child, dead in a smoldering doorway. "We saw a man running away from us, but he had a weapon. There were two running along with him. What else was there to do? Run up and beg them to stop? I had orders to shoot anyone that ran. They were about 20 yards away. I couldn't see the child. I used my M16. . . I noticed it was a woman and child when I walked over. It's hard to tell what they are

from the back. . . The man? He got away.

"They can't punish me for that. Big officials are saying it doesn't matter that we were under orders, we're still guilty—but I don't see that. If you're under orders, you're going to be punished for not doing it and punished if you do. I didn't like what happened, but I didn't decide."

Simpson's grandmother saw this picture and said quietly, "Lord, have mercy."

## 'They might have been wild for



EX-PFC. CHARLES GRUVER



EX-SGT. CHARLES WEST

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aren't going to feel sorry for you."

Lt. William Calley Jr.'s platoon was the first to arrive in the center of Mylai. "There was about 40, 45 people that we gathered in the center of the village," ex-Pvt. Paul Meadlo told CBS News. "And we placed them in there, and it was like a little island, right there in the center of the village, I'd say.

"Men, women, children. Babies. And we all huddled them up. We made them squat down, and Lieutenant Calley came over and said, you know what to do with them, don't you? And I said yes. So I took it for granted that he just wanted us to watch them. And he left, and came back about 10 or 15 minutes later, and said how come you ain't killed them yet? And I told him that I didn't think you wanted us to kill them, that you just wanted us to guard them. He said, no, I want them dead. He stepped back about 10, 15 feet, and he started shooting them. And he told me to start shooting. So I started shooting. I poured about four clips into the group.

"I fired them on automatic—you just spray the area and so you can't know how many you killed 'cause they were going fast.

"We're rounding up more, and we had about seven or eight people. And we was going to throw them in the hootch, and well, we put them in the hootch and then we dropped a hand grenade down there with them. And somebody holed up in the ravine, and told us to bring them over to the ravine, so we took them back out, and led them over too—and by that time, we already had them over there, and they had about 70, 75 people, all gathered up. So we threw ours in with them and Lieutenant Calley told me, he said, Meadlo, we got another job to do. And so we walked over to the people, and he started pushing them off and started shooting. . . off into the ravine. It was a ditch. And so we started pushing them off and we started shooting them, so altogether we just pushed them all off, and just started using automatics on them. Men, women, and children.

"And babies. And so we started

shooting them, and somebody told us to switch off to single shot so that we could save ammo. So we switched off to single shot, and shot a few more rounds."

"There was no expression on the American faces," says Haeberte. "I couldn't believe it. They were destroying everything. They were doing it all very businesslike. The Vietnamese saw the Americans but didn't run. They kept on walking until the GIs saw them and started shooting. Some of the people started pulling their animals off the road and hiding behind trees. The GIs were opening up with M16s, machine guns and grenade launchers. The grenade launcher made a KAPLOW sound."

Pfc. Charles Gruver of Tulsa, Okla., was the first eyewitness to report what he had seen to his old friend Ron Ridenhour, the man who set off the new Army investigation by writing to congressmen. Gruver says he had been in other operations around Mylai, "but we had never killed civilians before. We had never been under orders to wipe things out before."

Gruver told Ridenhour of seeing a small boy, about three or four years old: "The boy was clutching his wounded arm with his other hand while blood trickled between his fingers. He just stood there with big eyes staring around like he didn't understand. Then the captain's RTO [radio operator] put a burst of 16 [M16] fire into him."

"On other missions," says Sgt. West, "the GIs would take their fruit and maybe a can of pork and beans and give the rest to the Vietnamese people. I always thought it would be a treat if I could give them my peaches or my peaches or something like that. The people seemed like they appreciated it.

"Just about anywhere we went on an operation we always had kids following us, and most of the kids we would know by name. In a lot of cases I could actually say the people were actually looking out for us. Kids would meet us two or three miles outside a village. We didn't have to use

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# Wild for a while but I don't think they were crazy'



Sgt. MICHAEL BERNHARDT



EX-PVT. PAUL MEADLO



SP5 JOHN KINCH



EX-SP4 LARRY COLBURN

our mine-detecting machine to check out the trail because they would run their animals down the trail and walk behind them just to show us. GIs, we don't want to hurt you and we know that you don't want to hurt us.

"We would tell the kids to eat the food and bring the cans back and dump them in a large pile. There was a saying that every time we ran into a booby trap, it turned out to be made of a can that we had given to the kids."

"Just outside the village," says Reporter Jay Roberts, "there was this big pile of bodies. This really tiny little kid—he only had a shirt on, nothing else—he came over to the pile and held the hand of one of the dead. One of the GIs behind me dropped into a kneeling position, 30 meters from this kid, and killed him with a single shot."

"I saw three heaps of bodies about the same size," says Sgt. Bernhardt, "all with about 20 people. Thieu says the people were killed by artillery, which is ridiculous. The shell would have had to land dead zero to kill this many people in one spot, and it would have blasted them into the paddies."

Haeberle and Roberts watched while troops accosted a group of women, including a teen-age girl. The girl was about 13 and wearing black pajamas. A GI grabbed the girl and with the help of others started stripping her. "Let's see what she's made out of," a soldier said.

"VC boom-boom," another said, telling the 13-year-old girl that she was a whore for the Vietcong.

"I'm horny," said a third.

As they were stripping the girl, with bodies and burning huts all around them, the girl's mother tried to help her, scratching and clawing at the soldiers. Another Vietnamese woman, afraid for her own safety, tried to stop the woman from objecting. One soldier kicked the mother in the rear and another slapped her up a bit.

Haeberle jumped in to take a picture of the group of women. The picture (page 37) shows the 13-year-old girl, hiding behind her mother, trying to button the top of her pajamas

"When they noticed Ron," says

Roberts, "they left off and turned away as if everything was normal."

Then a soldier asked, "Well, what'll we do with 'em?"

"Kill 'em," another answered.

"I heard an M60 go off," says Roberts, "a light machine gun, and when we turned back around, all of them and the kids with them were dead."

"The yanigans were doing most of the shooting," says Charles West. "I call them yanigans because they were running around doing unnecessary shooting. In a lot of cases they weren't even shooting at anything. Some were shooting at the hootches that were already burning, even though there couldn't possibly be anything alive in there."

"The guys were hollering about 'slants.' It wasn't just the young guys, older guys were shooting too. They might have been wild for a while, but I don't think they went crazy. If an individual goes crazy, you can't reason with him. Once everything was secured, everything did cease. If these men had been crazy, they would have gone on killing people."

"Most of the men in our squad were not reacting in a violent way. We were with the command element and Captain Medina was with us. He never would have stood to see us run around like rookies. He would have probably ordered a court-martial right on the spot."

A black GI told Haeberle he couldn't stomach it, he had to get out of there. Later Haeberle and Roberts were sitting near a ditch, a clump of bodies off to the left, when they heard a shot. They hit the ground, thinking it was a sniper. The soldier who had wanted to get out of there had shot himself in the foot with a .45. Accidentally, he said. Captain Medina was calling in a "dust-off," a helicopter, to take him out. "He shot himself purposely to get out of there," says Roberts. "He looked happy even though he'd shot up his own foot."

SP5 John Kinch, who is still on active duty in Vietnam, was the point man for the heavy weapons squad. "We moved into Pinkville and found another stack of bodies in a ditch. It

must have been six or seven feet deep and they were level with the top of it. One body, an old man, had a 'C' carved on his chest.

"Captain Medina was right in front of us, Colonel Barker, the task force commander, was overhead in his helicopter. He came through over the radio saying he had got word from the medevac chopper there were bodies lying everywhere and what was going on. I heard Captain Medina tell him, 'I don't know what they are doing. The first platoon's in the lead. I am trying to stop it.'

"Just after that he called the first platoon and said, 'That's enough shooting for today.'

"Colonel Barker called down for a body count and Medina got back on the horn and said, 'I have a body count of 310.'"

At 9 a.m. Haeberle and Roberts got into the village itself. On the outskirts they met Captain Medina. Roberts said Medina told him there had been 85 killed in action so far. He also said Company C had taken 20 suspects. One of them, an old man, said many Vietcong had been in the village the night before but had left at dawn.

Huts were being torched with cigarette lighters. One soldier with a 90-pound pack was cutting down corn-stalks one by one. Some GIs were going through the civilians' belongings, looking for weapons. One soldier was keeping the civilians' piasters. There were two dead water buffalo and two calves on the ground.

"I know that you've got to destroy the enemy's resources," says Roberts. "It's an old tactic and a good one. Sherman's march to the sea. You've just got to. We saw soldiers drag a body from a hut and throw it in a well to destroy the water supply. They shot and stabbed all the animals, which were, in effect, VC support units."

One soldier was stabbing a calf over and over again. Blood was coming from the calf's nose. The calf tried to move toward the mother cow. The GI was enjoying it and stabbed again with a bayonet which he'd taken off his rifle. Soldiers stood around and watched. Others were killing the

baby pigs and all the other cows.

"God," says Roberts, "those cows died hard. They had them in small pens. They'd shoot them—*paff, paff*, and the cow'd just go *moo*. Then *paff, paff, moo*."

A GI was running down a trail, chasing a duck with a knife.

"I saw two military-age males running across the field about 500 meters away," says Charles West. "I yelled, '*Dong lai, dong lai*,' but neither of them stopped. At this distance we could have killed both of them, but we just fired in the air and then chased them about half a mile. Only one of them lived. The other one was killed by the interrogation unit. Some of the people told the interrogation unit they didn't understand what was being talked about. The men that didn't talk were killed by the Vietnamese that were doing the questioning—*not* by the Americans. There were 11, nine or 10 killed before one of them started talking. I was told that the guys were saying that there had been Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops there and that they had gone toward the ocean by underground tunnels."

Haeberle remembers a hideously small act of compassion. "A GI went up to a little boy who was badly mangled up, and put a blanket over him."

SP4 Larry Colburn was the gunner on a helicopter, flying reconnaissance over the Mylai area. "Outside the village," he recalls, "we saw a VC with a carbine and pack, but he got away. We came back near Mylai and noticed people dead and wounded along the road and all through the village. There was an irrigation ditch full of bodies. We noticed some people were still alive. We didn't know what had happened."

"Our pilot wanted to evacuate some of the wounded, but there was no room in our helicopter, so he called for gunships to help out. We spotted a child. We went down and our crew chief brought out a little boy about 10 years old. He seemed to be in shock."

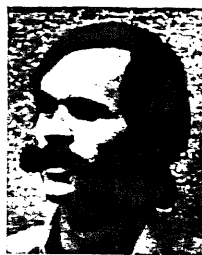
"About 50 meters away there was a bunker with 10 or 15 people. We called for gunships to help evacuate

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COMBAT PHOTOGRAPHER  
RON HAEBERLE



ARMY CORRESPONDENT  
JAY ROBERTS

CONTINUED

them while we took the child to a hospital. There must have been 75 or 80 people in a ditch—some dead, some wounded. I had never seen so many people dead in one place before."

Later the helicopter returned and landed in a paddy near Lieutenant Calley's platoon. The pilot got out and motioned for Lieutenant Calley to come over. "The pilot seemed angry," remembers Charles Sledge, Calley's radio operator, "but we couldn't hear what he was saying. Then Lieutenant Calley came back and told us, 'This guy isn't very happy with the way we're running the operation, but I don't care. He's not in charge.'"

Charles West's squad saw a little boy about 10 feet away. The boy was crying. He had been shot in the arm and leg—probably the same child Charles Gruver had described.

"Gee," a GI said, "what are we going to do with that kid up there?"

Without reply, says West, a radio-man turned, aimed and fired his M16, shooting the little boy through the head. Neither West nor anyone else said anything. They kept going, pushing on, "clearing up," as West calls it.

"That day I was thinking military," says West. "I was thinking about the security of my own men. I said to myself this is a bad thing that all these people had to be killed. But if I was to say that at that time I actually felt a whole lot of sorrow for the people, then I would be lying."

An old papa-san was found hiding. His pants kept coming off. Two GIs dragged him out to be questioned. He was trying to keep his pants on. Captain Medina was doing the questioning. The old man didn't know anything. He rattled something off. Somebody asked Captain Medina what to do with the man, and Jay Roberts heard the captain say, "I don't care."

Captain Medina walked away. Roberts heard a shot and the old man was dead.

In the entire day at Mylai 4, says West, "I can't rightfully say that I got fired upon. I heard shots all the time, but I couldn't tell whether it was our men or an enemy firing upon us. I did hear some guys call on a radio and say they had received sniper fire. They told Captain Medina they were going to

try to get in position to zap the sniper. But I heard all that on the radio."

"I remember this man and his two small children, one boy and one girl, kept walking toward us on this trail," says Haerberle. "They just kept walking toward us, you know, very nervously, very afraid, and you could hear the little girl saying, 'No, no,' in the Vietnamese tongue. The girl was on the right and the boy was on the left. All of a sudden, the GIs just opened up and cut them down."

Before noon Haerberle and Roberts left by chopper to cover another company and have lunch. Later that day, at another company, Haerberle heard a captain listening to a radio report. The report said 125 Vietcong had been killed. The captain didn't know anything about the incident, but he laughed and said, "Yeah, probably all women and children!"

Later, back at base camp, West talked to Haerberle. "He said he thought there was a whole lot of wrongdoing," recalls West. "He had taken a whole lot of pictures of this. I stressed that I thought it was wrong that people should be walking around taking pictures of this. There were a whole lot of GIs going about taking pictures of dead bodies."

"Most of us felt that we were U.S. government property, which we were and still are. I tried to explain to the men at the time that you can't sit there and blame yourself—you were on orders, you were on a search-and-destroy mission. If anyone was to be blamed or court-martialed, it has to be someone higher than our echelon. Calley and the sergeant shouldn't be tried unless they try ev-

ery man that was on that operation."

"They captured three weapons [rifles]," says Roberts. "40 rounds of mortar ammo, grenades, web gear."

"We thought about Mylai a lot after we got back to Duchpho. But neither one of us was very much of a banner carrier." When he wrote it up for the brigade newspaper, Roberts says, "I played it up like it was a big success."

"The village was heavily fortified with rice," says West. "They did find documents that there had been NVA and VC troops there. Also they found evidence that these people had been there not too long ago. I understand that they found ammunition and as far as tunnels, I wouldn't know because I checked into some tunnels and I ran into dead ends."

"Eventually we reached the beach," says John Kinch. "We captured four suspects, one kid, one 15 to 27, one 40 to 55 and a girl in her twenties. They were being beaten kind of hard and the kid named the older man as an NVA platoon leader. Medina drew his .38, took out five rounds and played Russian roulette with him. Then he grabbed him by the hair and threw him up against a tree. He fired two shots with a rifle, closer and closer to the guy's head, then aimed straight at him. The guy must have been very scared because he started rapping like hell. He turned out to be an NVA area commander. Then Medina had a picture of himself taken while he drank from a coconut with one hand and held a big sharp knife under the throat of the kid who was gagged and tied to a bamboo."

"When we got back to LZ Dottie, Captain Medina gave the company a briefing. He said, 'They are running an investigation. As far as anyone knows, we ran into sniper fire and cut loose.' As far as I am concerned there was no sniper fire."

Charles West and his squad stayed in Mylai until about 5 that afternoon. They camped in the same area that night, before moving on to find Vietcong nearer the coast the next day. Some of the men talked about writing their congressmen to protest the action, but they never did. Some were quiet and grim, but not many. "A lot of people knew," Charles West says, "that a lot of people had been killed who didn't have to be killed, but the average GI felt that it was part of our mission. We all wondered where the enemy went. We were all concentrating on finding where they went."

At suppertime they set up bivouac in a little graveyard near Mylai. Children and old papa-sans were hovering nearby. When the GIs opened their C-rations, they shared their supper with these Vietnamese who had survived the massacre.

## An accused lieutenant and the company commander



LT. WILLIAM CALLEY

The first man to be accused by the Army in the deaths at Mylai was Lt. William Calley Jr., who commanded the first platoon to enter the village. He has been ordered to stand general court-martial for the premeditated murder of at least 109 villagers. The Army has given no hint whether it plans to file charges against the company commander, Captain Ernest Medina. Military spokesmen admit only that 23 other men are currently being investigated, 15 of them now civilians. Whether charges can ever be filed against the ex-servicemen is uncertain. The Supreme Court has ruled that the Army cannot court-martial a civilian. In its decision, the Court appeared to invite Congress to write a law to fill the loophole. Congress never acted. South Vietnam could ask to try the civilians, but in light of President Thieu's view that all talk of atrocity is Vietcong propaganda, such a move seems unlikely.



CAPTAIN ERNEST MEDINA



Survivors of Mylai gaze out of makeshift huts at the Songmy camp. Nguyen Thi Doc (above) was hit in the shoulder, saw her granddaughter

Oanh, at right, now age 9, shot in the foot. Oanh's brother was not hit. The women below were both married to a 71-year-old farmer who was killed.



## 'Before, Americans always brought us candy and medicine'

SONGMY  
Crouched in the doorway as a heavy rain puddles in front of her thatch hut, the old woman looks suspiciously at those who pass by. She is wary of people she doesn't know well, and that includes even many of the Vietnamese living near her in the Songmy resettlement village of Quangngai province. Songmy is not the woman's home. It is a government corral where civilians can be protected while troops pursue the Vietcong through every other village in the area.

The old woman is Nguyen Thi Doc, like many in the refugee center a survivor of the massacre at Mylai.

The old woman recalls she was just beginning a morning meal with 13 of her family, including nine grandchildren, when she heard the Americans "come down from the sky."

"They had been in the village before," she says, "and always brought us medicine or candy for the children. If we had known what they came for this time, we could have fled."

The entire family was taken out of the hut and ordered into a field, she says, and then "the soldiers started shooting at everyone."

She was hit through the shoulder and left for dead. She saw her 8-year-old granddaughter, Tran Thi Oanh, shot through the foot and watched her fall over the bodies of her dead brothers and sisters. Nguyen Thi Doc says the Americans must have thought everyone was dead when they left the village about noon.

"I thought Oanh was dead, too," she says. "And I lay in the field until the next morning, when people came from nearby villages to help us."

They were taken to a Vietnamese hospital where they stayed four months. With the exception of Oanh's 6-year-old brother, who miraculously was not hit, everyone else in the family was killed. When she was sent to the resettlement village, other survivors from Mylai told Nguyen Thi Doc they had counted 370 dead. Her voice gets excited when she recalls the number and then trails off—there is nothing more to say.

Down the path in the settlement live two other women, both of them widows of Truong Van Vinh, a 71-year-old farmer. The younger wife had

gone to the market at another village the day of the attack. But the older woman and Vinh were sitting inside his hut, cringing from the artillery barrage that had been pounding near the village for hours. When it stopped, the old woman looked out and saw many Americans walking through the village. Vinh left the hut to see what was happening.

"When he got outside the door," the old woman says, "there was a shot, and I heard him fall to the ground. The soldiers came in and saw me, and motioned for me to come outside. One of them lifted his rifle to shoot me, but another group of Americans sitting around the well shouted to him and he walked away." The woman ran back into the hut where she hid for hours.

All of the Mylai villagers who talked of the incident said they could hear the Americans shouting when they arrived, but the only words they could understand were "VC," "VC." The villagers deny there were any Vietcong in the village, though American battle reports for the day indicated sniper fire and resistance had been directed against the American units for some time before they entered the village. The entire coastal strip of Quangngai province has been a battleground for most of the war. Even today the area around Mylai is frequently visited by the Vietcong.

One of the few male survivors from Mylai is Truong Quang An, a wizened peasant who looks much older than his 59 years. "When we saw the helicopters landing," he says, "I ran with my two nephews to the family shelter outside the hut." The shelter is no more than a four- or five-foot hole covered with thatch and a wooden pallet. An dropped in first and the nephews took their place on the outer edge, closest to the entrance.

"We heard the soldiers walking through the village and when they saw the shelter, they stopped. One of them could see inside, and he pointed his rifle at close range and shot both my nephews." Then the soldiers moved on to the next hut, and An could hear Mylai burning as he curled up in the darkness, sheltered beneath the bodies of the two young men.

HAL WINGO



From The Cleveland Plain Dealer; photo by Ronald L. Haerberle

Aftermath: A cluster of Vietnamese bodies; Calley at Fort Benning



UPI

## Song My: A U.S. Atrocity?

Through two world wars and countless smaller conflicts, the twentieth century has witnessed the evolution of mass warfare aimed directly at civilians. At Dresden and Hiroshima, the United States helped polish the technique to chilling perfection. Yet to the American mind, there has always been a vast moral difference between the impersonal obliteration of a remote strategic target by a bomb—even a nuclear one—and the savage, close-up butchery personified by such Nazi massacres as those at Lidice and Babi Yar. Last week, however, there was mounting and increasingly powerful evidence that—for at least one wildly aberrant moment—a group of American soldiers had deliberately erased that vague but precious distinction.

At the center of the drama was First Lt. William L. Calley Jr., a slight, 26-year-old Floridian known to his friends as Rusty. Calley, who served as a platoon leader with the Americal Division in Vietnam in 1965, faced charges that he had personally executed 100 or more unarmed civilians in an enemy-controlled village nicknamed "Pinkville" on the northern coast of South Vietnam. As the Army's inquiry unfolded last week, it appeared that Calley would soon be ordered to undergo a court-martial at Fort Benning, Ga., and that he might not be alone. Another 24 soldiers and veterans of the Americal Division were also under Army investigation in connection with the case. In Vietnam, moreover, fresh evidence was turned up to suggest that an entire company of U.S. troops had taken part in the massacre, and that the number of Vietnamese civilians who had been slaughtered might be as high as 500.

Despite the enormity of the allegations,

many Americans appeared curiously unmoved by the case when it first broke two weeks ago. For one thing, while many people might have been ready to accept sinister charges against eight Green Berets trained in "black warfare," they found it hard to believe that a young lieutenant and a platoon composed mainly of draftees could commit such a crime. It was only after photographs purporting to show the alleged massacre had appeared in *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*—and had been snapped up by *Life* magazine (page 57)—that editors and readers began to feel reasonably convinced that the episode had occurred at all.

**Quest:** Probably the main source of uncertainty, however, was the piecemeal way in which the story came to light. It was broken by Ronald Lee Ridenhour, 23, an earnest young veteran now enrolled at Claremont Men's College in Pomona, Calif. Ridenhour did not witness the events at Song My—the proper name for Pinkville. But while serving with the Americal Division in 1968 he heard other soldiers talk about it and began his own private investigation. Later, back home in Phoenix with a heavy burden on his conscience, he set down what he had learned in a long letter and mailed copies to President Nixon, the Secretaries of State and Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and various congressmen. "Exactly what did, in fact, occur in the village of 'Pinkville' in March 1968, I do not know for *certain*," he wrote, "but I am convinced that it was something very black indeed. I remain irrevocably persuaded that if you and I do truly believe in the principles of justice... that this country is founded on, then we must press forward a wide-

spread and public investigation of this matter with all our combined efforts."

Inevitably, there were those who questioned Ridenhour's motives. But a careful check of his background turned up no support for such suspicions. Ridenhour has never participated in a peace demonstration and his acquaintances in Phoenix do not consider him a rebel. Ridenhour does feel, however, that the guilty parties at Song My must be exposed. "I believe that Calley was just following orders," he told *NEWSWEEK's* Nolan Davis last week. "When they get finished shaking this hen house, there will be a lot of big roosters falling out of the rafters."

**Toll:** By the time Ridenhour wrote his letter, the Eleventh Brigade of the Americal Division—prompted to action by rumors of the massacre—had already investigated the Song My affair. Its conclusion was that not enough evidence had been found to justify any further action. But Ridenhour's letter eventually got the inquiry back into high gear, and by last week U.S. and South Vietnamese investigators had compiled strong evidence that the incident was no mere rumor. Two weeks ago, agents of the U.S. Army's Criminal Investigation Division visited the three hamlets that make up Song My, slicing through enemy-held territory in a convoy of armored personnel carriers to get there. They found mass graves in three separate areas, as well as a ditch full of bodies. One U.S. official estimated that between 450 and 500 people—most of them women, children and old men—had been killed, and a South Vietnamese investigator placed the figure at 450 to 550. There was no evidence to indicate that the slaughter



Exhibit A: Refugee Do Chuc (right) shows off his son's wounded hand

Associated Press

was an accident. It seemed certain, said one informed American official, that "someone gave the order to shoot some civilians."

Just why that order was given may never be known for sure, but there is ample reason to believe that it was sparked by a blend of peculiarly volatile ingredients. Song My is located in Quang Ngai Province, probably the most violence-ridden area in all of South Vietnam. Dirt-poor and hot-blooded, its people are known for their warlike ways, and when they are not battling outsiders, they are often fighting among themselves. Quang Ngai has favored the Communists ever since World War II (Hanoi's Foreign Minister, Pham Van Dong, and four of its generals were born there), and the local Viet Cong are uncommonly ferocious. Early this year, a U.S. official reportedly found the bodies of two missing American friends up in the hills. One had been jammed into a tiny cage and then had been shot through the knees and el-

bows; the other man's head was encased in a bamboo headdress, and inside it two rats still gnawed on his skull.

The main force opposing the Communists in Quang Ngai was the Americal Division,\* the Army's largest, with 23,000 men. At the time of the Song My incident, the Americal was commanded by Maj. Gen. Samuel W. Koster, now superintendent of West Point, and had only recently arrived in Quang Ngai. It learned quickly and painfully that its enemy had a rare gift for booby traps—not just crude punji stakes, but elaborate explosive devices that caused fearful carnage. In addition, at the time of the incident at Song My, the Americans were still reeling from the enemy's nationwide Tet offensive of early 1968.

It was in this atmosphere that elements of "Task Force Barker" (named for Lt. Col. Frank A. Barker Jr., who was killed

\*Originally formed in the Pacific in 1942, the division takes its name from the title "American Forces in New Caledonia."

in action three months later) set out for Song My. After a preparatory artillery barrage, Lieutenant Calley's unit—Company C, First Battalion, Twentieth Infantry, commanded by Capt. Ernest Medina, also now at Fort Benning—entered the village, which apparently offered only the lightest resistance. One version of what happened next was told by survivors to NEWSWEEK's Paul Brinkley Rogers. His report:

At Truong An, a refugee center north of Quang Ngai City, I encountered 40-year-old Do Hoai, a farmer from Song My. "When the Americans came into the village," he said through an interpreter, "they made the people gather in three places—men, women and children. Then they tried to shoot all of them." Hoai, who fell uninjured under the bodies of his neighbors, escaped later, and he counted up the death toll by comparing the list of known survivors with the village register, a standard practice in Vietnam. Of Song My's three hamlets, Hoai claimed, Tu Cung lost 370 people, My Hoi lost 175 and Ding Hong lost 22, for a total of 567 deaths. "There was much pleading for mercy when the soldiers came to shoot us," said Do Chuc, 48, another survivor. "A monk held out his ID papers to the Americans, but they shook their heads and killed him too."

Although other villagers backed up this story, their assertions had to be viewed with a certain amount of skepticism, if for no other reason than the fact that Song My has long been a Viet Cong fief, and at least some of its people must still have Communist sympathies. Indeed, for the past twenty months, Hanoi's propagandists have been feeding on the Song My incident. (Last week, the Communist delegates at the Paris peace talks took advantage of the uproar over the massacre to claim that another 1,200 Vietnamese had been drowned by Americans in the South China Sea earlier this year, a charge the Pentagon declined to dignify with a reply.) Elsewhere, however, corroboration for the villagers' story was beginning to emerge.

Witness: At Fort Dix, N.J., Sgt. Michael Bernhardt, a friend of Ridenhour's, said he had witnessed some of the killings but, like a few other GIs in the unit, had refused to take part in the slaughter. "Prior to the operation," Bernhardt told NEWSWEEK's Patricia Lynden, "our company officer ordered us to destroy the village and its inhabitants." Bernhardt said he had watched while some twenty civilians were killed and that, at a "conservative estimate," he had seen about 100 bodies in all. Asked whether there were any Viet Cong among the farmers, he replied: "Some of the people in the village weren't old enough to walk yet. I didn't see how they could be Viet Cong."

By late last week, the public outcry over the massacre was beginning to mount. In the Senate, Charles Goodell of New York demanded that the Armed



Reminder: Mourners examine the bones of Communist victims in Hué

UPI

Services Committee launch an investigation. In the House, Ohio's Rep. William Minshall complained that the "handling of the matter smacks of the same kind of secrecy that surrounded the Green Beret case." Abroad, the story prompted even more emotional reactions. In London, Prime Minister Harold Wilson told the House of Commons that if the massacre reports proved to be even "one-quarter true, they would be regarded as very grave atrocities." And the tabloid Daily Sketch headlined: IF THIS CAN HAPPEN, AMERICA HAS LOST.

**Terror:** There remained many unanswered questions about Song My—precisely how many people had died, who had ordered their deaths and, most important, why they had been killed at all. But whatever the answers, the massacre presumably was not the first U.S. atrocity in Vietnam, although it was doubtless the largest (box). Nor did it come close to matching the savagery exhibited by the Communists when they seized the city of Hue during the Tet offensive and held it for over three weeks. During that time, the Communists violated their own rules against alienating the population on which their movement depends by summarily executing masses of civilians: so far, some 2,300 bodies have been found, and more are being dug up all the time.

But the recitation of this and other Communist atrocities was of little comfort to Americans. Quite conceivably, the disclosure of the incident at Song My—which allegedly involves the massacre of a whole community of civilians at point-blank range—could have a profoundly disturbing effect on the American psyche. This chilling spectacle of cold-blooded murder may be interpreted by some as a sinister comment on the mid-century American character. But more to the point, it serves as a stark reminder of the brutalizing effect that war—and particularly the war in Vietnam—has had upon all too many of those unfortunate enough to become involved in it.



Roland M. Charles

Ridenhour: A burdened conscience  
December 1, 1969

## GI's in Battle: The 'Dink' Complex

**A**lthough the full truth about the massacre at Song My may never be known, even the details that have emerged so far point up a distressing fact about the Vietnam war: many U.S. fighting men, under the stress of combat, display a profound contempt for the people of South Vietnam. With hearty distaste, GI's commonly refer to the South Vietnamese—allies and enemies alike—as "dinks." And in the view of many longtime observers of the war, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the strong antipathy underlying such epithets—or the "dink syndrome" as it is known in Vietnam—sometimes plays a part in the casual killing of civilian bystanders. "Psychologically and morally," says a U.S. civilian official, "it's much easier to kill a 'dink' than it is to shoot a 'Vietnamese'."

Friction between allies, of course, is not a new phenomenon. During World War II, American troops in the China-Burma-India theater often derided their native comrades as "wogs," "chinks" or "slopes." In Korea, the people of both north and south were lumped together by American GI's under the derisive term "gook." But in these earlier wars, there was at least a frontline on most occasions, and the enemy, by definition, was on the other side of it. By contrast, in Vietnam there is often no way to tell friend from foe, and the constant suspicion sometimes prods tired and frustrated soldiers into rash actions.

**Contempt:** Sometimes these acts are mindless impulses. Late last year, as he whizzed by a rice field in his Jeep, one soldier took a playful pot shot at a Vietnamese farmer's hat: he missed, blew the man's head off and drew a five-year prison term. In other cases, contempt for Vietnamese lives is demonstrated in a more premeditated way. One U.S. battalion commander, observed a few months ago by NEWSWEEK's Saigon bureau chief Maynard Parker, dubbed his helicopter a "Gookmobile" and recorded his kills on its fuselage with a neatly painted row of conical hats. Another officer liked to stalk Vietnamese in "free-fire zones" (where anything that moves is fair game), plinking at them from his helicopter with a pistol. His shooting sprees were perfectly legal—and the victims may even have been Viet Cong.

Officially, the U.S. command takes infinite precautions to avoid civilian casualties; six or eight separate clearances are often required to fire a single round of artillery. "I'm sometimes astounded," says an American diplomat, "that they ever get a round out of the tube." But the use of such devices as free-fire zones and random "H&I" (harassment and in-



American soldier with suspected VC

terdiction) artillery fire inevitably create the unintended impression that Vietnamese life is cheap. Young GI's, moreover, soon learn that the main business of an army in wartime is killing, and that success is measured almost solely by body count. A brigade commander once ran a contest to rack up his unit's 10,000th kill; the prize was a week of luxury in the colonel's own quarters, and the happy winner was even shown off to a visiting journalist.

**Traps:** The problem is compounded by the isolation of most GI's from ordinary Vietnamese citizens. The U.S. soldier lives in his own "world of the big PX"; the civilians he sees most frequently include panhandlers, black marketeers, prostitutes, taxi drivers and VC suspects—none of whom inspire much affection. And the GI soon learns from bitter experience that even apparently friendly villagers may be his mortal enemies. Fully a third of the Americal Division's casualties this year have been caused by booby traps, and many of the explosives were probably made by meek-looking farmers and grandmothers. "It gets maddening going into the same place again and again and seeing your people's legs blown off," an Army captain said last week. "You know the VC couldn't do it without support. You know even the kids are making grenades. When you're under that kind of stress, anything can happen."

The fact that "anything" does not happen more often is a credit to the American soldier. But the GI's bitter and sometimes violent distaste for the people he is supposed to defend hardly stands as a good omen. Since the first American combat soldier set foot in Vietnam, U.S. officials have repeatedly stressed the crucial importance of winning the hearts and minds of the South Vietnamese people. "Dinks," almost by definition, do not possess hearts and minds worth winning.