

# VIETNAM - ATROCITIES

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Seymour M. Hersh

A Report on the Massacre and its Aftermath

# MY LAI 4

## I. "YOU WOULDN'T BELIEVE IT"

It must have been a beautiful area, Quang Ngai Province, before the war. Situated on the northeast coast of South Vietnam, its green rice paddies and fertile farmlands stretch in a plain from the rolling foothills of the Ammanese Mountains east to the smooth white sand beaches of the South China Sea.

But the mountains—at some points less than ten miles inland—also provided a perfect haven for revolutionaries. The people of Quang Ngai have a history of rebellion dating back to the sixteenth century; it was there that Vietminh troops led revolts against the French in the 1930s and after World War II; and it was there that the Viet Cong fought the Saigon government in the 1950s and 1960s.

When Vietnam was partitioned in 1954, after the defeat of the French, Saigon officials estimated that 90,000 southerners went north to join the Hanoi regime. More than 90 per cent of them came from Quang Ngai and a neighboring province. By the mid-1960s Quang Ngai's population was estimated at 640,000; it was South Vietnam's third-largest province. It was also considered the toughest Viet Cong stronghold in the country.

Attempts to separate the Viet Cong from the people had begun in earnest early in 1962, when the Saigon government launched its Strategic Hamlet Program, later known as "pacification" or "rural construction." Whole families were uprooted and moved into fortified hamlets; if they refused to go, units of the South Vietnamese Army burned their homes and fields. The program was a failure; it embittered the peasants and did little to

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drive the Viet Cong out of the area. Those civilians living inside fortified hamlets were still in contact with the National Liberation Front, the political arm of the Viet Cong, and the gates and walls of strategic hamlets were often scribbled with Viet Cong slogans of defiance.

Quang Ngai, not unnaturally, became the target for the first major American combat operation of the Vietnam war. The mission, conducted by the U. S. Marines in 1965, was called "Operation Starlight" and more than 700 Viet Cong were reported killed. General William C. Westmoreland, commander of the U. S. forces in Vietnam, later boasted that the Marines "could meet and beat any force they might encounter."

The Marines were given the job of freeing Quang Ngai and its people from Communist control. To help them, a new concept of pacification was devised. As explained by a senior officer in early 1966: "We've been told by our superiors that in many areas there isn't any chance of pacifying the people, so instead we've got to sanitize our region—kill the Viet Cong and move the civilians out. We are not going to be able to make the people loyal to our side. So we are going to sterilize the area until we can win it back." American military men began quoting Mao Tse-tung to the effect that in guerrilla warfare the guerrillas are the fish and the people are the water. The officers talked of catching the fish by removing the water.

By this time much of Quang Ngai, as well as many other provinces, had been declared a "free-fire zone," in which all civilians were automatically suspected of being Viet Cong or Viet Cong sympathizers. The U. S. forces did not need to get approval from Saigon or local officials before staging bombing missions and artillery attacks. Tens of thousands of tons of bombs, rockets, napalm, and cannon fire were poured into the free-fire zones during much of 1965, '66, and '67. Often a pilot would find himself left with some bombs or other ordnance after a mission and simply drop them on a likely-looking target. Artillery units devised a fire concept known as Harassment and Interdiction, in which rounds of artillery were fired at irregular intervals at no targets in particular.

Yet the Viet Cong continued their hold on Quang Ngai.

In the spring of 1967, a new task force was assembled under command of the Marines and ordered anew to sanitize the Communists in the area. Known as Task Force Oregon, it included two infantry brigades, one airborne unit, and a brigade of Korean Marines. In four months of military operations, Task Force Oregon claimed a kill of 3,300 Viet Cong, and said it had captured 800 weapons and arrested 5,000 suspects in the area. By then, as a side effect of the two years of U. S. operations in Quang Ngai, at least 138,000 civilians had been made homeless and brought into refugee camps and about 70 per cent of the homes and huts in the province had been destroyed by bombs, shells, or fire. Some infantry platoons formed a "Zippo Squad"—named after the cigarette lighter—to handle the burning of homes and huts during hamlet sweeps. By the fall of 1967, the only government hospital in the province was treating more than 700 patients a month in its 400-bed facility. Hundreds of patients were overcrowding wards and corridors; hundreds more could not get in.

In September, combat operations in Quang Ngai were handed over to a newly formed unit known as the Americal Division, which was composed of three brigades—the 196th, which had served as part of Task Force Oregon, and two new fighting

teams, the Eleventh Brigade from Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, and the 198th Brigade from Fort Hood, Texas. Many of the senior officers of the new division came from Fort Hood expressly to serve in the new headquarters under the command of Major General Samuel W. Koster. A West Pointer, Koster had the rare opportunity to put together his own command staff, and selected a number of his classmates and friends to serve with him.

There were many rag-tag aspects to the new division. It was not an elite fighting force, and thus did not warrant the helicopters and armored equipment of an airborne division or cavalry brigade. There was serious squabbling and competition among the three brigades making up the division; many GIs chose to wear the patch of their brigade and not the new division patch. For many brigade and battalion officers of the new division, Vietnam was a chance to put in some combat duty, earn battle ribbons, then come back with the combat experience they thought was vital to future promotion. At that time the desire to see combat was so high among the field-grade officers—majors and above—that each was limited to six months' duty.

The majority of troops in the front-line combat units were draftees. They knew little about Vietnam and usually cared less. And, although ranking officers would deny it in public, they themselves had little use for the average combat GI. One former Americal Division colonel, talking later about the GIs in one of the division's task forces, said, "When you talk to a bunch of task-force nothings—you're talking about a bunch of guys who don't know anything. They're dumb dogfaces." Another Vietnam officer said, "We are at war with the ten-year-old children. It may not be humanitarian, but that's what it's like."

The Army's effort to educate GIs on the rights of prisoners consisted in 1968 of two hours of instruction a year. Those GIs who were assigned to South Vietnam got an additional few hours of training upon arrival, plus a wallet-sized card entitled "The Enemy in Your Hands," which told soldiers: "Always treat your prisoners humanely."

The average GI's ignorance of Vietnamese customs was appalling, and the Army did little to educate them. The Vietnam-bound soldiers were given—at the most—only one or two lectures on the country and its people while in training. Miss Claire Culhane, a Canadian who served as a tuberculosis hospital volunteer in Quang Ngai City in 1967-68, later described how GIs assigned to pacification projects would often complain that the Vietnamese didn't care about their own children. They would say that the mothers tried to leave them behind when they were being evacuated. "Saw it with my own eyes," one GI said. "A woman hopped up on the chopper after setting her baby down on the ground. When I picked it up and handed it to her, she shouted and pointed to the ground and wouldn't accept the baby from me." The GI didn't know that a peasant woman in Quang Ngai believes it is unlucky to carry a baby across a threshold, and so she always sets the baby down, steps across, and then reaches back and picks it up—in a single swift movement. Another GI claimed that "you can't help these dinks. They like to live like pigs in hovels, and even when you build them new houses, they won't live in them." What he didn't know, however, was that according to the custom in that area, married women had to live in houses with full, double-sloped roofs. The new GI-built units were attached, single-slope cor-

rugated tin-roofed huts. Since most of the peasant women were not widows, they refused to move in.

Even worse than the misunderstandings were the deliberate cruelties and implicit assumptions of superiority on the part of the Americans. The pacification policy called for the free provision of medical care and medicines to the civilian population. But in practice, visits by medical teams to any hamlet were generally infrequent, and only two days' supply of medicine would be given each patient out of fear that the excess would fall into Viet Cong hands. Vietnamese were provided with new names when they entered a U. S. military hospital, so the staff would have less trouble identifying them. Thus a civilian who lost an eye was called, for example, "Bubbles," "Ohio," or "Cyclops." All U. S. hospitals had to keep 35 per cent of their beds empty in case of an emergency involving American casualties; this rule was adhered to even in areas where the local civilian populace was in desperate need of medical help. Few Americans paid any attention to the names of hamlets and villages, many of them centuries old, and devised their own titles, which often found their way onto official military maps.

Young GIs soon learned that there were Army names for Vietnamese too: gook, dink, and slope. One battalion commander in Vietnam named his helicopter the "Gookmobile" and listed his kills on the fuselage with a neatly painted row of conical hats. Another helicopter pilot stalked Vietnamese in free-fire zones, shooting at anyone who moved below with his pistol or a rifle. Another called his helicopter the "Slope-toter." One brigade commander ran a contest to celebrate his unit's 10,000th enemy kill. The winning GI received a week's pass to stay in the colonel's personal quarters. Many battalions staged contests among their rifle companies for the highest score in enemy kills, with the winning unit getting additional time for passes. Not every officer liked what he was doing. "I am sickened by the numbers of people we have killed and kept killing all year," one troop commander, after completing a tour of Vietnam in 1968, told a reporter. "This is not my concept of a soldier's career, just killing, killing, killing." But he did it nonetheless.

Among the highly touted colonels in Vietnam in 1967-68 was George S. Patton III, son of the famous World War II leader, who was commander of the Eleventh Armored Cavalry Regiment just south of Quang Ngai. His unit had the motto: "Find the bastards and pile on." He would exhort his men before combat by telling them, "I do like to see the arms and legs fly." He once told his staff: "The present ratio of 90 per cent killing to 10 per cent pacification is just about right." Patton celebrated Christmas in 1968 by sending cards reading: "From Colonel and Mrs. George S. Patton III—Peace on Earth." Attached to the cards were color photographs of dismembered Viet Cong soldiers stacked in a neat pile.

A military physician who served with Patton later recalled: "In my experience, Patton was neither the best nor the worst of the military there. He is simply the product of the misbegotten and misguided idea that a single-minded dedication to destruction is to be highly rewarded." When Patton left Vietnam, he threw a farewell party at which he frolicked with a peace medallion around his neck while carrying the polished skull of a Viet Cong with a bullet hole above the left eye. When a Congressman later read an account of that party and of some of Patton's statements in *The New York Times Magazine*, he privately wrote the Pentagon to complain. He received a reply twenty

days later from a major general, airily brushing aside the Congressman's concern and giving a candid view of the leeway provided combat officers in Vietnam:

*Colonel Patton was commanding a unit in combat. In carrying out his mission he properly had the safety and well-being of his men in mind. This concern is dramatized by consideration of the fact that his regiment averaged eight to ten average enemy contacts each week, inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy at a very low cost to his own men. In discussions with the members of his regiment he emphasized that combat was a kill-or-be-killed environment and used the phrase that he liked to see arms and legs fly to point this up.*

*At a party given in his honor on the occasion of his departure from Vietnam, he was presented with a peace medallion. This medallion is the unofficial insignia of the platoon of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment that had the best combat record of any unit in the regiments. He was also presented with an old skull that obviously had been retrieved from the jungle.*

In September 1969, Colonel Patton's promotion to brigadier general of the U. S. Army was approved by the U. S. Senate. He was one of the youngest officers to achieve that high rank.

To the inexperienced GIs and their inexperienced officers, life seemed cheap in Quang Ngai. "If you can shoot artillery and bombs in there every night," one Americal Division soldier said, "how can the people in there be worth so much?" A favorite joke heard repeatedly among the Marines in Quang Ngai went something like this: The loyal Vietnamese should all be taken and put out to sea in a raft. Everybody left in the country should then be killed, and the nation paved over with concrete, like a parking lot. Then the raft should be sunk.

Some of the contempt was inevitable, a by-product of trying to conduct military operations in an area controlled by the Viet Cong by night, and no one by day. As many as one third of the Americal Division's casualties in some periods resulted from enemy mines and booby traps. The Viet Cong were always hard to find for the troops of the Americal Division, but the people were not. Bombs and artillery were now being called in to destroy villages in retaliation for sniper fire—or reports of sniper fire. The Vietnamese reciprocated the contempt. One British photographer traveled with units of the Americal in late 1967, and later wrote: "In other parts of the country, children would quite often grin at you and beg gum. Not in Quang Ngai. They wouldn't look you in the eyes. They would hiss the Americans, and it upset the young conscripts, who'd been told to expect a great welcome from the people they were defending."

The infantry's basic tactic by then was a refined search-and-destroy method known informally as the scorched-earth policy. The technique was best described in a letter sent home by a GI to his family and later published in his local newspaper:

*Dear Mom and Dad:*

*Today we went on a mission and I am not very proud of myself, my friends, or my country. We burned every hut in sight!*

*It was a small rural network of villages and the people were incredibly poor. My unit burned and plundered their meager possessions. Let me try to explain the situation to you.*

*The huts here are thatched palm leaves. Each one has a dried mud bunker inside. These bunkers are to protect the families. Kind of like air-raid shelters.*

*My unit commanders, however, chose to think that these bunkers are offensive. So every hut we find that has a bunker, we are ordered to burn to the ground.*

*When the ten helicopters landed this morning, in the midst of these huts, and six men jumped out of each "chopper," we were firing the moment we bit the ground. We fired into all the huts we could. Then we got "on line" and swept the area.*

*It is then that we burn these huts and take all men old enough to carry a weapon and the choppers come and get them. . . . Everyone is crying, begging, and praying that we don't separate them and take their husbands and fathers, sons and grandfathers. The women wail and moan. Then they watch in terror as we burn their homes, personal possessions, and food. Yes, we burn all rice and shoot all livestock.*

*Some of the guys are so careless! Today a buddy of mine called, "La dai" ("Come here") into a hut and an old man came out of the bomb shelter. My buddy told the old man to get away from the hut and since we have to move quickly on a sweep, just threw a hand grenade into the shelter.*

*As he pulled the pin the old man got excited and started jabbering and running toward my buddy and the hut. A GI, not understanding, stopped the old man with a football tackle just as my buddy threw the grenade. . . . After he threw it, and was running for cover, we all heard a baby crying from inside the shelter.*

*There was nothing we could do. . . .*

*After the explosion we found the mother, two children (ages about six and twelve, boy and girl) and an almost newborn baby. That is what the old man was trying to tell us!*

Often, such victims were included in the day's statistics as enemy kills. The GIs in Quang Ngai had a joke for that practice too: "Anything that's dead and isn't white is a VC."

What, perhaps, would happen inadvertently in the beginning became routine. Terry Reid of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, spent much of 1968 serving with the Eleventh Brigade of the Americal Division near Chu Lai, the division headquarters a few miles north of Quang Ngai City. The indiscriminate slaughter of Vietnamese women and children was commonplace in his unit. "Our company was credited with hundreds of kills," Reid told a reporter. "In the first firefight our company encountered, my platoon alone accounted for forty kills. Yet no one in my platoon saw a [Viet Cong] body. But I witnessed many civilians being shot down like clay pigeons."

On one assault, Reid said, some GIs were killed in a mine accident and his unit retaliated by killing sixty civilians—women, children, and old men. "After all this was done, word came up from the captain at the rear that no women were to be shot. If they don't clarify this—'No women are to be shot'—it is free game." He explained that all young Vietnamese "are supposed to be in the Army. If you see one and he is not. . . he is free game to be shot." One day, he added, "we saw a young man in a rice paddy with a water buffalo. Since he did not belong there, one of our men shot him. We found no gun near him, but he wasn't supposed to be there. After you kill your first innocent civilian, you tell yourself you are doing the right thing. Everyone else is doing it, so you do it too. You know you are doing it and can't turn back." Reid remembered one GI who refused to carry out an order, believing he would be imprisoned and sent out of the unit. He was court-martialed, busted a few grades in rank, and sent back to rejoin his old platoon.

"To me," the ex-GI said, "the war was being ambushed every three to five days, being left with scores of wounded GIs, and

then coming right back at the enemy by going into an innocent village, destroying and killing people."

Reid spoke out in November 1969 only after he had read accounts of how another element of his brigade—the Eleventh—had perpetrated the wholesale slaughter of the hamlet of My Lai 4 northeast of Quang Ngai City. Before seeing the news stories, Reid said, he had tried to put it all out of his mind.

Most GIs simply weren't talking about such things earlier.

When *The New Yorker* correspondent Jonathan Schell was touring Quang Ngai Province in the late summer of 1967, as he wrote later, a GI who was driving him around in a jeep suddenly turned and said, "You wouldn't believe the things that go on in this war."

"What things?" Schell asked.

"You wouldn't believe it."

"What kind of things, then?"

"You wouldn't believe it, so I'm not going to tell you," the GI said, shaking his head no. "No one's ever going to find out about some things, and after this war is over, and we've all gone home, no one is ever going to know."

## II. CHARLIE COMPANY

Charlie Company, First Battalion, Twentieth Infantry, came to Vietnam in December 1967. Its men, like GIs in all combat units, considered themselves to be part of the best and toughest outfit in the newly formed Eleventh Brigade. Since December 1966, the brigade had been readying itself for Vietnam at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii; when the orders came to move out, Charlie Company was named to lead the advance party.

Captain Ernest L. Medina, the thirty-three-year-old former enlisted man who was the company's commanding officer, was proud of his men. "We became the best company in the battalion. We took every award—athletics, the company-of-the-month trophy." Medina's hustle had earned him the nickname "Mad Dog," a term that many of his company would use later when complaining about the captain's love of marching and field duty. Originally, the nickname was meant as a compliment; Medina's men were wiping out a mock Communist aggressor unit during exercises in Hawaii when one officer broke in on the radio to proclaim, as he thought a Viet Cong might, "Hey, Mad Dog Medina." After that, Medina would walk into the officers' club and people would say, "Hey, Mad Dog, how are you?" Medina took it as a joke.

The captain was enthusiastic about killing Viet Cong, even in mock battles. He was anxious to go to Vietnam to help win a war he believed in. But there was a personal reason, too—his career. A Mexican-American, he was born into poverty at Springer, New Mexico, in 1936. His mother died when he was an infant and he was raised in a hard-working ranching and farming community in Montrose, Colorado, on the western slope of the Colorado Mountains. When he was sixteen, he lied about his age to enlist in the National Guard, and then the Army; from the very first he wanted to make the military a career. In 1964, after eight years in the infantry, he became an officer, graduating with honors from the Officers' Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia, and stayed on for two years to serve as an instructor. He wrote a school paper on "Meteorological

Effects on the 4.2-in. Mortar Shell." In 1966 he was promoted to captain and made a company commander. By all accounts he was an excellent officer. Lieutenant Colonel Edward C. Beers, who served above Medina as commanding officer of the First Battalion in Hawaii and in Vietnam, personally considered him the most outstanding officer in his command. "He is a good Army man."

Medina's promotion to captain had been quick and easy, but rising to major would be more difficult because, as he said, he "didn't have enough education." Vietnam offered him his best chance, and he wanted to make the most of it.

He was off to a good start. Putting together a first-rate fighting unit was no easy feat in 1966. As always, the men assigned to infantry units were those who, upon entering service, performed poorly on the various Army qualification and aptitude examinations. GIs scoring average and above were most usually assigned to a support or training unit to become, for example, clerk-typists, or computer technicians. In Vietnam, there were as many as eight support troops for each combat soldier in the field. Most of the men in Charlie Company had volunteered for the draft; only a few had gone to college for even one year. Nearly half were black, with a few Mexican-Americans. Most were eighteen to twenty-two years old. The favorite reading matter of Charlie Company, like that of other line infantry units in Vietnam, was comic books. Thirteen of the 130 men had not done well enough in the Army's basic intelligence tests to qualify for service, but had been accepted under a new program, Project 100,000, endorsed by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, which provided remedial education for those who would otherwise not be eligible for the Army. But as it worked out, none of the Project 100,000 men in Charlie Company had been exposed to any further education before getting shipped to Vietnam.

There was a decided advantage for Medina in not having a group of college graduates under his command: Charlie Company was a "grunt" unit; its men were the foot soldiers, the "GI Joes," who understood they were to take orders, not question them. In Hawaii, Medina had been fair but tough, handing out disciplinary penalties when needed but sticking up for his men on many occasions. Charlie Company respected and admired its captain. "He did everything for his men," Henry Pedrick Jr., of Alameda, California, said. "When we had chow in the field, the enlisted men ate before the officers... all the time. His men always came first." Michael Bernhardt of Franklin Square, New York, was impressed by Medina's "tremendous grip on his men. He was so hard-core." Medina could outwalk anybody in the company. "He was hard," William Wyatt of Oklahoma City said. "That's the way you got to do it."

Nobody in the unit, however, admired Medina as much as William L. Calley, Jr., then a twenty-four-year-old second lieutenant from Miami who was serving as a platoon leader. Medina was swarthy, powerfully built, and commanded respect; Calley was boyish-looking, five-foot, three-inches tall, and unsure of himself. No sergeant would dare cross Medina in public; but Calley's chief noncommissioned officer, Sergeant Isaiah Cowen, a thirteen-year veteran from Columbia, South Carolina, was always arguing with Calley in front of the men.

Despite these differences, Calley and Medina had much in common: they both wanted to make the military a career. Calley had flunked out of Palm Beach Junior College in 1963 after earning four Fs. By his own admission, he came from an emo-

tionally cold family, one that had never been close. His high-school friends had called him "Rusty," a nickname that stayed with him. There was nothing relaxed about him; he began smoking three to four packages of cigarettes a day and by the age of nineteen he was treated for a stomach ulcer. After leaving college, Calley worked as a bellhop and then briefly as a restaurant dishwasher before becoming a switchman for the then strike-bound East Coast Railway. He made the local newspapers in 1964 when police in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, arrested him for allowing a forty-seven-car freight train to block traffic for nearly thirty minutes during rush hour at several downtown intersections. He was later exonerated. Facing a bleak future, he saved some money, bought a car, and in 1965 left Florida, heading west. His friends didn't hear from him again for nearly three years; some thought he was dead. He wandered around for a year—one of his jobs then was taking photographs for an insurance-adjustment agency—before enlisting in the Army in July 1966 while in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He quickly found roots as an enlisted man, and was pleased when the Army—despite his poor academic record—decided he would make good officer material. He graduated from the Officers' Candidate School at Fort Benning without learning how to read a map properly.

If there is any consensus among former members of Calley's platoon in Vietnam, it is amazement that the Army considered Calley officer material. Allen Boyce of Bradley Beach, New Jersey, an eighteen-year-old rifleman at the time of the massacre, said that "everybody used to joke about Calley. He was one of those guys they just take off the street." Rennard Doines of Fort Worth, Texas, thought that Calley constantly tried to impress Medina. "He was always trying to be the big man; always would be the one to beat them [the Vietnamese] up. He didn't know what was going on half the time." Charles W. Hall of Columbus, Ohio, was one of Calley's machine gunners: "Calley also reminded me of a kid, a kid trying to play war." Hall added that Calley, apparently trying to impress his men, once told them that he had worked as a private detective in Miami—perhaps thinking of his work for an insurance adjuster. "We all called him 'Surfside 5½'"—a reference to a once-popular television private-eye series known as *Surfside 6*.

Many men in the company said that the captain would sometimes refer to Calley as "Sweetheart"; some thought it was a mocking reference, others described it as just a nickname. Gary Garfalo of Stockton, California, recalled that Medina "didn't show any respect for Calley; it was kind of hard for anybody else to show respect." Roy L. Wood of Richmond, Virginia, a rifleman in Calley's platoon, believed that "Medina didn't like Calley. Calley was always doing things wrong... never right. I wondered sometimes how he got through OCS; he couldn't read no darn map and a compass would confuse his ass." Robert E. Maples of Freehold, New Jersey, said that Calley was always trying to "do things that would make him out to be a hero. That's what he tried to do—be a good boy in front of the captain. I just couldn't make it out... why he always had to try to make something out of himself he wasn't. He was always trying to be the first one."

Daniel E. Zeigler of Santa Barbara, California, served with Calley's platoon until he, Zeigler, was seriously injured in a mine accident in mid-February. He remembers that the men in his platoon mocked the young officer, but followed his orders. A favorite Calley expression was "I'm the boss." Sergeant Cowen,

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Despite these differences, Calley and Medina had much in common: they both wanted to make the military a career. Calley had flunked out of Palm Beach Junior College in 1963 after earning four Fs. By his own admission, he came from an emo-

tionally cold family, one that had never been close. His high-school friends had called him "Rusty," a nickname that stayed with him. There was nothing relaxed about him; he began smoking three to four packages of cigarettes a day and by the age of nineteen he was treated for a stomach ulcer. After leaving college, Calley worked as a bellhop and then briefly as a restaurant dishwasher before becoming a switchman for the then strike-bound East Coast Railway. He made the local newspapers in 1964 when police in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, arrested him for allowing a forty-seven-car freight train to block traffic for nearly thirty minutes during rush hour at several downtown intersections. He was later exonerated. Facing a bleak future, he saved some money, bought a car, and in 1965 left Florida, heading west. His friends didn't hear from him again for nearly three years; some thought he was dead. He wandered around for a year—one of his jobs then was taking photographs for an insurance-adjustment agency—before enlisting in the Army in July 1966 while in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He quickly found roots as an enlisted man, and was pleased when the Army—despite his poor academic record—decided he would make good officer material. He graduated from the Officers' Candidate School at Fort Benning without learning how to read a map properly.

If there is any consensus among former members of Calley's platoon in Vietnam, it is amazement that the Army considered Calley officer material. Allen Boyce of Bradley Beach, New Jersey, an eighteen-year-old rifleman at the time of the massacre, said that "everybody used to joke about Calley. He was one of those guys they just take off the street." Rennard Doines of Fort Worth, Texas, thought that Calley constantly tried to impress Medina. "He was always trying to be the big man; always would be the one to beat them [the Vietnamese] up. He didn't know what was going on half the time." Charles W. Hall of Columbus, Ohio, was one of Calley's machine gunners: "Calley also reminded me of a kid, a kid trying to play war." Hall added that Calley, apparently trying to impress his men, once told them that he had worked as a private detective in Miami—perhaps thinking of his work for an insurance adjuster. "We all called him 'Surfside 5½'"—a reference to a once-popular television private-eye series known as *Surfside 6*.

Many men in the company said that the captain would sometimes refer to Calley as "Sweetheart"; some thought it was a mocking reference, others described it as just a nickname. Gary Garfalo of Stockton, California, recalled that Medina "didn't show any respect for Calley; it was kind of hard for anybody else to show respect." Roy L. Wood of Richmond, Virginia, a rifleman in Calley's platoon, believed that "Medina didn't like Calley. Calley was always doing things wrong... never right. I wondered sometimes how he got through OCS; he couldn't read no darn map and a compass would confuse his ass." Robert E. Maples of Freehold, New Jersey, said that Calley was always trying to "do things that would make him out to be a hero. That's what he tried to do—be a good boy in front of the captain. I just couldn't make it out... why he always had to try to make something out of himself he wasn't. He was always trying to be the first one."

Daniel E. Zeigler of Santa Barbara, California, served with Calley's platoon until he, Zeigler, was seriously injured in a mine accident in mid-February. He remembers that the men in his platoon mocked the young officer, but followed his orders. A favorite Calley expression was "I'm the boss." Sergeant Cowen,

a Negro who bitterly argued about tactics with Calley throughout their stay in Vietnam, later commented that Calley "was my superior officer and I had to follow him whether I wanted to or not. Personal opinions don't enter into it; you can't have any ifs, ands, or buts about it, you have to go with your officers."

The other key sergeant in the first platoon,\* David Mitchell of St. Francisville, Louisiana, was also a Negro. Mitchell was widely disliked in his platoon, however, for his arrogance.

In Charlie Company, the whites and blacks usually kept to themselves, as happened in most units in Vietnam. To Roy Wood, a black Southerner, "it seemed like some of those whites didn't want to be bothered too much with us." Other Negroes noted that Medina surrounded himself with whites in his headquarters group who manned radios and helped to run the company. Harry Stanley, born in Gulfport, Mississippi, a quick-witted Negro, had learned Vietnamese on his own while in Vietnam; in fact, he was convinced that he could speak Vietnamese more fluently than white members of the company who had studied it in Army language school. Yet, it was not until Medina left the company in July 1968 that Stanley got a chance to demonstrate this ability. On the whole, however, Charlie Company saved its antagonism for the Vietnamese. "There wasn't any prejudice in that whole company," said Herbert Carter of Houston, Texas, a Negro. "The government ought to take some pictures of us and say: 'Hey, these guys got along good—at least they killed together.'"

If there was any reason for what began to happen to Charlie Company, it was not too much combat—but too little. The company had conducted some search-and-destroy missions around Eleventh Brigade headquarters at Duc Pho shortly after arriving in Vietnam, with no real enemy contact. Its expectations rose when the brigade, with more units arriving every day from Hawaii, took over responsibility from the South Korean Marines for monitoring an area 40 miles to the north. The 150-square-mile area included parts of the embattled Quang Ngai Province east of Highway One to the South China Sea coast. To continue search-and-destroy operations in the zone, the brigade set up Task Force Barker, a tiny ad hoc unit composed of one company from each of the three battalions in the brigade. The ultimate parent unit of this force, headed by and named after Lieutenant Colonel Frank A. Barker, Jr., was the Americal Division operating out of Chu Lai to the south. Medina's company was assigned to the task force, and relocated on January 26, 1968, at Landing Zone Dotti, one of the three artillery bases from which the three companies worked and bivouacked in the area.

One of the task force's main objectives would be keeping pressure on an area a few miles northeast of Quang Ngai City known as Pinkville, the name deriving from the fact that its higher population density caused it to appear in red on Army maps. The operation was given the code name "Muscatine."

\*Infantry companies theoretically are composed of three rifle platoons and a weapons platoon, each with forty men. The platoons, led by lieutenants, have four ten-man squads, each led by sergeants. Each squad is comprised of two small-weapons fire teams. By the time Charlie Company went into My Lai 4, its ranks were depleted and most of the platoons were operating with two or three squads.

"We were informed that the Viet Cong had been in the area for twenty to twenty-five years," Medina later recalled. "The inhabitants in the outlying villages had all been moved at one time or another. The area was a permanent free-fire zone." The captain said he routinely explained to his troops that if they received fire from a hamlet, they could return it, taking care not to fire at unarmed citizens who posed no seeming threat. At least one soldier recalled other advice. Gary Garfolo remembered that "Medina used to always tell us about the grenade bit. If you shoot a gook and check him out and find he's got an ID [identification card indicating he is not a Viet Cong]—plant a grenade on him."

But nothing happened. "We seemed to be blessed," Ronald Grzesik of Holyoke, Massachusetts, remarked later. "I could walk along a street and not draw a shot—and other companies would come along the same street and get into a good firefight. Other guys would be getting like, you know, hero treatment."

Occasionally the company, still new to Vietnam, was stunned by the evidence of the almost barbarous attitudes veterans displayed toward the Vietnamese people. Gregory Olsen of Portland, Oregon, remembered that soon after they were in Vietnam they saw an American troop carrier drive by with "about twenty human ears tied to the antenna. It was kind of hard to believe. They actually had ears on the antenna."

Charlie Company wanted some action. It began to make a little of its own. Daniel Zeigler remembered that at first there was very little manhandling of civilian suspects. "It started off easy, then it got rough." Both Medina and Calley began trying to convince the company that most of the suspects in the area were Viet Cong. "Once Grzesik gave a prisoner something to eat, and they got mad." Zeigler never understood why Medina or Calley would beat a prisoner to try to get information in a language they couldn't understand anyway. "Whenever we got to a village, there were usually no males of military age around. So if they found one, they would just assume he was a VC. That is, if he wasn't an old man or a little teeny kid."

After many weeks of no combat, the company began to systematically beat its prisoners, and it began to be less discriminating about who was—or was not—a VC. Michael Bernhardt thought that as far as Medina was concerned, "Everything that walked and didn't wear any uniform was a VC. . . . He was as much of a nut as anybody else. He was pissed off at the people and had no respect for them." The lack of respect was apparently infectious. "On the lower level," Charles Hall said, "squad leaders and platoon leaders didn't enforce the rules—like for beating people. This happened every day; every day there was disregard for the people. There were a few people who made a habit of this."

Charlie Company got its first ear early in January near Duc Pho. While on patrol, a GI had seen four Viet Cong in a valley below. Medina called in artillery, and sent a squad in after the bombardment to search for the dead. Harry Stanley saw them come back "with an ear. Medina was happy; it was his first kill." Some members of the company, finding ears of Viet Cong hard to come by, began marking their estimated kills with notches on their rifles.

Charlie Company had an isolated life, staying either in the field or at one of the artillery fire bases. Unless there was an operation in a village, the men only saw whores, beggars, and thieves. "They were all after my money, I'll tell you that," re-

membered James R. Berghold of Niagara Falls, New York. He quickly learned to direct his anger at all Vietnamese. "Why shouldn't I? They were the enemy."

Eusebio B. Santellana of San Antonio, Texas, had served with Charlie Company since December 1967; he watched as his buddies got shredded by mines. (Later he would lose a leg in Vietnam, but Santellana was not at My Lai 4: he had been called home in early March on an emergency leave.) He remembered the company's feelings then about the Vietnamese, and his own: "I hope they kill everybody over there because they won't tell you where the VC is. They should kill every goddamn thing over there—VC, animals. . . . You can slap them around but they won't tell you—and then the VC snipe at you. Villagers won't tell you nothing. How come they won't tell you? They ought to know. How come they don't like GIs?"

He said the trouble in Vietnam is that "the people aren't straight like we are. We ask them something and they don't know. After we leave, the VC hit us. They all look alike."

Danny Zeigler recalled, with a touch of shame, one operation in early February in which the first platoon grabbed and beat up four old men they knew were not Viet Cong. "I looked at it then and I looked at myself. Most of the guys realized what was happening. It wasn't so much that we were against the people as it was . . . just a ridiculous thing, all of it, everything."

About a week after the company arrived at LZ Dotti, Lieutenant Calley ordered Michael Bernhardt to shoot at a running woman. The GI wasn't sure if shooting at an unknown civilian was really Army policy. He half-heartedly ran after her yelling, "*Dong lai*" ("Stop") but she got away. Calley berated him for not firing. Bernhardt later contemplated asking other officers in the unit about the propriety of issuing such an order, but he decided not to; he was sure Calley would deny everything, and Bernhardt would just end up with a reputation as a troublemaker. "I would just fire and miss on purpose after that."

**D**uring these weeks, Medina said later, Charlie Company was learning that "this was a dangerous area." Mines and booby traps, often placed by women and children, were everywhere. This was a prevalent belief among GIs in Vietnam, including Charlie Company, yet not one member of Charlie Company to whom I put the question was ever able to cite a specific act of terror by either a woman or child. Such incidents most certainly did occur throughout Vietnam, and still do, but they weren't happening to Charlie Company. When one of its men got hurt, there was usually one reason: carelessness.

One of the first casualties at LZ Dotti was Zeigler: "We were coming back from a night ambush, and I stepped off the trail and got wounded." The date was February 14, 1968. Zeigler decided that what happened to him "could be considered dumb in a way. We were using a well-worn trail and that would be dumb." Something else dumb happened that day: there was no medic around. Calley, who was leading the operation, had forgotten to take one along. "It was our first night patrol, and we asked him for one. I guess he just didn't think it was necessary." Zeigler suffered twenty-one punctures in his body from mine fragments, including a collapsed lung. Luckily, the incident took place a few hundred yards from Dotti, and medical help came before he could bleed to death.

A few days later, Medina led his men into Song My, establish-

ing a blocking position on a stream to the north while other Task Force Barker units sought the Viet Cong's crack 48th Battalion, then operating in the Song My area. By this time, the three platoons of Charlie Company were patrolling on a rotating basis. The second platoon was in the field cautiously making its way toward the river when it made contact with the enemy. It was a tough fight, Medina remarked later, with intense small-arms and rocket fire. Michael Bernhardt's squad was a few hundred meters behind the other squads. "Somebody yelled 'incoming'—it was in front of us. I sat down on a dike, lit a cigarette, and watched the battle going on. I saw these guys shooting; I couldn't figure it out; it was really confusing. Nobody knew what was going on." But Bernhardt watched as one nearby GI reacted to the attack by firing his M16 rifle at a group of Vietnamese civilians crouching in a rice paddy fifteen feet in front of the men. "The moment the rounds were incoming, this guy let the people have it. . . . They fell down right fast." After firing, the GI closed in on them. "They were holding their ID cards over their heads. Then he said, 'Okay,' and the people walked away." It had been a family of four—a mother, father, child, and infant. The infant was left behind in the field; it had been struck by one of the GI's bullets.

A few soldiers in the squad near the river were hit by rifle fire from the well-entrenched Viet Cong on the other side. The second platoon was further shaken when mortar shells, flinging showers of shrapnel, injured a few more men. Gunships were called in. "They held them under fire and we took off," Bernhardt recalled, "running back for a mile or so. Then we kind of pulled ourselves together and walked the rest of the way." Gary Crossley of San Marcos, Texas, another member of the second platoon, confirmed that his unit had been overwhelmed. "We had to take off running," he said. "We didn't have a chance." Bernhardt blamed the company officers for the debacle. "It was always ridiculous. They'd sit down and try to figure out what to do next, and it would be over before they figured it out."

The next day, Lieutenant Calley led his first platoon back into the area and again there was enemy fire. Calley was visibly upset when he later talked about the event: "It was a good all-day battle. We received quite a bit of fire. We got hit quite badly. I had my radio operator shot up under me. It was our first time in there and we just literally got the shit shot out of us. So we pulled back, dugged up replacements. That was my first good taste of it."

None of Calley's fellow platoon members saw the battle as anywhere near that awesome. Most considered what happened—the death of William Weber, a radioman—simply another result of the lieutenant's stupidity.

Ron Grzesik, Weber's best friend and bunkmate, remembered the incident clearly. "Up until this time, we really never ran into the enemy too much. As far as contact, nothing special, nothing resembling a battle or even a hard fight." He said that the platoon was moving along the river toward a small hamlet when the snipers opened up. "We got pinned down but we made it into the village. Calley called in a lot of artillery." (Others said that Medina had suggested that Calley remain in the hamlet or carefully withdraw in order to avoid exposing his men to fire.) The platoon pulled out, "moving straight back away from the river, using the river as cover." The snipers opened up again but the men, crawling shoulder deep through muck and mud, escaped injury. "We got 400 or 500 meters

away from the river and the snipers weren't bothering us too much. Then we started moving back toward the river, walking toward a causeway. I thought Calley was lost again." To make it worse, instead of ordering the men to walk in a 4-foot-deep dike alongside the river—by this time the company was strung out in single file—Calley permitted them to walk on top of it. "I laid this on stupidity," Grzesik said. "Our own stupidity and our being green. We hadn't been in Vietnam too long."

It was then that Weber got hit. Robert Maples overheard Calley and Cowen decide to put off telling the company that Weber had been killed. The platoon had been vigorously complaining about going back to the river; the news that a man had been killed because of it would perhaps cause panic. "You figured," Maples said, "like Weber got shot and you don't know if it was going to be you next. You can't have a platoon leader who's trying to make things look good. You can't put yourself out for people like that. He [Calley] was jeopardizing his people, their lives and whatnot, just for his reputation. The whole thing was stupid to me."

The platoon blamed the Viet Cong for Weber's death. Describing the incident twenty months later, Sergeant Cowen said that the platoon had been pinned down by fire from the Song My area across the river; he said that gunships were needed to get the platoon out safely. Weber was the unit's only reported casualty that day, yet Charles A. West of Chicago, a member of the third platoon, told how his unit—rushing to the aid of Calley's platoon—went "two or three times . . . to the water's edge and harassed the village with gunfire. Each time we got wounded men."

The incident served to heighten the hostility of the company for the Vietnamese. By this time the men had been living in the field for nearly three weeks without relief; they were tired, confused, and morale was low. Olsen remembered that the company "always seemed to get the dirty job. Everybody thought that we were getting the short end of the stick." Some were beginning to wonder whether they were being volunteered for additional search-and-destroy duty by Captain Medina, who told the men that the Viet Cong were afraid of Charlie Company and knew what a good unit it was; that's why they had yet to come out and engage it in a firefight. The men of Charlie Company were getting more violent, Olsen recalled, routinely kicking away the Vietnamese children who would come begging for gum or money when the unit went through villages and hamlets. William Doherty of Reading, Massachusetts, talked about the dirt and grime of living in the field: "We had to rip our pants up to get a change of clothes." The company routine in the field was fixed: the men would awake at dawn, eat a cold C-ration breakfast, pack up, move, walk until lunch, eat a cold C-ration lunch, walk again until dinner. Sometimes they would have yet another C-ration meal, but more often helicopters would fly in a hot meal to the unit or take the men back into LZ Dotti for dinner. "But after dinner," Doherty said, "they'd fly us out again to set up camp for the night." Richard Pendleton of Richmond, California, felt the company was "kept away from everything. People were made kind of backwards. We never got to the beach places; our job was different. They just kind of snuck us in the back way and put us in the field. They tried to put it into our minds that this was our job—to do this. After a while, people just kept to themselves."

Michael Terry, a Mormon from Orem, Utah, said that the company simply treated the Vietnamese "like animals. A lot of guys didn't feel that they were human beings." Charles Sledge of Batesville, Mississippi, knew why the Vietnamese were beginning to show increasing hostility to the young GIs. "We did it ourselves. We would go through a village, tearing up stuff, kicking it over, burning it down—I know. I did it."

The company was taking its cue from Captain Medina, who was quick to beat and terrorize suspected Viet Cong soldiers or civilian sympathizers in his attempt to gain intelligence information. John T. Paul of Cherry Hills, New Jersey, one of Medina's radiomen, described the captain's interrogation technique: "He thought that if you could instill fear in a prisoner, you'd most likely get them to talk. He wanted to put a point across right away on these people—'We're not fucking around with you.'" Sometimes Medina's antics brought laughs. Paul recalled that Medina once hid behind a large rock after hearing that one of the platoons was bringing up an old man—a "papa-san"—for questioning. "He told us to 'watch this' and then jumped out with a roar and grabbed the guy in a bear hug from behind. They started rolling on the ground. The old man was screaming." He already had been gashed on the head with the gunsight from a rifle. The old man defecated in fear, much to the merriment of the company. With another prisoner, Medina suddenly pulled out "his survival knife and cut the guy a little behind the ear." The old man wasn't a Viet Cong, so the company medic patched him up, gave him a cigarette and sent him on his way. "A lot of this was done in jest," Paul added. Herbert Carter got fed up with the war and the people at this point. "I used to like kids—but I can't stand them anymore . . . kinks and slant-eyed people. I didn't like them—and the CO didn't either."

The captain was even irritated by the incongruous appearance of young Vietnamese entrepreneurs during combat assignments. "We'd be out on a mission," Gary Garfalo explained, "and all of a sudden a dozen kids would come selling Cokes and sandwiches. I mean we were *out on a mission*. Medina would come and chase them away, kick them in the ass, throw them out of there."

The atrocities began with Carter. About February 15, Charlie Company was assigned another patrol mission in the task-force area. As they filed through a hamlet, Carter offered a "papa-san" a cigarette. As the man took it, Carter suddenly began to club him with his rifle butt. He broke his jaws and ribs. Most of the company watched; some "were mad as hell," Olsen remembered, but no one said anything. Nor was Carter reprimanded. Later that day, the first platoon separated to reconnoiter on its own. By this time, Harry Stanley recalled, the platoon had the idea that "if they wanted to do something wrong, it was always right with Calley. He didn't try to stop them." A few hours later two men in the platoon suddenly began firing at a figure walking across a field. They said he was carrying something. It took a dozen shots with an M16 rifle before he fell. They ran forward and shot again. The victim turned out to be a woman farmer who was carrying the deed to her land in a tube. Stanley translated the writing for Lieutenant Calley, and then listened as the lieutenant radioed Captain Medina and told him his men had killed a Viet Cong.

A few minutes later, two men, possibly Viet Cong guerrillas, were brought in to Calley. He turned this time to Grzesik, who

had had 350 hours of Vietnamese language instruction while the company was in Hawaii, to interpret. But before he could begin, Grzesik recalled, "somebody brought in an old man. He was a farmer; there was no doubt in my mind." Grzesik questioned the man, quickly found that he had an identification card. "I told Calley I didn't think he was a VC." But it didn't matter; the first platoon hadn't had any contact with the enemy in weeks. Calley motioned Grzesik away with his M16. "Why are you going to kill him?" Grzesik asked. Calley told him to "get moving." But before Calley could fire, Herbert Carter moved forward.

Harry Stanley of Long Beach, California, was ten feet away. During an interrogation in October 1969, he told the Army's main police unit, the Criminal Investigating Division (CID), what happened next: "Carter hit the old man into a well, but the old man spread his legs and arms and held on and didn't fall. . . . Then Carter hit the old man in his stomach with his rifle stock. The old man's feet fell into the well, but he continued to hold on with his hands. Carter hit the man's fingers, trying to make him fall . . . and Calley shot the man with his M16." Carter talked easily about the incident in a later interview. "Bergthold captured the old man," he said. "I was the one that threw him into the well. We tried to make him talk and he wouldn't. After we tried, I picked him up and threw him in the well—then Lieutenant Calley blew his brains out. I started to shoot him myself," he added. "I just said, 'The hell with this tramp—you know what I mean. He was a VC.'"

According to Grzesik, Calley then radioed Captain Medina and told him that "an old man jumped in a well and we got him." Calley told his commanding officer the man was a Viet Cong guerrilla. Medina promptly asked Calley to have the well carefully searched to make sure it wasn't part of an enemy tunnel system. No one in the company would crawl into the—by now—bloody well. Calley reported it was not part of a tunnel complex.

Bergthold later was asked what made him bring in the old man for questioning. "I found him working in a rice paddy," he said. Did he think he could be a Viet Cong? "I don't know . . . you never know."

**O**n February 25, Charlie Company suffered its worst day. Six men were killed and twelve seriously wounded when it ran into a well-laid minefield north of Pinkville. Most of the casualties were in the first and third platoons. Medina earned the Silver Star, the Army's third-highest medal for valor, for his role in rescuing the wounded. "I lost some of my best men that day," Medina has said. The incident stunned the company. Carter recalled that "the guys were confused. They said, 'Okay, you guys [the Viet Cong] want to be tough. We can be tough right with them.' The VC were blowing us up with mines—sending little kids with grenades. It was getting ridiculous."

The shock of the incident was increased for a few by the nagging thought that perhaps it could have been avoided. Allen Boyce remembered that it happened when "we was in a hurry and had to move through the minefield." Sergeant Cowen was leading the platoon that day and Boyce thought he could have taken his time and gone around the minefield, which was marked on the maps. "A whole lot of guys were mad about it, mad at Sergeant Cowen." Michael Bernhardt remembered something else: the task force was operating in an area that formerly was

the responsibility of the South Korean Marines. He was convinced the mine that ruptured the company had been emplaced by the Koreans. "We all knew it, you see"—meaning that the Koreans didn't always clear their minefields or report them, as regulations required. The incident happened, Bernhardt continued, "in a place where the Koreans had laid mines out in their perimeter. But the guys in the company didn't want to know the sad truth. They were all for the Army; all gung ho. Someone you can blame is the Viet Cong or the Vietnamese. Somebody you can't blame are the big men in the Army. They [the men in Charlie Company] didn't want to believe it. . . . They knew it. We all talked about it. The truth is that the Koreans had set up a base camp and surrounded it with mines. And we walked into the area that they had set up."

About this time, at least two members of Charlie Company began to assault and abuse Vietnamese women. Some of the younger members of the company were troubled, but apparently no punishment was meted out. On one occasion a few GIs accosted a woman working in a rice field in a friendly area. Michael Bernhardt remembered they took away her baby and then "they raped her and killed her. . . . I guess they killed her baby, too." One of the group was busy taking photographs with an Instamatic camera during the incident.

**M**edina and his men continued their fruitless routine of search-and-destroy missions until the second week in March, when the company was assigned relatively easy guard duty near LZ Dotti. Olsen and Paul Meadlo of Terre Haute, Indiana, an easygoing farmboy, were guarding a bridge together near Pinkville: "We did nothing but laugh and run around," Olsen said. On March 14, two days before the mission to My Lai 4, a small squad from the third platoon ran into a booby trap. Gary Garfolo watched Sergeant Cox lead a patrol into a cluster of trees. Suddenly, he heard Cox call over the radio that he'd found something. "Next thing—kaBOOM—big mushroom cloud, everybody hits the ground. We went over there—this big ruin of a place—and found everybody tore up." Richard Pendleton arrived seconds after the booby trap went off. "Somebody that was injured said Cox picked the bomb up before it went off. He was kind of curious about those things." Cox was killed and one GI lost his eyes, an arm, and a leg. There were screams and calls for medics. Michael Terry, also on the patrol, remembered: "It was a kind of a gruesome thing. We were good and mad."

The wounded and dead were lifted away by helicopters and the remaining men in the squad—about eight—began marching back to LZ Dotti. En route, they stole a radio while walking through a small hamlet. "We stole it because we wanted it," Gary Garfolo explained. "They had it and we wanted it—we figured, 'What the hell, they're gooks, they caused Cox's death.'" "Everybody was just taking things," said Pendleton. "They knew that people here might have something to do with it." The squad wanted more revenge. Moments after leaving the hamlet, a GI shouted, "Something's moving in the bushes." Lieutenant Jeffrey La Crosse of the third platoon ordered them to find out what it was. Someone yelled, "He's got a weapon. He's got a weapon," and the squad opened up with M16 rifle fire. The suspect fell, and the squad came running after him. William Doherty saw what happened next: "I ran there. I was

the first to get there. I kicked her, and then I saw she was a woman, so I stopped. But some of the other guys kept on." Michael Terry yelled in protest as he came up to the group. The woman was still alive. Someone suggested calling in a helicopter to evacuate her to a hospital. "She don't need no medivac," one GI suddenly exclaimed, and shot her in the chest. Someone else stole her ring.

The murder and the theft of the radio and ring angered the residents of the hamlet, a secure area near LZ Dotti. They called in the Vietnamese national police. The police began asking around at the LZ; eventually they found their way to Charlie Company and Medina. "Medina was really hot," Garfalo remembered. "Not because we did it, but because it got to him—we got caught." Garfalo didn't remember whether the ring or radio were returned. No charges were filed.

Medina later had a much different version of what had happened. He told a reporter that the booby trap was detonated by remote control and that his company found a fifteen-year-old girl hidden nearby with her hand still on the plunger. His men then killed her, Medina said. He did not mention any theft charges. "Captain Medina just kind of hushed that up," Michael Terry said of the shooting of the woman, "but something like that's a war crime, just out and out a war crime."

**B**y now, many in the company had given in to an easy pattern of violence. Some were still struggling. Ronald Grzesik had developed a fondness for his Vietnamese instructors at Army language school in Hawaii. He was particularly impressed by a lieutenant colonel and a pretty woman teacher. "You get to like them. I had a little more respect for the average Vietnamese." Yet his attitude changed day by day in the weeks before the My Lai 4 assault: "It just started building. I don't know why. Everybody reached the point where they were frustrated. We weren't getting any action, yet the only thing on our mind was survival. After Bill [William Weber] got killed, I began to stop caring. I remember writing a letter home saying that I once had sympathy for these people, but now I didn't care. I became passive: I wouldn't beat them up but I wouldn't try to stop it. Yet I told Calley at one point that I wouldn't question anybody unless he stopped beating them up. There'd be days when I'd just be sick of it."

Others told of their agony in letters home. Gregory Olsen came from devout Mormon stock in Oregon; he didn't drink or smoke. A few days after My Lai 4, he and Mike Terry, also a Mormon, got special permission to leave the company and attend a Mormon conference at Da Nang. On March 14, a Thursday, Olsen wrote the following letter to his father, Samuel G. Olsen, scrawled in pencil on standard GI stationery:

*Dear Dad:*

*How's everything with you?*

*I'm still on the bridge, we leave here Saturday [for the My Lai 4 mission].*

*One of our platoons went out on a routine patrol today and came across a 155-mm artillery round that was booby-trapped. It killed one man, blew the legs off two others, and injured two more.*

Gregory Olsen letter reprinted by courtesy of Dispatch News Service, © Copyright 1969 Dispatch News Service.

*And it all turned out a bad day made even worse. On their way back to "Dotti" they saw a woman working in the fields. They shot and wounded her. Then they kicked her to death and emptied their magazines in her head. They slugged every little kid they came across.*

*Why in God's name does this have to happen? These are all seemingly normal guys; some were friends of mine. For a while they were like wild animals. It was murder, and I'm ashamed of myself for not trying to do anything about it.*

*This isn't the first time, dad. I've seen it many times before. I don't know why I'm telling you all this; I guess I just want to get it off my chest. My faith in my fellow men is shot all to hell. I just want the time to pass and I just want to come home.*

*I really believe as you do, dad, there is a cause behind all this, and if it is God's will for me to go, I would rather do it here than home on the freeway.*

*Saturday we're going to be dropped in by air in an NVA stronghold [My Lai]. I'm still hoping I'll be able to get out of here for a few days to go to a conference.*

*Don't expect any letters for awhile but please keep writing them.*

*I love and miss you and mom so much—*

*Your son,  
Greg.*

On the day after the mine incident, Charlie Company held a brief funeral service for Sergeant George Cox. By all accounts, it was a moving occasion. "The men were hurt real bad, real bad," Henry Pedrick said. "The company was very upset. The company was also very angry. It had revenge on its mind." Like other members of the company, Pedrick came close to tears as he talked about it.

After the chaplain's service, Medina got up to speak. The men were quiet. Charles West remembered what the captain said: "He knew it was hard on them, but it was just as hard on him. Maybe he didn't show it because he was held responsible for being a leader but that was no reason for the guys to hold back. He said to let it out, let it go." At this point, West said, many of the men of Charlie Company cried.

Medina then began to tell his men about the next day's mission. As Medina described it later, he and Colonel Barker had begun planning the mission early in the day. At one point, they flew from LZ Dotti in a helicopter for a peek at My Lai 4, 11 kilometers to the south, being careful not to get too close and alert the enemy. Barker told Medina that elements of the 48th Viet Cong Battalion, one of the enemy's best units with a strength of 250 to 280 men, was in My Lai 4. The Colonel said intelligence reports predicted that the hamlet's women and children would be gone by 7:00 A.M., en route to the weekly markets in Quang Ngai City or Son Tinh Districts.\* Charlie Company's mission was to destroy the 48th Battalion as well as My Lai 4. Medina was ordered to burn houses and blow up bunkers and tunnels, along with killing the livestock. Normally

\*The basic administrative units in South Vietnam are, in order of size and importance, provinces, villages, and hamlets. The Quang Ngai area is unique in that it also has sub-hamlets that are under the jurisdiction of nearby hamlets. According to the Pentagon, My Lai 4 is one of six numbered sub-hamlets of Tu Cung hamlet in the village of Song My. The hamlet's titles were confused even further by a U. S. Army map project that Americanized many of the original names. Some Vietnamese reportedly refer to My Lai 4 as Xom Lang.

killing the animals was not done, Medina said, but he didn't think it was unusual. "The idea was to destroy the village so the 48th VC would be forced to move. It looked like a tough fight," he said. The captain claimed that his men would be outnumbered at least two-to-one by the Viet Cong during the assault, but added that he did not expect heavy casualties. "I have a lot of faith in the firepower that the American infantryman has. The helicopter pilots and the gunship pilots do a tremendous job in supporting the infantryman on the ground."\*

His objective in the pep talk after the funeral that night, he later explained, was to "fire them up to get them ready to go in there. I did not give any instructions as to what to do with women and children in the village."

There were sharply conflicting opinions among the company over what Medina did order. Many thought the captain had ordered them to kill every person in the hamlet. Others thought that he had given routine—if more emotional—orders for a search-and-destroy mission. A few felt that Medina had been vague, as if to leave the interpretation of his orders for the next day to the feelings and conscience of the individual soldier.

Harry Stanley later told the CID that Medina "ordered us to 'kill everything in the village.' The men in my squad talked about this among ourselves that night," Stanley said, "because the order . . . was so unusual. We all agreed that Medina meant for us to kill every man, woman, and child in the village." Charles West remembered hearing the captain saying that when Charlie Company left the area, "nothing would be walking, growing, or crawling." He also recalled the captain saying that the women and children would be out of the area. Herbert Carter told the CID he thought Medina had been explicit. "Well, boys," he said the captain told them, "this is your chance to get revenge on these people. When we go into My Lai, it's open season. When we leave, nothing will be living. Everything's going to go." Sergeant Cowen testified during a hearing on Sergeant Mitchell's criminal charges—stemming from his role at My Lai 4—December 2, 1969, at Fort Hood, Texas, that Medina "told us to destroy everything with life." He was asked if he took that to mean he was supposed to kill civilians. "Yes, sir," Cowen said. Charles Hall remembered Medina saying, "Don't take any prisoners." Robert Maples recalled that Medina "told us everything in the village was the enemy. The way I think he said it—and the way they took it—was that anything in the village was VC." Michael Bernhardt remembered Medina saying, "They're all VCs, now go in and get them. We owe them something. . . . He didn't have to specifically say women and kids." The company interpreter, Sergeant Nguyen Phu of the South Vietnamese Army, was told that night by one of the black GIs that Charlie Company was going to destroy a hamlet and its

\*Despite Medina's confidence in the ability of helicopter gunships, there is a puzzling aspect to Charlie Company's mission as outlined by Medina. Most military tacticians, especially those in Vietnam, agree that an attacking force must have a manpower superiority of at least three-to-one over a well-armed enemy force defending fortified positions. Only 70 to 75 GIs from Charlie Company took part in the assault against the expected 250 to 280 Viet Cong guerrillas. Charlie Company thus would actually have been outnumbered four-to-one. Even more puzzling, then, were Medina's eventual decisions to attack the hamlet by initially sending in only two platoons, and to land the company less than 200 yards from My Lai 4, well within range of enemy rifle fire. The inevitable question left begging is: did Medina really expect to find Viet Cong troops in My Lai 4?

people the next day. The interpreter assumed it was the usual GI bragging.

Bur Gregory Olsen was sure Captain Medina did not order the killing of women and children: "He did say—he did make the statement—that we had a score to even up. He did tell us that we were to go there and destroy the food supply and hamlet. He said it was known that VC sympathizers were in My Lai 4 and that it was harboring VCs. He told us to shoot the enemy." At this point someone asked, "Who was the enemy?" Olsen said Medina then defined "the enemy as anybody that was running from us, hiding from us, or who appeared to us to be the enemy. If a man was running, shoot him; sometimes even if a woman with a rifle was running, shoot her. He never at any time said, 'Slaughter the people.'" Ron Grzesik agreed with Olsen. He heard Medina tell the men "to go in and destroy the village; to make it uninhabitable," but did not recall an order to destroy the inhabitants.

Perhaps the best answer to what was said or what was believed has been supplied by Henry Pedrick: "The orders could be interpreted in different ways to different persons according to their emotional structure. . . . One person just might interpret it to kill if he wanted to." The question about who was the enemy was asked by Michael Terry. He thought the captain was in an awkward position because of the charged atmosphere following the funeral service. "Guys were asking when they would have a chance to fight instead of marching around and getting blown up. Some of the guys were all shook up, and like a good captain he was trying to appease them." The net result, Terry said, was that Medina "gave the impression—he never specifically said it—that they could kill the people . . . that they could kill anybody they saw. I remember paying attention to how he was handling the situation. It seemed like there would be a whole lot of killing the next day."

Most significantly, Lieutenant William Calley thought so, too. "Every time we got hit [in the Pinkville area] it was from the rear," Calley recalled later. "So the third time in there the order came down to go in there and make sure no one was behind us. Just to clear the area. It was a typical combat assault tactic. We came in hot [firing], with a cover of artillery in front of us, came down the line, and destroyed the village."

Bernhardt recalled that by March 16, "we'd already gone through some villages and the company more or less roughed up the people. If anybody ever told them to go there and kill everybody, they'd do it. They were looking for an excuse, and they got it."

For Ron Grzesik, My Lai 4 was the end of a vicious circle that had begun months earlier. "It was like going from one step to another, worse one," he says. "First, you'd stop the people, question them, and let them go. Second, you'd stop the people, beat up an old man, and let them go. Third, you'd stop the people, beat up an old man, and then shoot him. Fourth, you go in and wipe out a village."

### III. THE DAY—part 1

**N**obody saw it all. Some, like Roy Wood, didn't even know the extent of the massacre until the next day. Others, like Charles Sledge, who served that day as Calley's radioman, saw more than they want to remember.

But they all remember the fear that morning as they climbed onto helicopters at LZ Dotti for the assault on Pinkville. They all remember the sure knowledge that they would meet face-to-face for the first time with the enemy.

Calley and his platoon were the first to board the large black Army assault helicopters. The men were heavily armed, each carrying twice the normal load of rifle and machine-gun ammunition. Leading the way was Calley, who had slung an extra belt of M16 rifle bullets over his shoulder. There were nine helicopters in the first lift-off, more than enough for the whole first platoon—about twenty-five men—and Captain Medina and his small headquarters unit of three radiomen, some liaison officers, and a medic. It was sunny and already hot when the first helicopter started its noisy flight to My Lai 4. The time was 7:22 A.M.; it was logged by a tape recorder at brigade headquarters. A brief artillery barrage had already begun; the My Lai 4 area was being "prepped" in anticipation of that day's search-and-destroy mission. A few heavily armed helicopters were firing thousands of small-caliber bullets into the area by the time Calley and his men landed in a soggy rice paddy 150 meters west of the hamlet. It was harvest season; the fields were thick with growth.

The first platoon's mission was to secure the landing zone and make sure no enemy troops were left to fire at the second wave of helicopters—by then already airborne from LZ Dotti. As the flight of helicopters hovered over the landing area, the door gunners began spraying protective fire to keep the enemy—if he was there—busy. One of the helicopter pilots had reported that the LZ was "hot," that is, Viet Cong were waiting below. The first platoon came out firing. But, after a moment, some men noticed that there was no return fire. "I didn't hear any bullets going past me," recalled Charles Hall, a machine gunner that day. "If you want to consider an area hot, you got to be fired on."

The platoon quickly formed a perimeter and secured the landing zone. Sergeant Cowen spotted an old man. Sledge was a few yards to Cowen's right. "We came to a well and there was a VC. We thought it was a VC. He was standing and waving his arms. Cowen fell back and said, 'Shoot the so-and-so.' I fired once, and then my [rifle] magazine fell out." Paul D. Meadlo noted that "the gook was standing up shaking and waving his arms and then he was shot." Allen Boyce saw it a little differently: "Some guy was in a rice field, doing something to a rice plant. He looked up and he got it. That was the most confused operation I ever went on. Just everything was screwed up."

By this time, those Viet Cong who were in the hamlet had slipped away. Some local supporters of the guerrillas also left, but they did not go as far. They watched as Charlie Company went through My Lai 4.

After about twenty minutes, the second flight of helicopters landed, and the forty men of the second and third platoons jumped off. Gary Garfalo heard the helicopter blades make sharp crackling sounds as they changed pitch for the landing. "It was a pop, pop, pop sound like a rifle. Lots of us never even heard a hot LZ before. We knew we were going into a hot place. This got their adrenaline going." The men were quickly assembled. Calley's first platoon and Lieutenant Stephen Brooks' second platoon would lead the sweep into the hamlet, Calley to the south and Brooks to the north. The third platoon, headed

by Lieutenant Jeffrey La Crosse, would be held in reserve and move in on the heels of the other men. Captain Medina and his headquarters unit would move with the third platoon and then set up a command post (CP) inside to monitor the operation and stay in touch with other units. Charlie Company was not alone in its assault; the other two companies of Task Force Barker set up blocking positions to the north and south. They were there to prevent the expected Viet Cong troops from fleeing.

The My Lai 4 assault was the biggest thing going in the Americal Division that day. To get enough airlift, Task Force Barker had to borrow helicopters from other units throughout the division. The air lanes above the action were carefully allotted to high-ranking officers for observation. Barker monitored the battle from the 1,000-foot level. Major General Samuel W. Koster, commanding general of the division, was allotted the air space at 2,000 feet. His helicopter was permanently stationed outside his door at division headquarters 21 miles to the north waiting to fly him to the scene of any action within minutes. Oran K. Henderson, commander of the Eleventh Brigade, was given the top spot—at 2,500 feet. All of the helicopters were to circle counterclockwise over the battle area. Flying low, beneath the 1,000-foot level, would be the gunships, heavily armed helicopters whose mission was to shoot down any Viet Cong soldiers attempting to escape.

Brigade headquarters, sure that there would be a major battle, sent along two men from the Army's 31st Public Information Detachment to record the event for history. Jay Roberts of Arlington, Virginia, a reporter, and photographer Ronald L. Haeberle of Cleveland, Ohio, arrived with the second wave of helicopters and immediately attached themselves to the third platoon, which was bringing up the rear.

**T**he hamlet itself had a population of about 700 people, living either in flimsy thatch-covered huts—"hootches," as the GIs called them—or in solidly made red-brick homes, many with small porches in front. There was an east-west footpath just south of the main cluster of homes in My Lai 4; a few yards further south was a loose surface road that marked a hamlet boundary. A deep drainage ditch and then a rice paddy marked the eastern boundary. To the south of My Lai 4 was a large center, or plaza area—clearly the main spot for mass meetings. The foliage was dense: there were high bamboo trees, hedges, and plant life everywhere. Medina couldn't see 30 feet into the hamlet from the landing zone.

The first and second platoons lined up carefully to begin the 100-meter advance into the hamlet. Walking in line is an important military concept; if one group of men gets too far in front, it could be hit by bullets from behind—those fired by colleagues. Yet even this went wrong. Ron Grzesik was in charge of a small first-platoon team of riflemen and a machine gunner that day; he took his job seriously. His unit was supposed to be on the right flank, protecting Calley and his men. But Grzesik's group ended up on Calley's left.

As Brooks' second platoon cautiously approached the hamlet a few Vietnamese began running across a field several hundred meters on the left. They may have been Viet Cong, or they may have been civilians fleeing the artillery shelling or the bombardment from the helicopter gunships. Vernado Simps

Jr. of Jackson, Mississippi, told reporters he saw a man he identified as a Viet Cong soldier running with what seemed to be a weapon. A woman and small child were running with him. Simpson fired... again and again. He killed the woman and the baby. The man got away. Reporter Roberts saw a squad of GIs jump off a helicopter and begin firing at a group of people running on a nearby road. One was a woman with her children. Then he saw them "shoot two guys who popped up from a rice field. They looked like military-age men... when certain guys pop up from rice fields, you shoot them." This was the young reporter's most dangerous assignment. He had never been in combat before. "You're scared to death out there. We just wanted to go home."

The first two platoons of Charlie Company, still unfired upon, entered My Lai 4. Behind them, still in the rice paddy, were the third platoon and Captain Medina's command group. Calley and some of his men walked into the plaza area in the southern part of My Lai 4. None of the villagers was running away; they knew that U. S. soldiers would assume that anyone running was a Viet Cong and shoot to kill. There was no immediate sense of panic. The time was after 8:00 A.M. Grzesik and his fire team were a few meters north of Calley; they couldn't see each other because of the dense vegetation. Grzesik and his men began their usual job of pulling people from their homes, interrogating them, and searching for Viet Cong. The villagers were gathered up, and Grzesik sent Meadlo, who was in his unit, to take them to Lieutenant Calley for further questioning. Grzesik didn't see Meadlo again for more than an hour.

Some of Calley's men recalled thinking it was breakfast time as they walked in; a few families were gathered in front of their homes cooking rice over a small fire. Without a direct order, the first platoon also began rounding up the villagers. There still was no sniper fire, no sign of a large enemy unit. Sledge remembered thinking that "if there were VC around, they had plenty of time to leave before we came in. We didn't tiptoe in there."

**T**he killings began without warning. Harry Stanley told the CID that one young member of Calley's platoon took a civilian into custody and then "pushed the man up to where we were standing and then stabbed the man in the back with his bayonet. . . . The man fell to the ground and was gasping for breath." The GI then "killed him with another bayonet thrust or by shooting him with a rifle. . . . There were so many people killed that day it is hard for me to recall exactly how some of the people died." The youth next "turned to where some soldiers were holding another forty- or fifty-year-old man in custody." He "picked this man up and threw him down a well. Then [he] pulled the pin from a M26 grenade and threw it in after the man." Moments later Stanley saw "some old women and some little children—fifteen or twenty of them—in a group around a temple where some incense was burning. They were kneeling and crying and praying and various soldiers. . . . walked by and executed these women and children by shooting them in the head with their rifles. The soldiers killed all fifteen or twenty of them. . . ."

There were few physical protests from the people; about eighty of them were taken quietly from their homes and herded

together in the plaza area. A few hollered out, "No VC. No VC." But that was hardly unexpected. Calley left Meadlo, Boyce, and a few others with the responsibility of guarding the group. "You know what I want you to do with them," he told Meadlo. Ten minutes later—about 8:15 A.M.—he returned and asked, "Haven't you got rid of them yet? I want them dead." Radioman Sledge, who was trailing Calley, heard the officer tell Meadlo to "waste them." Meadlo followed orders: "We stood about 10 to 15 feet away from them and then he [Calley] started shooting them. Then he told me to start shooting them. I started to shoot them. So we went ahead and killed them. I used more than a whole clip—used four or five clips." There are seventeen M16 bullets in each clip. Boyce slipped away, to the northern side of the hamlet, glad he hadn't been asked to shoot. Women were huddled against their children, vainly trying to save them. Some continued to chant "No VC." Others simply said, "No. No. No."

**D**o Chuc is a gnarled forty-eight-year-old Vietnamese peasant whose two daughters and an aunt were killed by the GIs in My Lai 4 that day. He and his family were eating breakfast when the GIs entered the hamlet and ordered them out of their homes. Together with other villagers, they were marched a few hundred meters into the plaza, where they were told to squat. "Still we had no reason to be afraid," Chuc recalls. "Everyone was calm." He watched as the GIs set up a machine gun. The calm ended. The people began crying and begging. One monk showed his identification papers to a soldier, but the American simply said, "Sorry." Then shooting started. Chuc was wounded in the leg, but he was covered by dead bodies and thus spared. After waiting an hour, he fled the hamlet. Nguyen Bar, a Viet Cong hamlet chief who later defected, said that many of the villagers who were eating breakfast outdoors when the GIs marched in greeted them without fear. They were gathered together and shot. Other villagers who were breakfasting indoors were killed inside their homes.

The few Viet Cong who had chosen to stay near the hamlet were safely hidden. Nguyen Ngo, a former deputy commander of a Viet Cong guerrilla platoon operating in the My Lai area, ran to his hiding place 300 meters away when the GIs came in shooting, but he could see that "they shot everything in sight." His mother and sister hid in ditches and survived because bodies fell on top of them. Pham Lai, a former hamlet security guard, climbed into a bunker with a bamboo top and heard but did not see the shootings. His wife, hidden under a body, survived the massacre.

**B**y this time, there was shooting everywhere. Dennis I. Conti, a GI from Providence, Rhode Island, later explained to CID investigators what he thought had happened. "We were all psyched up, and as a result when we got there the shooting started, almost as a chain reaction. The majority of us had expected to meet VC combat troops, but this did not turn out to be so. First we saw a few men running. . . . and the next thing I knew we were shooting at everything. Everybody was just firing. After they got in the village, I guess you could say that the men were out of control."

Brooks and his men in the second platoon to the north had

begun to ransack the hamlet systematically and slaughter the people, kill the livestock, and destroy the crops. Men poured rifle and machine-gun fire into huts without knowing—or seemingly caring—who was inside.

Roy Wood, one of Calley's men who was working next to Brooks' platoon, stormed into a hut, saw an elderly man hiding inside along with his wife and two young daughters. "I hit him with my rifle and pushed him out." A GI from Brooks' platoon standing by with an M79 grenade launcher asked to borrow his gun. Wood refused and the soldier asked another platoon mate. He got the weapon, said, "Don't let none of them live," and shot the Vietnamese in the head. "These mothers are crazy," Wood remembered thinking. "Stand right in front of us and blow a man's brains out." Later he vomited when he saw more of the dead residents of My Lai 4.

The second platoon went into My Lai 4 with guns blazing. Gary Crossley said that some GIs, after seeing nothing but women and children in the hamlet, hesitated: "We phoned Medina and told him what the circumstances were and he said just keep going. It wasn't anything we wanted to do. You can only kill so many women and children. The fact was that you can't go through and wipe out all of South Vietnam."

Once the first two platoons had disappeared into the hamlet, Medina ordered the third platoon to start moving. He and his men followed. Gary Garfalo was caught up in the confusion: "I could hear heavy shooting all the time. Medina was running back and forth everywhere. This wasn't no organized deal." So Garfalo did what most GIs did when they could get away with it. "I took off on my own." He ran south; others joined him. Terrified villagers, many carrying personal belongings in wicker baskets, were running everywhere to avoid the carnage in the hamlet. In most cases it didn't help. The helicopter gunships circling above cut them down, or else an unfortunate group ran into the third platoon. Charles A. West sighted and shot six Vietnamese, some with baskets, on the edge of My Lai 4. "These people were running into us, 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."

West and his men may have thought that those Vietnamese were Viet Cong. Later they knew better. West's first impression upon reaching My Lai 4: "There were no people in the first part. . . . I seen bodies everywhere. I knew that everyone was being killed." His group, no longer burdened by questions of differentiation, quickly joined in.

Medina—as any combat officer would do during his unit's first major engagement—decided to move from the rice paddy nearer to the hamlet. John Paul, one of Medina's radiomen, figured that the time was about 8:15 A.M. West remembered that "Medina was right behind us" as his platoon moved inside the hamlet. There are serious contradictions about what happened next. Medina later said he did not enter the hamlet proper until well after 10:00 A.M. and did not see anyone kill a civilian. John Paul didn't think that Medina ever entered the hamlet. But Herbert Carter told the CID that Medina did some of the shooting of civilians as he moved into My Lai 4.

Carter testified that soon after the third platoon moved in, a woman was sighted. Somebody knocked her down and then, Carter said, "Medina shot her with his M16 rifle. I was 50 to 60 feet away and saw this. There was no reason to shoot this girl." The men continued on, making sure no one was escaping.

"We came to where the soldiers had collected fifteen or more Vietnamese men, women, and children in a group. Medina said, 'Kill every one. Leave no one standing.'" A machine gunner began firing into the group. Moments later, one of Medina's radio operators slowly "passed among them and finished them off." Medina did not personally shoot any of them, according to Carter, but moments later, the captain "stopped a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old man with a water buffalo. Medina told the boy to make a run for it," Carter told the CID. "He tried to get him to run but the boy wouldn't run, so Medina shot him with his M16 rifle and killed him. . . . I was 75 or 80 meters away at the time and I saw it plainly." At this point in Carter's interrogation, the Army investigator warned him that he was making very serious charges against his commanding officer. "What I'm telling is the truth," Carter replied, "and I'll face Medina in court and swear to it."

If Carter is correct, Medina walked first into the north side of My Lai 4, then moved south with the CP to the hamlet plaza, and arrived there at about the time Paul Meadlo and Lieutenant Calley were executing the first group of villagers. Meadlo still wonders why Medina didn't stop the shooting, "if it was wrong," Medina and Calley "passed each other quite a few times that morning, but didn't say anything. I don't know if the CO [company commander] gave the order to kill or not, but he was right there when it happened. . . . Medina just kept marching around."

Roberts and Haeberle also moved in just behind the third platoon. Haeberle watched a group of ten to fifteen GIs methodically pump bullets into a cow until it keeled over. A woman then poked her head out from behind some brush; she may have been hiding in a bunker. The GIs turned the fire from the cow to the woman. "They just kept shooting at her. You could see the bones flying in the air chip by chip." No one had attempted to question her; men inside the hamlet also were asking no questions. Before moving on, the photographer took a picture of the dead woman. Haeberle took many more pictures that day; he saw about thirty GIs kill at least a hundred Vietnamese civilians.

When the two correspondents entered the hamlet, they saw dead animals, dead people, burning huts and homes. A few GIs were going through victims' clothing, looking for piasters. Another GI was chasing a duck with a knife; others stood around watching a GI slaughter a cow with a bayonet.

Haeberle noticed a man and two small children walking toward a group of GIs. "They just kept walking toward us. . . . You could hear the little girl saying, 'No, no. . . .' All of a sudden, the GIs opened up and cut them down." Later, on his left, he watched a machine gunner suddenly open fire on a group of civilians—women, children, and babies—who had been collected in a big circle. "They were trying to run. I don't know how many got out." He saw a GI with an M16 rifle fire at two young boys walking along a road; the older of the two—about seven or eight years old—fell over the first to protect him. The GI kept on firing until both were dead.

Haeberle and Roberts walked further into the hamlet, and Medina came up to them. Eighty-five Viet Cong had been killed in action thus far, the captain told them, and twenty suspects had been captured. Roberts jotted down the captain's information in his note pad.

Another Vietnamese interpreter, Sergeant Duong Minh,

told a Vietnamese investigating team later that he saw Medina for the first time about then. Minh had arrived on a later helicopter assault, along with Lieutenant Dennis H. Johnson, Charlie Company's intelligence officer. When he saw the bodies of civilians, he asked Medina what happened. Medina, obviously angry at Minh for asking the question, stalked away.

Now it was nearly 9:00 A.M. and all of Charlie Company was in My Lai 4. Most families were being shot inside their homes, or just outside their doorways. Those who had tried to flee were crammed by GIs into the many bunkers built throughout the hamlet for protection—once the bunkers became filled, hand grenades were lobbed in. Everything became a target. Gary Garfalo borrowed someone's M79 grenade launcher and fired it point-blank at a water buffalo. "I hit that sucker right in the head; went down like a shot. You don't get to shoot water buffalo with an M79 every day." Others fired the weapon into the bunkers full of people.

Jay Roberts insisted that he saw Medina in My Lai 4 most of the morning. "He was directing the operations in the village. He was in the village the whole time I was—from nine o'clock to eleven o'clock."

Some GIs were shouting and yelling during the massacre, Carter recalled. "The boys enjoyed it. When someone laughs and jokes about what they're doing they have to be enjoying it." A GI said, "Hey, I got me another one." Another said, "Chalk up one for me." Even Captain Medina was having a good time, Carter thought. "You can tell when someone enjoys their work." Few members of Charlie Company protested that day. For the most part those who didn't like what was going on kept their thoughts to themselves.

Herbert Carter also remembered seeing Medina inside the hamlet well after the third platoon began its advance: "I saw all those dead people lying there. Medina came right behind me." At one point in the morning, one of the members of Medina's CP joined in the shooting. "A woman came out of a hut with a baby in her arms and she was crying," Carter told the CID. "She was crying because her little boy had been in front of their hut and . . . someone had killed the child by shooting it." When the mother came into view, Carter said, one of Medina's men "shot her with an M16 and she fell. When she fell, she dropped the baby." The GI next "opened up on the baby with his M16." The infant was also killed. Carter also saw an officer grab a woman by the hair and shoot her with a 45-caliber pistol. "He held her by the hair for a minute and then let go and she fell to the ground," Carter told the Army. "Some enlisted man stranding there said, 'Well, she'll be in the big rice paddy in the sky.'"

In the midst of the carnage, Michael Bernhardt got his first good look at My Lai 4. Bernhardt had been delayed when Medina asked him to check out a suspicious wood box at the landing zone. After discovering that it wasn't a booby trap, Bernhardt hurried to catch up with his mates in the third platoon. He went into the hamlet where he saw Charlie Company "doing strange things. One: they were setting fire to the hootches and huts and waiting for people to come out and then shooting them. Two: they were going into the hootches and shooting them up. Three: they were gathering people in groups and shooting them. The whole thing was so deliberate.

It was point-blank murder and I was standing there watching it. It kind of made me wonder if I could trust people anymore."

Grzesik and his men, meanwhile, had been slowly working their way through the hamlet. The young GI was having problems controlling his men; he was anxious to move on to the rice paddy in the east. About three-quarters of the way through, he suddenly saw Meadlo again. The time was now after 9:00 A.M. Meadlo was crouched, head in his hands, sobbing like a bewildered child. "I sat down and asked him what happened." Grzesik felt responsible; after all, he was supposed to be a team leader. Meadlo told him Calley had made him shoot people. "I tried to calm him down," Grzesik says, but the squad leader didn't stay long. He had to move on; his men still hadn't completed their sweep.

Those Vietnamese who were not killed on the spot were being shepherded by the first platoon to a large drainage ditch at the eastern end of the hamlet. After Grzesik left, Meadlo and a few others gathered seven or eight villagers in one hut and were preparing to toss in a hand grenade when an order came to take them to the ditch where they found Calley, along with a dozen other first platoon members, and perhaps seventy-five Vietnamese, mostly women, old men, and children.

Not far away, invisible in the brush and trees, the second and third platoons were continuing their search-and-destroy operations in the northern half of the hamlet. Ron Grzesik and his fire team had completed a swing through the hamlet and were getting ready to turn around and walk back to see what was going on. And just south of the plaza Michael Bernhardt had attached himself to Medina and his command post. Shots were still being fired, the helicopters were still whirring overhead, and the enemy was still nowhere in sight.

One of the helicopters was piloted by Chief Warrant Officer Hugh C. Thompson of Decatur, Georgia. For him, the mission had begun routinely enough. He and his two-man crew in a small observation helicopter from the 123rd Aviation Battalion had arrived at the area around 9:00 A.M. and immediately reported what appeared to be a Viet Cong soldier armed with a weapon heading south. Although his mission was simply reconnaissance, Thompson directed his crew men to fire at and attempt to kill the Viet Cong as he wheeled the helicopter after him. They missed. Thompson flew back to the hamlet and it was then, as he told the Army Inspector General's office in June 1969, that he began seeing wounded and dead Vietnamese civilians all over the hamlet, with no sign of an enemy force.

The pilot thought that the best thing he could do would be to mark the location of wounded civilians with smoke so that the GIs on the ground could move over and begin treating some of the many injured persons. "The first one that I marked was a girl that was wounded," Thompson told the Inspector General (IG), "and they came over and walked up to her, put their weapon on automatic and let her have it." The man who did the shooting was a captain, Thompson said. Later he identified the officer as Ernest Medina.

Flying with Thompson that day was Lawrence M. Colburn of Mount Vernon, Washington, who remembers that the girl was about twenty years old and was lying on the edge of a dike outside of the hamlet with part of her body in a rice paddy. "She had been wounded in the stomach, I think, or the chest," Colburn told the IG. "This captain was coming down the dike and he had men behind him. They were sweeping through and we

were hovering a matter of feet away from them. I could see this clearly and he emptied a clip into her."

Medina and his men immediately began moving south toward the Viet Cong sighted and reported by Thompson. En route they saw the young girl in the rice paddy who had been marked by the smoke. Bernhardt had a ground view of what happened next: "He [Medina] was just going alone . . . he shot the woman. She seemed to be busy picking rice, but rice was out of season. What she really was doing was trying to pretend that she was picking rice. She was 100 meters away with a basket. . . . If she had a hand grenade, she would have to have a better arm than me to get us. . . . Medina lifted the rifle to his shoulder, looked down the barrel and pulled the trigger. I saw the woman drop. He just took a potshot . . . he wasn't a bad shot. Then he walked up. He got up real close, about three or six feet, and shot at her a couple times and finished her off. She was a real clean corpse. . . . She wasn't all over the place, and I could see her clothing move when the bullets hit. . . . I could see her twitch, but I couldn't see any holes . . . he didn't shoot her in the head." A second later, Bernhardt remembered, the captain "gave me a look, a dumb shit-eating grin."

By now, it was past 9:30 A.M. and the men of Charlie Company had been at work for more than two hours. A few of them flung off their helmets, stripped off their heavy gear, flopped down, and took a smoke break.

#### IV. THE DAY—part 2

**H**ugh Thompson's nightmare had only begun with the shooting of the girl. He flew north back over My Lai 4 and saw a small boy bleeding along a trench. Again he marked the spot so that the GIs below could provide some medical aid. Instead, he saw a lieutenant casually walk up and empty a clip into the child. He saw yet another wounded youngster; again he marked it, and this time it was a sergeant who came up and fired his M16 at the child.

Larry Colburn, who was just eighteen years old at the time, remembered that "the infantrymen were killing everything in the village. The people didn't really know what was happening. Some of them began walking out of there and the GIs just started going up to them and shooting them all in the back of the head." He added, "We saw this one woman hiding there. She was alive and squatting; she looked up when we flew over. We dropped a smoke marker. When we came back she was in the same position—only she was dead. The back of her head was blown off. It had to be point-blank."

Thompson was furious. He tried unsuccessfully to radio the troops on the ground to find out what was going on. He then reported the wild firings and unnecessary shootings to brigade headquarters. All of the command helicopters flying overhead had multichannel radios and could monitor most conversations. Lieutenant Colonel Barker apparently intercepted the message and called down to Medina at the CP just south of the plaza. John Kinch of the mortar platoon heard Medina answer that he "had a body count of 310." The captain added, "I don't know what they're doing. The first platoon's in the lead. I am trying to stop it." A moment later, Kinch said, Medina called Calley and ordered, "That's enough for today."

Harry Stanley was standing a few feet away from Calley near

some huts at the drainage ditch when the call came from Medina. He had a different recollection: "Medina called Calley and said, 'What the fuck is going on?' Calley said he got some VC, or some people that needed to be checked out." At this point Medina cautioned Calley to tell his men to save their ammunition because the operation still had a few more days to run.

It is not clear how soon or to whom Medina's order was given, but Stanley told the CID what Calley did next: "There was an old lady in a bed and I believe there was a priest in white praying over her. . . . Calley told me to ask about the VC and NVA and where the weapons were. The priest denied being a VC or NVA." Charles Sledge watched with horror as Calley pulled the old man outside: "He said a few more words to the monk. It looked like the monk was pleading for his life. Lieutenant Calley then took his rifle and pushed the monk into a rice paddy and shot him point-blank."

Calley then turned his attention back to the crowd of Vietnamese and issued an order: "Push all those people in the ditch." Three or four GIs complied. Calley struck a woman with a rifle as he pushed her down. Stanley remembered that some of the civilians "kept trying to get out. Some made it to the top. . . ." Calley began the shooting and ordered Meadlo to join in. Meadlo told about it later: "So we pushed our seven to eight people in with the big bunch of them. And so I began shooting them all. So did Mitchell, Calley. . . . I guess I shot maybe twenty-five or twenty people in the ditch . . . men, women, and children. And babies." Some of the GIs switched from automatic fire to single shot to conserve ammunition. Herbert Carter watched the mothers "grabbing their kids and the kids grabbing their mothers. I didn't know what to do." Calley then turned again to Meadlo and said, "Meadlo, we've got another job to do." Meadlo didn't want any more jobs. He began to argue with Calley. Sledge watched Meadlo once more start to sob. Calley turned next to Robert Maples and said, "Maples, load your machine gun and shoot these people." Maples replied, as he told the CID, "I'm not going to do that." He remembered that "the people firing into the ditch kept reloading magazines into their rifles and kept firing into the ditch and then killed or at least shot everyone in the ditch." William C. Lloyd of Tampa, Florida, told the CID that some grenades were also thrown into the ditch. Dennis Conti noticed that "a lot of women had thrown themselves on top of the children to protect them, and the children were alive at first. Then the children who were old enough to walk got up and Calley began to shoot the children."

One further incident stood out in many GIs' minds: seconds after the shooting stopped, a bloodied but unhurt two-year-old boy miraculously crawled out of the ditch, crying. He began running toward the hamlet. Someone hollered, "There's a kid." There was a long pause. Then Calley ran back, grabbed the child, threw him back in the ditch, and shot him.

Moments later, Thompson, still in his helicopter, flew by. He told the IG what had happened next: "I kept flying around and across a ditch. . . . and it. . . had a bunch of bodies in it and I don't know how they got in the ditch. But I saw some of them were still alive." Captain Brian W. Livingston was piloting a large helicopter gunship a few hundred feet above. He had been monitoring Thompson's agonized complaints and went down to take a look for himself. He told a military hearing "There were bodies lying in the trenches. . . . I remember

that we remarked at the time about the old Biblical story of Jesus turning water into wine. The trench had a gray color to it, with the red blood of the individuals lying in it."

By now Thompson was almost frantic. He landed his small helicopter near the ditch, and asked a soldier there if he could help the people out: "He said the only way he could help them was to help them out of their misery." Thompson took off again and noticed a group of mostly women and children huddled together in a bunker near the drainage ditch. He landed a second time. "I don't know," he explained, "maybe it was just my belief, but I hadn't been shot at the whole time I had been there and the gunships following hadn't. . . ." He then saw Calley and the first platoon; the same group that had shot two of the wounded civilians he had earlier marked with smoke. "I asked him if he could get the women and kids out of there before they tore it [the bunker] up and he said the only way he could get them out was to use hand grenades." "You just hold your men right here," Thompson told the equally angry Calley, "and I will get the women and kids out."

Before climbing out of his aircraft, Thompson had ordered Colburn and his crew chief to stay alert. "He told us that if any of the Americans opened up on the Vietnamese, we should open up on the Americans," Colburn recalled. Thompson walked back to the ship and called in two helicopter gunships to rescue the civilians. While waiting for them to land, Colburn said, "he stood between our troops and the bunker. He was shielding the people with his body. He just wanted to get those people out of there." Colburn wasn't sure whether he would have followed orders if the GIs had opened fire at the bunker: "I wasn't pointing my guns right at them, but more or less toward the ground. But I was looking their way." He remembered that most of the soldiers were gathered alongside a nearby dike, "just watching. Some were lying down; some of them were sitting up; and some were standing." The helicopters landed, with Thompson still standing between the GIs and the Vietnamese, and rescued nine persons—two old men, two women, and five children. One of the children later died en route to the hospital. Calley did nothing to stop Thompson, but later stormed up to Sledge, his radioman, and complained that the pilot "doesn't like the way I'm running the show, but I'm the boss."

Gregory Olsen, who had watched the encounter from his machine-gun position a few dozen meters away, remembered that "the next thing I knew Mitchell was just shooting into the ditch." At this point, Grzesik and his fire team came strolling into the area; they had gone completely through the hamlet, had a break, and were now returning. It was about 10:00 A.M. Grzesik saw bodies all over the northeastern quarter of My Lai 4. He glanced at the ditch. Suddenly Mitchell yelled, "Grzesik, come here." He walked over. Calley then ordered him to go to the ditch and "finish off the people." Grzesik had seen the helicopter carrying some wounded Vietnamese take off from the area a moment earlier; much later he concluded that Calley—furious with Thompson's intervention—wanted to make sure there were no more survivors in the ditch. Calley told Grzesik to gather his team to do the job. "I really believed he expected me to do it," Grzesik said later, with some amazement. Calley asked him again and Grzesik again refused. The lieutenant then angrily ordered him to take his team and help burn the bootches. Grzesik headed for the hamlet plaza.

Thompson continued to fly over the ditch and noticed that some of the children's bodies had no heads. He landed a third time after his crew chief told him that he had seen some movement in the mass of bodies and blood below. The crew chief and Colburn walked toward the ditch. "Nobody said anything," Colburn said. "We just got out." They found a young child still alive. No GIs were in the immediate area. The crew chief climbed into the ditch. "He was knee-deep in people and blood." The child was quiet, buried under many bodies. "He was still holding onto his mother," Colburn said. "But she was dead." The child, clinging desperately, was pried loose. He still did not cry. Thompson later told the Inspector General: "I don't think this child was even wounded at all, just down there among all the other bodies, and he was terrified." Thompson and his men flew the baby to Quang Ngai Hospital and safety.

In other parts of My Lai 4, GIs were taking a break, or loafing. Others were systematically burning those remaining homes and huts and destroying food. Some villagers—still alive—were able to leave their hiding places and walk away. Charles West recalled that one member of his squad who simply wasn't able to slaughter a group of children asked for and received permission from an officer to let them go.

West's third platoon went ahead, nonetheless, with the killing. They gathered a group of about ten women and children, who huddled together in fear a few feet from the plaza, where dozens of villagers already had been slain. West and his squad had finished their mission in the north and west of the hamlet, and were looking for new targets. They drifted south toward the CP. Jay Roberts and Ron Haerberle, who had spent the last hour watching the slaughter in other parts of the hamlet, stood by—pencil and cameras at the ready. A few men now singled out a slender Vietnamese girl of about fifteen. They tore her from the group and started to pull at her blouse. They attempted to fondle her breasts. The old women and children were screaming and crying. One GI yelled, "Let's see what she's made of." Another said, "VC boom, boom," meaning she was a Viet Cong whore. Jay Roberts thought that the girl was good-looking. An old lady began fighting with fanatical fury, trying to protect the girl. Roberts said, "She was fighting off two or three guys at once. She was fantastic. Usually they're pretty passive. . . . They hadn't even gotten that chick's blouse off when Haerberle came along." One of the GIs finally smacked the old woman with his rifle butt; another booted her in the rear.

Grzesik and his fire team watched the fight develop as they walked down from the ditch to the hamlet center. Grzesik was surprised: "I thought the village was cleared. . . . I didn't know there were that many people left." He knew trouble was brewing, and his main thought was to keep his team out of it. He helped break up the fight. Some of the children were desperately hanging onto the old lady as she struggled. Grzesik was worried about the cameraman. He may have yelled, "Hey, there's a photographer." He remembered thinking: "Here's a guy that you've never seen before standing there with a camera." Then somebody said, "What do we do with them?" A GI answered "Waste them." Suddenly there was a burst of automatic fire from many guns. Only a small child survived. Somebody then carefully shot him, too. A photograph of the woman and child,

with the young Vietnamese girl tucking in her blouse, was later published in *Life*. Roberts tried to explain later: "It's just that they didn't know what they were supposed to do; killing them seemed like a good idea, so they did it. The old lady who fought so hard was probably a VC." He thought a moment and added: "Maybe it was just her daughter."

West was annoyed at the photographer. "I thought it was wrong for him to stand up and take pictures of this thing. Even though we had to do it, I thought, he didn't have to take pictures of it." Later he complained personally to Haeberle about it.

By now it was nearly 10:30 A.M. and most of the company began drifting aimlessly toward the plaza and the command post a few yards to the south. Their work was largely over; a good part of the hamlet was in flames. The villagers "were lying around like ants," William Wyatt remembered. "It was just like somebody had poisoned the water and everybody took a drink and started falling out."

Herb Carter and Harry Stanley had shed their gear and were taking a short break at the CP. Near them was a young Vietnamese boy, crying, with a bullet wound in his stomach. Stanley watched one of Captain Medina's three radio operators walk along a trail toward them; he was without his radio gear. As Stanley later told the CID, the radio operator went up to Carter and said, "Let me see your pistol." Carter gave it to him. The radio operator "then stepped within two feet of the boy and shot him in the neck with a pistol. Blood gushed from the child's neck. He then tried to walk off, but he could only take two or three steps. Then he fell onto the ground. He lay there and took four or five deep breaths and then he stopped breathing." The radio operator turned to Stanley and said, "Did you see how I shot that son of a bitch?" Stanley told him, "I don't see how anyone could just kill a kid." Carter got his pistol back; he told Stanley, "I can't take this no more..." Moments later Stanley heard a gun go off and Carter yell. "I went to Carter and saw he had shot himself in the foot," Stanley remembered. "I think Carter shot himself on purpose."

Other children were also last-minute targets. After the scene with the women and children, West noticed a small boy, about seven years old, staring dazedly beside a footpath. He had been shot in the leg. "He was just standing there staring; I don't think he was crying. Somebody asked, 'What do we do with him?'" At this point West had remembered there had been an order from Captain Medina to stop the shooting. "I just shrugged my shoulders," West recalled, "and said, 'I don't know,' and just kept walking." Seconds later he heard some shots, turned around and saw the boy no longer standing on the trail.

Haeberle and Roberts were walking together on the edge of the hamlet when they also noticed the wounded child with the vacant stare. In seconds, Roberts said, "Haeberle, envisioning the war-torn-wounded-waif picture of the year, got within five feet of the kid for a close-up. He was focusing when some guy, just walking along, leveled his rifle, fired three times, and walked away." Haeberle saw the shooting through the lens of his camera. "He looked up in shock," Roberts added. "He just turned around and stared. I think that was the thing that stayed in our mind. It was so close, so real; we just saw some kid blown away."

By then a helicopter had landed near the command post, under Medina's supervision, to fly out the wounded Carter.

Sergeant Duong Minh, the interpreter who had angered Medina with the questions about the dead civilians, was also put aboard. One of Haeberle's photographs shows the company medic bandaging Carter, with Medina and a radio operator, Rodger Murray of Waukegan, Illinois, in the background near a partially destroyed red-brick house. Medina was on the radio. William Wyatt remembered the scene; that was the first time he'd seen Medina that morning. Roy Wood also saw him then for the first time.

Others recalled, however, that the captain had left his command post south of the plaza many times during the late morning to tour the northern and western sections, urging the men to stop the shooting and get on with the job of burning down the buildings. Some GIs from the second platoon, under Lieutenant Brooks, found three men still alive. Gary Crossley heard the GIs ask Brooks, "What do we do now?" The lieutenant relayed the question by radio to Medina. "Don't kill them," the captain said. "There's been too much of that already." Gary Garfalo remembered that Medina seemed frantic at times, dashing about the hamlet: "He was telling everybody, 'Let's start getting out—let's move out of here.'"

Roberts also thought that Medina "was all over." He and Haeberle had crossed from the south to the north side of the hamlet to look around, and saw the captain there. "Then Carter shot himself and Medina went back," Roberts said. At some point earlier in the morning, Roberts had watched some GIs interrogate an old man. He didn't know anything and somebody asked the captain what to do with him. Medina "indicated he didn't care," Roberts said, "that the guy wasn't of any use to him, and walked away." The GIs shot the man. Sergeant Mitchell may have witnessed the same scene. He saw both Calley and Medina interrogating an old man; Mitchell thought he was a monk. "Four or five of us weren't far away. We were watching. The old monk mumbled something and Medina walked off. I looked away for a second and when I looked back the old man had been shot and Calley was standing over him."

Richard Pendleton remembered Medina himself shooting a civilian that day. Pendleton was standing about 50 feet away from the captain sometime that morning—Pendleton isn't sure exactly when. Pendleton hadn't seen the captain earlier and he wondered what Medina thought about what was going on. "Medina was standing there with the rest of the CP. It was right there in the open. I was watching." There was a small Vietnamese child, "the only one alive among a lot of dead people." He said he watched Medina carefully aim his M16 rifle at the child. "He shot him in the head, and he went down."

Pendleton may have been mistaken. There was a child shot near the command post that day, after Carter shot himself. Charles Gruver of Tulsa, Oklahoma, remembered vividly how it happened: he saw a small boy, about three or four years old, standing by a trail with a wound in his arm. "He just stood there with big eyes staring like he didn't believe what was happening. Then the captain's RTO [radio operator] put a burst of 16 [M16 rifle fire] into him." Ronald Grzesik also saw it. He was just watching the child when he heard a rifle shot; he looked back and saw that the radio operator was still in braced firing position. But Medina, recalled Grzesik, "was around the corner" in the command post at the time. Roberts also witnessed the shooting; he thought the toddler was searching through the pile of dead bodies for his mother or father, or a sister. He

was wearing only a shirt. The impact of the M16 flung the small body backwards onto the pile.

After that incident, Grzesik said he went up to John Paul and told him what had been going on inside My Lai 4. Paul promptly asked him to tell the captain. Grzesik declined, thinking that Medina "was going to find out anyway if he walked up a few feet."

There were some small acts of mercy. A GI placed a blanket over the body of a mutilated child. An elderly woman was spared when some GIs hollered at a soldier just as he was about to shoot her. Grzesik remembered watching a GI seem to wrestle with his conscience while holding a bayonet over a wounded old man. "He wants to stab somebody with a bayonet," Grzesik thought. The GI hesitated . . . and finally passed on, leaving the old man to die.

Some GIs, however, didn't hesitate to use their bayonets. Nineteen-year-old Nguyen Thi Ngoc Tuyet told a reporter that she watched a baby trying to open her slain mother's blouse to nurse. A soldier shot the infant while it was struggling with the blouse, and then slashed at it with his bayonet. Tuyet also says she saw another baby hacked to death by GIs wielding their bayonets.

Le Tong, a rice farmer, reported seeing one woman raped after GIs killed her children. Nguyen Khoa, a peasant, told of a thirteen-year-old girl who was raped before being killed. GIs then attacked Khoa's wife, he said, tearing off her clothes. Before they could rape her, however, Khoa said, their six-year-old son, riddled with bullets, fell and saturated her with blood. The GIs left her alone.

There were "degrees" of murder that day. Some were conducted out of sympathy. Michael Terry, the Mormon who was a squad leader in the third platoon, had ordered his men to take their lunch break by the bloody ditch in the rear of the hamlet. He noticed that there were no men in the ditch, only women and children.

He had watched Calley and the others shoot into that ditch. Calley seemed just like a kid, Terry thought. He also remembered thinking it was "just like a Nazi-type thing." When one soldier couldn't fire any more and threw down his weapon, "Calley picked it up." Later, during lunch, Terry and his men saw that some of the victims were still breathing. "They were pretty badly shot up. They weren't going to get any medical help, and so we shot them . . . shot maybe five of them."

James Bergthold saw an old man who had been shot in both legs: "He was going to die anyway so I figured I might as well kill him." He took his 45-caliber pistol (as a machine-gun ammunition carrier, he was entitled to one), carefully placed the barrel against the upper part of the old man's forehead, and blew off the top of his head. Carter had watched the scene and remembered thinking that Bergthold had done the old man a favor. "If me and you were together and you got wounded bad," Carter later told an interviewer, "and I couldn't get you to a doctor, I'd shoot you, too."

Most of the shooting was over by the time Medina called a break for lunch, shortly after 11:00 A.M. By then, Roberts and Haerberle had grabbed a helicopter and cleared out of the area, their story for the day far bigger than they wanted. Calley, Mitchell, Sledge, Grzesik, and a few others went back to the command post west of My Lai 4 to take lunch with Captain Medina and the rest of his headquarters crew. Grzesik

recalled that at that point he had thought there couldn't be a survivor left in the hamlet. But two little girls showed up, about ten and eleven years old. John Paul said they came in from one of the paddies where they apparently had waited out the siege. "We sat them down with us [at the command post]," Paul recounts "and gave them some cookies and crackers to eat." When a CID interrogator later asked Charles Sledge how many civilians he thought had survived, he answered: "Only two small children who had lunch with us."

In the early afternoon, the men of Charlie Company mopped up to make sure all the houses and goods in My Lai 4 were destroyed. Medina ordered the underground tunnels in the hamlet blown up; most of them already had been blocked. Within another hour, My Lai 4 was no more; its red-brick buildings demolished by explosives, its huts burned to the ground, its people dead or dying.

Michael Bernhardt later summarized the day: "We met no resistance and I only saw three captured weapons. We had no casualties. It was just like any other Vietnamese village—old papa-sans, women, and kids. As a matter of fact, I don't remember seeing one military age male in the entire place, dead or alive. The only prisoner I saw was in his fifties."

The three platoons of Company C pulled out shortly after noon, rendezvousing in the rice paddies east of the hamlet. Lieutenant Brooks' second platoon had about eighty-five villagers in tow; it kept those of military age with them and told the rest to begin moving south. Following his original orders, Medina then marched the GIs a few hundred meters northeast through the deserted hamlets of My Lai 5 and My Lai 6, ransacking and burning as they went. In one of the hamlets, Medina ordered the residents gathered, and then told Sergeant Phu, the regular company interpreter, to tell them, as Phu later told Vietnamese investigators, that "they were to go away or something will happen to them—just like what happened at My Lai 4."

By nightfall, the Viet Cong were back in My Lai 4, helping the survivors bury the dead. It took five days. Most of the funeral speeches were made by the Communist guerrillas. Nguyen Bat was not a Communist at the time of the massacre, but the incident changed his mind. "After the shooting," he said, "all the villagers became Communists."

When Army investigators reached the barren area in November 1969, in connection with the My Lai probe in the United States, they found mass graves at three sites, as well as a ditch full of bodies. It was estimated that between 450 and 500 people—most of them women, children, and old men—had been slain and buried there.

## V. THE VICTORY

Specialist 5 Jay Roberts carried his reporter's note pad and a pencil with him when he took the helicopter from Eleventh Brigade headquarters at Duc Pho that morning. But whatever he wrote could not be used. The Army had decided the night before that the Viet Cong were in My Lai 4; nothing that happened in the next twenty-four hours officially changed that view.

A Saigon report of Charlie Company's battle sent to the Pentagon the night of March 16 noted that initial "contact with the enemy force" occurred at 7:50 A.M., about the time Lieuten-

ant Calley and his platoon had secured the landing zone and shot an unarmed old man. The military message added that a second combat company had been airlifted into the area by 9:10 A.M. and that both units reported "sporadic contact" with the enemy as they moved toward a rendezvous. The companies had support from "Army artillery and helicopter gunships."

Roberts—who had been out of My Lai since 11:00 A.M.—learned from Colonel Barker in the early afternoon that the final body-count for Task Force Barker that day was 128, with three enemy weapons captured. He had no idea how, or why, that total was reached. There was great excitement at LZ Dotti: the 128 body-count was the largest for the task force since it had begun operations forty days earlier. The correspondent knew most of the dead were civilians; he personally had seen at least twenty-five persons killed and fifty bodies: "I was pretty upset. And then I had to write a story about it. How do you write a story when you have 128 bodies and only three captured weapons?" He thought briefly of reporting what had happened, but his ambition vanished when he walked into the tactical-operations center at LZ Dotti. He was promptly kicked out of the area by Major Charles Calhoun, the task force's operations officer who was monitoring the radios. Roberts still doesn't know if he was thrown out because of what was coming over the radios or because of simple officer hostility to enlisted men. In either case, the incident didn't bolster his courage. Colonel Barker also returned to his headquarters at LZ Dotti early in the afternoon, and Roberts sought him out. Roberts asked him "about the high body-count and the low number of weapons discovered. He just kind of overlooked it and said something to the effect that I could make a good story without that fact." Barker died in a helicopter crash three months later, but Roberts was certain that "he knew what was going on. He knew they were wiping out the village."

Roberts returned to brigade headquarters at Duc Pho, wrote the story based on the official statistics, and gave it to his superior officer. "I just figured it'd look real bad, and it wasn't my problem." The brigade press officer, Second Lieutenant Arthur Dunn of Forest Park, Illinois, also thought the story looked bad. Dunn particularly noticed the claim that high numbers of Viet Cong were killed and the fact that artillery had been called in before the ground assault. "Well, they did it again," he said to himself, thinking that an artillery round had landed amidst civilians. Dunn's job was to file a daily after-action report on the brigade's maneuvers to division headquarters at Chu Lai. Task Force Barker's assault on My Lai 4 was the biggest thing going on March 16, and Dunn used the same official statistics that were available to Roberts. As he wrote his report that evening he knew it "was fishy." Perhaps, he thought, Medina and his company had unearthed some previously killed soldiers or civilians and were claiming them as enemy dead. Such things had happened before.

Roberts hadn't discussed the mission with him, Dunn recalled, but it wouldn't have made any difference if he had. "If I had known there was a massacre and let somebody write about it, I would have lost my job." The young officer's two-page action report was dictated that night by telephone to the Americal Division press office at Chu Lai. "They copied it down word for word," Dunn said. Division press personnel sent one copy of the story up to Saigon for release to the hundreds of newsmen there; a second copy was sent over to the printer for pub-

lication in the division's daily newsletter. The report bore little relation to reality. Neither did Roberts'.

The official brigade account of the task-force operation, as written by Roberts, gave Charlie Company direct credit for only fifteen of the 128 enemy kills, and also said that none of the company's victims was inside My Lai 4 at the time. "The infantry company led by Captain Ernest Medina engaged and killed fourteen VC and captured three M-1 rifles, a radio and enemy documents while moving toward the village," the report said, adding that one Vietnamese had been killed earlier at the landing zone. It said firefights in the surrounding areas were responsible for most of the enemy deaths. Six victims were killed by the helicopter gunships from the 123rd Aviation Battalion and 174th Aviation Company, which were flying support for the mission. Those six, according to Roberts' version, were the only Vietnamese who were killed inside My Lai 4. Barker was quoted in the story as saying, "The combat assault went like clockwork. We had two entire companies on the ground in less than an hour." The story added that "the swiftness with which the units moved into the area surprised the enemy. After the battle, the Eleventh Brigade soldiers moved into the village, searching each hut and tunnel."

Similar stories appeared later in the *Pacific Stars and Stripes* and in *The Trident*, the weekly newspaper of the Americal Division.

A report of the My Lai 4 invasion, based on the official version supplied newsmen in Saigon, was published on the front page of the *New York Times*, as well as in many other newspapers, on March 17. It said that two Americal Division companies had caught a North Vietnamese unit in a pincer movement, killing 128 enemy soldiers. "The United States soldiers were sweeping the area," the *Times* said. "The operation is another American offensive to clear enemy pockets still threatening the cities. While the two companies of United States soldiers moved in on the enemy force from opposite sides, heavy artillery barrages and armed helicopters were called in to pound the North Vietnamese soldiers." The report said two American GIs were killed and ten wounded during the day-long fight six miles northeast of Quang Ngai, even though Medina's company had only sustained one casualty—Carter. There was no mention of civilian casualties.

Haeberle had returned with Roberts to Duc Pho. He developed some—but not all—of the photographs taken at My Lai 4 that day. He had taken three cameras with him; one to shoot black-and-white photographs for the Army and two to shoot color photographs for his own use. A few black-and-white photographs were printed and sent up to division headquarters, but only a few. Most of the negatives were simply thrown into a desk at Duc Pho. Roberts obviously thought that there was no sense in sending up photographs of carnage, because the press people at headquarters would never have approved them for release.

Charlie Company's apparent victory did not go unnoticed. A few days after the battle, General William C. Westmoreland, then commander of U. S. forces in Vietnam, sent the following message: "Operation Muscatine [the code name for the My Lai 4 assault] contact northeast of Quang Ngai City on 16 March dealt enemy heavy blow. Congratulations to officers and men of C-1-20 [Charlie Company, First Battalion, Twentieth Infantry] for outstanding action."

## VI. AFTERMATH

Hours after it was over, most members of Charlie Company were still keyed up. There was a lot of talk; much of it bragging about how many gooks had been killed that day. Harry Stanley said that three members of the company had staged a contest at My Lai 4 to see who would kill the most people there. Charles West got angry at all the loose talk and joking after the incident. "It was bad enough that we did this, but some guys were telling how many people they had killed. . . . This didn't make no sense. The guys wasn't unhappy until after we came out; until they stopped to think about what they did."

When the men of Charlie Company finished razing My Lai 5 and 6, Medina marched them south to meet up with another company of Task Force Barker; together the units would set up defensive positions for the night near the coast of the South China Sea a few miles to the east. By late afternoon the company was about 2,500 meters—well over a mile—outside the hamlet. Medina got a radio call from Major Calhoun, asking him to take the company back into My Lai 4 to do a better body-count of civilian casualties. Medina argued: "I said I felt that was too far to go and it was late in the day and that it would be better to go into defensive positions." He was afraid of mines and booby traps. "This was a very dangerous operation in dangerous territory."

Suddenly Major General Samuel Koster, apparently flying overhead in a helicopter and monitoring the conversation between Medina and Calhoun, broke in over the radio, using his code name "Saber Six." Medina remembered that "Saber Six said there was no need to send the company . . . back into all that mess" this late in the day. Saber Six asked how many civilians had been killed during the operation in My Lai 4. Medina told him "about twenty to twenty-eight." Koster replied, "That sounds about right," and ordered Medina to get his defensive positions set up. At some point that evening, Medina gathered his three platoon leaders and asked if any civilians had been killed. "I received negative indications," he recalled.

Later that night, Medina told his men that a helicopter pilot had filed a complaint and there was the possibility of an investigation. Bernhardt remembered Medina promising that he would back them up in case of trouble: "He said he would say that there was a gunfight and that we did a lot of shooting." The captain urged his men not to talk about it. "The guys weren't worried," Bernhardt added. "They had absolute faith in him."

Charlie Company heard no more officially about My Lai 4 that day. But they talked among themselves. Mike Terry shared his dinner that night with Gregory Olsen and Michael Bernhardt. They were all upset about what had happened. "We talked about the way the Army was going to cover it by saying it was such a good thing . . . a big victory," Terry recalled. All three thought that field-grade officers must have known about it. Bernhardt heard talk of a body-count of "over three hundred" in My Lai; he also heard that only those old enough to walk were tallied. Young children and infants were not. Paul Meadlo was deeply disturbed about what he had done, especially after someone told him that the company was not supposed to kill everybody: "Mitchell said we were just supposed to shoot the men." James Bergthold remembered, "Everybody was talking

about it. First we heard there were quite a lot killed and then it was found out they weren't supposed to be killed, but were supposed to have been evacuated by helicopters instead."

They didn't dwell on it too long, however. John Paul remembered that some of the GIs brought two girls—apparently taken from My Lai 4—down to the beach. He isn't sure what happened to them. At one point in the evening a GI approached Sergeant Phu, who was distressed by what had happened to his countrymen that day, and suggested that he try not to look unhappy because "it could be very dangerous for him." The Vietnamese was told to "look casual."

Back at Duc Pho, Captain Charlie R. Lewellen, assistant intelligence officer for Task Force Barker, was just getting to sleep after an exhausting day. He liked to tape radio transmissions during combat: "It's one thing to tell a man what combat's like, it's another to play a tape." He had set up his equipment at the communications center at Duc Pho early in the morning. The first words recorded, he said later, showed that the "lift ships were getting off the ground at 7:22 A.M." The tape played continuously during the day, transcribing all of the complaints made by Thompson and the transmissions between Medina and others in the Eleventh Brigade. Lewellen kept the Japanese-made recorder going until "I checked out and went to bed."

Charlie Company spent that night in a Vietnamese graveyard, their sleeping bags and pup tents flung amidst shrines and burial mounds.

The next morning, Medina was ordered by Task Force Barker to establish an outpost on a nearby hill and destroy three deserted hamlets named Mykhe 1, 2, and 3. Sometime that day there was another argument in the first platoon between Calley and Sergeant Cowen, and another casualty resulted. The mission was reconnaissance; Calley wanted to take a small squad to the top of the ridge that was marked off-limits on the map because of minefields. Cowen argued briefly, but gave up when Calley asked his usual question: "Who's the boss?" The lieutenant picked Meadlo and a few others to go along. Meadlo had the minesweeper that day: his job was to go before the others and carefully sweep the warning device back and forth a few inches off the ground. His mind was on other things; he got careless and triggered a mine that blew off his right foot. Charles Sledge heard Meadlo begin to yell and curse at Calley while waiting for a rescue helicopter, warning him that "God will punish you. If you don't get out of the field, the same thing will happen to you." Rennard Doines also heard Meadlo say to Calley: "God will punish you for what you made me do." Some of the mine fragments had struck Calley and slightly wounded him about the face—he got a Purple Heart for the injury. Calley was shaken. He began screaming, "Get him on the helicopter. Get him on the helicopter." Describing the incident twenty months later, Roy Wood commented that "maybe God done caught up with Calley. It seems to me that now he got his reward, too."

During the search-and-destroy missions, some men seemed to get out of control again. Three men and a woman were sighted fleeing from a burning hut in one of the hamlets. The woman was grabbed. Gregory Olsen saw a soldier from the second platoon running around with the woman, by this time stripped of all her clothing, over his shoulder. "He said he was going

to 'put it' to her, but she was too dirty," Olsen recalled. The men were all told that the woman had been identified as a North Vietnamese Army nurse; the men with her, who had escaped, were described as doctors. Wood remembered clearly that they didn't get the men, but the whole second platoon "got her—they caught her ass." Wood said, "They all raped her . . . tore her up." He saw her later, bleeding badly, but a sergeant fixed her up. Later she escaped. "Tough?" he asked rhetorically. "She sure must of been—she took on all of them." The incident, which took place hardly twenty-four hours after the assault on My Lai 4, was known to most members of the company.

Charlie Company eventually worked its way back to the South China Sea coast, where four suspects were captured, including a young boy and a middle-aged man. The boy was gagged and tied to a bamboo tree; he quickly identified the man as an area commander for the North Vietnamese Army. The men decided to have some fun. One GI lit a cigarette and stuffed it, still burning, inside the older man's pants. Grzesik watched as the man started to dance in pain and the GI danced alongside, mocking him. John Kinch told *Life* magazine that Medina played Russian roulette with the old man at one point, trying futilely to make him talk. Medina acknowledged the incident in an interview with the *Washington Post*; but said he had removed the bullets from the pistol. Kinch's account continued: "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, and then aimed straight at him." The captive began talking. He said he was a North Vietnamese Army area commander. Medina later had a photograph taken of himself drinking from a coconut with one hand and holding a sharp knife under the throat of the trussed-up boy.

Sometime in the afternoon of that day, March 17, Medina got a call from Task Force Barker headquarters informing him that Colonel Henderson, the brigade commander, was en route for a visit. The colonel, accompanied by two other officers, landed and told Medina he had been accused of shooting a woman at My Lai 4. The colonel said he was conducting an informal investigation. "He asked me if there had been any war crimes at My Lai 4, and I told him no," Medina recalled. Henderson left. By this time, word of Charlie Company's victory at My Lai 4 was on the front page of the *New York Times* and General Westmoreland's office was readying his routine message of congratulations.

But Medina was worried. John Smail of Renton, Washington, a squad leader in the third platoon, remembered thinking that "somebody gave him a good ass-chewing." Smail and Medina got along well; the GI said that "Medina liked to bullshit with me, but he just wasn't himself" after Henderson's visit. "He was sweating about something," Smail said. "He walked around real nervously, and kept on saying, 'Sergeant Smail, what can I do?' I asked him, 'What do you mean, sir?'"

The next day, Charlie Company returned to LZ Dotti, its mission a success. Some of the men were quizzed by Colonel Henderson about My Lai 4 as they climbed off the helicopters onto the landing pad, but all denied seeing a massacre. For most of the GIs, that was the last they would hear about My Lai 4 from their officers or brigade headquarters.

Michael Bernhardt, however, wanted to do something about

what he had seen. But he was afraid to speak out. He had watched as Colonel Henderson asked his questions, and he felt sure nothing would come of it. He thought, too, that the helicopter pilot who had reported the incident had been killed in action the next day. Not many could speak, he figured, without implicating themselves, and if they did, no one knew how the Army would react. Bernhardt felt he had no place to go. He decided he could, perhaps, write his Congressman about the shooting. He apparently mentioned his ideas to other members of his platoon; the word got to the platoon leader, Lieutenant Stephen Brooks. Brooks passed it on to Medina. The captain accosted Bernhardt in a mess hall, and told the rifleman, "You can write your Congressman if you want to. But you will create a big stink. The matter is being investigated." Medina did not spell out just what could be reported to the Congressman, but it was clear to both men what they were talking about. Bernhardt denied that he had any such plan; Medina then emphasized that it would be unwise to send such a letter. An Army investigation concluded more than a year later that Medina had not really threatened the youth; he had merely "encouraged" him not to write any letters.

A few days after Charlie Company's invasion of My Lai 4, Ronald L. Ridenhour, a GI from Phoenix, Arizona, then serving as a helicopter door gunner in the Eleventh Brigade, flew over the stricken area: "The hamlet was completely desolate. There were no people around, no signs of life anywhere." The pilot, Warrant Officer Gilbert Honda, hovered the craft over a rice paddy near the hamlet. Ridenhour saw a body below. The helicopter flew down to investigate. "It was a woman," Ridenhour remembered, "spread-eagled as if on display. She had an Eleventh Brigade patch between her legs—as if it were some type of display, some badge of honor. We just looked; it was obviously there so people would know the Eleventh Brigade had been there. We just thought, 'What in the hell's wrong with these guys? What's going on?'"

The pilot banked the helicopter so its prop wash caught the patch and blew it away. Moments later Ridenhour spotted a number of possible Viet Cong suspects walking together in the My Lai 4 area. The men ran and jumped into a bunker when the helicopter approached. Ridenhour wanted to flush them out with a white phosphorous grenade to determine if they were enemy troops. "They were obviously bad guys," he recalled. But Honda seemed reluctant, and halfheartedly flew the helicopter over the bunker—at far too high an altitude to hit it with a grenade. Ridenhour was angry: "What in hell's going on, sir?" Honda told him cryptically that "these people around here have had a pretty rough time the last few days." The helicopter flew off.

Within hours, word of what had happened in My Lai 4 had spread throughout the helicopter units of the Eleventh Brigade. "We just rapped about it," Larry Colburn recalled. "Guys in the 123rd Aviation saw it and got mad. Thompson was so pissed he wanted to turn in his wings."

Charlie Company quickly settled back into its routine of search-and-destroy missions that continued until its year in Vietnam was over. There were only a few reminders of what had happened. Somehow other companies in the First Battalion of the Eleventh Brigade had learned about My Lai 4. "They'd say,

"Yeah, we heard you killed a whole lot of women and children—and then reported 128 VC killed," West recalled. Charles Sledge also remembered, with unhappiness, the fact that other companies "would razz us about it."

By then, Medina had promoted Calley to first lieutenant, but the first platoon continued in its dislike and disrespect for the young officer. In April 1968 the long-simmering feud between Sergeant Cowen and Lieutenant Calley reached its climax when Calley insisted during a field operation that artillery be called in near the first platoon's position. Cowen demanded he cancel the order. Calley refused. "I told him that someday he'd be sorry he never listened to a noncom," Cowen recalled. "I grabbed Mitchell and told him we'd better find a hole and crawl in it. . . . We were sitting there talking when I heard the whistle of an incoming. It landed 50 meters away. I could hear Calley yelling on the phone for the artillery to stop. The next night we hooked with the company again and I had a talk with Medina. I told him, 'It's either Calley or me.'"

The following day, Calley was relieved and put in charge of the mortar platoon, whose responsibility was to provide artillery cover for the infantrymen in the company. John Paul said that Medina must have made the shift after "figuring out where Calley could do the least damage." Calley later requested a transfer out of Charlie Company—and got it.

By then Medina's men were talking much less about My Lai 4. If there was any general consensus among the members of Charlie Company, it was perhaps best expressed by William Doherty, who thought that "it was pretty disgusting, but it was a different feeling. If they had been Americans," he said of the dead Vietnamese, "I might have felt different. I never really understood those people." Doherty was upset by what had happened to him in Vietnam: "You'd see a guy's leg blown off, or a rifle wound through his head—it stopped meaning anything more. It was nothing. You'd just say, 'Glad it wasn't me.' They told me this would happen to me when I got to Nam—this attitude. I didn't believe it, but . . ."

No one had stepped forward in protest, and most of the men started brooding about the incident only after they left the company or returned to their homes in the United States. Larry Colburn later bumped into some GIs at Fort Hood, Texas, who had served in other units of Task Force Barker at the time of My Lai 4. He talked to them about it. "They heard that Charlie Company had a turkey shoot," Colburn recalled.

At least one GI, however, had second thoughts while still with Medina's company in Vietnam. Ron Grzesik remembered that he wasn't immediately distressed by what he saw that day. Four days after My Lai he wrote a friend back home without even mentioning the shooting. But the following week he sent another letter, this one describing the massacre and concluding that every man in Charlie Company "should be sent to jail."

## VII. THE COVER-UP

**T**he Army defines the shooting of unarmed civilians as a "Grave Breach" of the Geneva Convention of August 12, 1949, for the protection of war victims. A 1968 directive published by the United States Command in Saigon is explicit about what to do: "It is the responsibility of all military personnel

having knowledge or receiving a report of an incident or of an act thought to be a war crime to make such incident known to his commanding officer as soon as possible. . . ."

March 16, 1968, was Colonel Oran K. Henderson's first day on his new job as commanding officer of the Eleventh Brigade. It should have been a happy day. But things began going wrong for Henderson right from the start. Shortly after 9:00 A.M., the colonel, cruising above the battle in My Lai 4, noticed two men fleeing the hamlet. He thought they might be Viet Cong and ordered Warrant Officer Thompson, below him in a small observation helicopter, to stop them. After this was done, Henderson landed and personally interrogated the suspects. They turned out to be, Thompson later told the IG, not Viet Cong but two members of the Saigon government's local militia, who had apparently been held captive in My Lai 4.

Sometime in that same hour, Thompson filed his complaint to brigade headquarters about the "wild shooting by men on the ground and by helicopters in the area." He specifically cited the shooting of a woman by a captain. Upon learning of the complaint, Henderson said later, "I reported it to division headquarters [at Chu Lai] right away." He told them that he would make an inquiry. Henderson already had had some hints of wild shooting at My Lai 4 before he heard from Thompson. In the fall of 1969 Henderson told a reporter that on an earlier helicopter fly-by, he had seen the bodies of "five or six" civilians, two of which appeared to be men.

But the colonel, testifying in the spring of 1969 in private at the Pentagon about the incident, had had a different recollection: he had observed the bodies of only one woman and two children, both killed—he believed—by artillery. The IG subsequently asked Thompson about that statement, and the warrant officer—who had landed his helicopter in the same area at the same time—disagreed.

Henderson gave a third version of what he saw. He told a group of radio and television newsmen in November 1969 that he had flown over My Lai 4 and had seen no evidence of a massacre. By the end of the next day, March 17, Henderson said, he had questioned the men of Charlie Company and they had proclaimed their innocence.

There is yet another version of Henderson's involvement. Larry Colburn decided to tell somebody what he had witnessed in My Lai 4. After returning in the afternoon to brigade headquarters at Duc Pho, he walked over to Henderson's office. "I told him what happened that day," Colburn said. "He took a few notes and then I just never heard anything about it." The colonel seemed "nonchalant" about the whole affair. Colburn wasn't surprised: "I never thought anything would come of it anyway. I'd seen it happen before, but just not with that many people." Thompson accompanied his young crew member to the colonel's quarters. Colburn recalled that the pilot also spoke to Henderson that day.

**T**his was only the beginning of many contradictions in the subsequent accounts by Henderson and others of how the colonel learned about and investigated the charges of wild shooting and unnecessary killing in My Lai 4.

Lieutenant Colonel Barker, the task-force commander, and Major Charles Calhoun, its executive officer at LZ Dotti, were immediately informed of Thompson's report. It is not known

if anyone else immediately knew of it. Barker contacted Medina, who then radioed Calley to ask what was going on and to tell him to conserve ammunition. All of these messages were being carefully logged on Lewellen's tape recorder at the communications center at Duc Pho. Second Lieutenant Joseph Reid of Mountain View, California, was monitoring the radios at brigade headquarters at Duc Pho that day; he heard radio messages indicating that "the going was pretty thick."

Thompson's report could not be ignored. Army Secretary Stanley R. Resor later said that Henderson was immediately "directed to conduct an investigation of the incident." It is unclear who actually gave Henderson the order. The colonel, in his subsequent description of his actions to newsmen, indicated that he himself had initiated the brief field investigation on March 17, and went on to say that he had interrogated a suspect that day in connection with a shooting at My Lai 4. In his first public discussions of the case, however, Henderson did not identify Medina as the man who was being investigated for the murder, nor did he say the victim was a woman. Henderson told one television reporter that Medina's story was virtually the same as that told by the helicopter pilots, with this exception: "The individual [Medina] thought this [Vietnamese] person was dead, and as he walked away, the Vietnamese raised his arm, and instinctively the individual thought it was a hand grenade. He whipped out and fired with his weapon, and it was a regrettable incident. But as a soldier, I can accept this. It was purely a result of the survival problem you're faced with. You only have a split second to react." The on-the-spot interrogation in connection with the shooting of the woman was ended at that point, apparently because of Medina's explanation.

Henderson also gave two accounts of his subsequent interrogation on March 18 of some of the men of Charlie Company at LZ Dotti. He told one reporter: "I talked to about forty of them and I asked them point-blank if there was any truth to these reports. This was an informal inquiry. I got a negative from all of them. In all my questioning, there was only one admission that a civilian had been killed . . . [a reference to the Medina shooting]." According to another newspaper version, supplied by Henderson, he gathered thirty or forty men, and approximately the following happened:

"From initial reports he [Henderson] had, some civilians might have been killed, perhaps promiscuously. This overshadowed to a degree any success they had in the operation. It concerned him as brigade commander. He did not expect his soldiers to kill civilians. He asked whether anyone in the group had observed shooting or killing of civilians. Reportedly there was a general murmur: 'No, no.' He pointed his finger at random at three or four men, and asked each of them. 'No, sir,' came the answer, loud and clear."

One of the men he asked was Sergeant Cowen. "When we got out of the area," Cowen recalled, "some colonel came up and asked me if there was anything unusual going on in the village. I said, 'No comment,' and he passed on." Allen Boyce also clearly remembered the interrogation: "When we got off the operation, somebody—a colonel or light colonel—asked us if anything out of the ordinary had taken place. Some sergeant who was there just shook his head. He didn't say yes or no. He didn't say either way. That's the way they [the Army] do it; they usually ask the highest-ranking guy. The officer directed

questions at everybody but the senior man answered. He's supposed to. In training, they try to brainwash you—they tell you that 'you don't ask questions; just obey orders.'" Even Ron Grzesik told Henderson no. As he explained later, "It was the only answer I could think of." Harry Stanley later wondered why the colonel expected anyone to say anything, since "the first thing they teach you is about the chain of command. If I talked to the colonel, they'd [Charlie Company] find some way to get me."

By the afternoon of the 18th, Medina was convinced that the matter was indeed closed. Colonel Barker later suggested that he tell the company not to discuss the incident with anyone else—a step Medina had already taken.

Henderson, meanwhile, concluded his investigation at LZ Dotti. There are again different versions of what took place. Secretary Resor told Congress later that Henderson, during his informal investigation of the incident, "interviewed the task-force commander and S-3 [Major Calhoun, the executive officer], and the commanders of the two companies which had been in the immediate area. He also received some reports of unnecessary killing through Vietnamese channels." But Henderson, making no mention of Vietnamese reports, told newsmen simply that the answers he received from the men of Charlie Company and Captain Medina "satisfied me and I accepted them." He then made an oral report of his findings to headquarters of the Americal Division. A few days later, around April 1, Henderson personally talked to General Koster about My Lai 4.

By this time Lewellen had played his long-running tape to a number of officers attached to headquarters company at Duc Pho. Lieutenant John Gore of Lawrenceville, New Jersey, listened to it a few days after the March 16 mission. "It was instant replay," Gore said later. He remembered that Lewellen continued "to play it once in a while" for the men of the brigade.

Henderson said that sometime in May 1968 he was ordered by General Koster to conduct a formal inquiry. The practice of formalizing an on-the-spot field investigation is a normal one in the military, but Koster's order to Henderson to handle it was a deviation. Usually a division commander will request his inspector general's office—charged by regulation with responsibility for such investigations—to step in at that point. Henderson assigned Lieutenant Colonel Barker to handle the formal inquiry, although it was his task force that was being investigated. Barker reached the same conclusion as he had, Henderson explained: "Colonel Barker also talked to a number of the men who had been in on this operation, and he also got a negative." Barker's report was deemed satisfactory by Henderson, who signed it and sent it on to headquarters. Whatever Barker did do remains a mystery. Of over forty members of Charlie Company who were later asked about it, not one could recall the Barker investigation.

Once Barker's report was handed in, General Koster should have forwarded it to his superiors in Saigon and Washington. A Defense Department directive then in force said clearly that reports of civilian killings—whether substantiated or not—must be forwarded up the line. Koster's actions throughout the March 16 incident are suspect. The officer, who later became Superintendent of West Point, is known to have been monitoring radio transmissions in the area that day; most Vietnam combat veterans agree he should have taken it upon himself at least to fly

over the My Lai 4 operation—the most significant for the Americal Division at that time. Did he, as Medina claimed, order the captain not to return to the hamlet and do the more accurate body-count that Major Calhoun was insisting upon? Did he call for an immediate inspector-general investigation after receiving Henderson's oral report on the My Lai 4 incident? Did he follow the directive about forwarding such reports to his superiors in Saigon? A three-star general was put in charge of an in-depth Pentagon investigation of My Lai 4 in November 1969 to determine, among other things, the answers to those questions.

**W**ithin a few days after March 16—the dead had been buried by then—Do Dinh Luyen, the Song My village chief (which includes the My Lai 4 area), turned over a carefully compiled list of the dead to the official immediately above him in the Vietnamese hierarchy—the Son Tinh district chief, Captain Tran Ngoc Tan. He in turn reported the incident to the Quang Ngai Province chief, Colonel Thon That Khien, within a few days. Captain Tan, who made his report by letter, also sent a sharply critical note to the chief of staff of the South Vietnamese Second Division, which had responsibility for the area. Included with the note was the list of the 450 to 500 villagers who were said to have been shot. Tan's report put Colonel Khien in an unenviable spot; the forty-year-old officer was popular among American military men, who considered him a strong supporter. But Khien knew that no one reporting an American atrocity would remain a friend for long, particularly after a number of high-ranking American officers had already investigated the charges, and ruled them groundless.

Khien delayed. He explained later that he was reluctant to provide the enemy with anything it could use as propaganda, and that he also had doubts the Americans could commit such a crime. He had tried to convince himself that it was an accident—perhaps some artillery had gone astray. In any case, once the Viet Cong began distributing leaflets about the incident, he, of course, had to keep quiet; otherwise he would be providing support for the enemy.

But officials of the South Vietnamese Second Division, meanwhile, had started doing what Khien was afraid to do: they were investigating the report. On April 15, four weeks after the incident, military intelligence officials filed reports noting that American troops had "gathered people together" and executed almost five hundred of them in the My Lai 4 hamlet of Song My village on March 16. The document was found on file by a London newspaperman in late 1969 at the province headquarters at Quang Ngai.

A further document, also seen by the same reporter, revealed that in June Colonel Khien requested Colonel Toan of the Second Division and James A. May, the senior United States province adviser at the time, to take up the matter with the Americal Division. That document was the last-known contact at the time between the Americans and the South Vietnamese regarding My Lai 4. May, in an interview, said he left Quang Ngai on May 29, 1968, and had heard nothing of the incident up to then. His successor, Robert T. Burke, insisted that "I never heard a word. Not a thing."

The Song My village chief told a newsman in November

1969 that he had never spoken to any American about the massacre. And no Americans—either from the province adviser's office or from the Americal Division—ever attempted to verify the chief's report by interrogating survivors. The next discussion about My Lai 4 between Americans and South Vietnamese took place the following spring, when the United States Army launched its investigation.

It's impossible to determine how far up the Vietnamese reports climbed in the bureaucracy. Had normal procedure been followed, Khien's report to the Second Division would have been passed up to the corps commander, the Vietnamese joint general staff, the defense minister, the Premier, and then to the President. In early December 1969, President Thieu was reported to have known about the My Lai 4 case for more than a year. He was said to have believed there was a good deal of truth to it, but did not want to acknowledge the incident publicly, telling associates at the time that it would only increase the anti-American feeling in South Vietnam.

## VIII. THE UNCOVERING—part 1

**I**t took twenty months for the American public to learn what Charlie Company had done in a few hours at My Lai 4. Why, and how, the deliberate murder of hundreds of civilians remained a secret so long is difficult to understand, especially because so many knew about it—and so many had participated in it. Dozens of Charlie Company GIs had transferred to other units; many chose, perhaps deliberately, the most dangerous job in South Vietnam—long-range reconnaissance patrols into enemy territory. GIs talk, and brag; the 250 men in the other two companies of Task Force Barker learned within days about what had happened in My Lai 4. A number of officers in the brigade had listened with fascination to a tape recording of the events at the hamlet. At least sixty Army men in a dozen helicopters saw firsthand what was going on in My Lai 4; the gunships had been assigned by the Americal Division to help Charlie Company overcome the expected Viet Cong resistance. And there were the survivors, unknown in number, of My Lai 4 itself.

Details of the massacre had been published twice in France: in the May 15, 1968, edition of the French-language publication *Sud Vietnam en Lutte*, and in *Bulletin du Vietnam*, published by the North Vietnamese delegation to the Paris peace talks. The issue was raised again in a report to the July meeting in Grenoble, France, of the World Conference of Jurists for Vietnam.

By the early summer of 1968, Paul Meadlo was home in Terre Haute, Indiana, his right foot gone, along with his self-respect. And by early 1969, most of Charlie Company was gone from Vietnam, back on the job or at school in cities across the nation. Ron Haerberle was busy in Ohio showing slide photographs of the My Lai 4 massacre to Rotary Club luncheons and the like; no one in his audiences apparently cared, or believed, enough to find out how he had managed to take such pictures. None of the GIs seemed to consider his experiences worth telling about.

But at that time a twenty-two-year-old ex-GI in Phoenix, Arizona, was in the midst of preparing a letter that would eventually prompt an Army investigation of the massacre. Ronald Ridenhour had flown over My Lai 4 a few days after the shootings. He noticed the complete desolation, but did not

find out what caused it until he joined a long-range reconnaissance unit operating out of Duc Pho, where he heard accounts of the massacre from five eyewitnesses. Ridenhour drove to the Americal Division headquarters in Chu Lai and confirmed that Charlie Company had indeed been at My Lai 4 on March 16. Ridenhour was cautious as he gathered information in Vietnam; he did not even make written notes for fear of his safety.

Ridenhour was discharged and returned to Phoenix in early December 1968, intent on doing something about the shootings at My Lai 4. He had served well in Vietnam, both as a helicopter door-gunner and as a team leader of long-range patrol groups. He earned the usual medals, and did nothing that would mark him as an antiwar protester. He kept his outrage to himself. But "I wanted to get those people," Ridenhour said. "I wanted to reveal what they did. My God, when I first came home, I would tell my friends about this and cry—literally cry. As far as I was concerned it was a reflection on me, on every American, on the ideals that we supposedly represent. It completely castrated the whole posture of America."

Those to whom he talked urged him not to report it, not to turn in his buddies, not to help the enemy. "Forget about it," one friend said, "if you know what's good for you and America." By the next spring, the young ex-GI was hard at work as a Popsicle maker for the local ice-cream company, saving his money so he could continue his college education in the fall at Claremont Men's College near Los Angeles.

He turned now to Arthur A. Orman, one of his former high-school teachers who had also taught him creative writing during the one year he attended Phoenix College before getting drafted. Along with his moral indignation, Ridenhour had another motivation: he'd always wanted to be a writer, and he knew he would never find a better story with which to begin. Orman, however, convinced the ex-GI not to try to sell his story to a magazine. Instead, he argued, Ridenhour should give his information to those government agencies that were equipped to investigate such matters. "I thought it would cheapen what he was doing if he tried to sell the story," Orman recalled.

Then came the critical decision to approach Congress. The two men agreed that letters should be sent to leading members of the House and Senate, and not just to the White House, Pentagon, and State Department. The letter described in detail what Ridenhour had learned about My Lai 4, but he was careful to make clear he was reporting what he heard, and not what he saw. The letter\* said, in part:

It was late in April 1968 that I first heard of "Pinkville" and what allegedly happened there. I received that first report with some skepticism, but in the following months I was to hear similar stories from such a wide variety of people that it became impossible for me to disbelieve that something rather dark and bloody did occur sometime in March 1968 in a village called "Pinkville" in the Republic of Vietnam. . . .

In late April 1968, I was awaiting orders for a transfer . . . when I happened to run into [Charles] "Butch" Gruver, whom I had known in Hawaii [Ridenhour went through training with the Eleventh Brigade at Schofield Barracks, as did Charlie Company]. . . . During the course of our conversation he told me the first of many reports I was to hear of "Pinkville."

"Charlie" Company . . . had been assigned to Task Force

Barker in late February 1968 to help conduct search-and-destroy operations on the Batangan Peninsula, Barker's area of operations. . . . One village area was particularly troublesome and seemed to be infested with booby traps and enemy soldiers. It was located about six miles northeast of Quang Ngai City. . . . It was a notorious area and the men of Task Force Barker had a special name for it: they called it "Pinkville." One morning in the latter part of March, Task Force Barker moved out from its firebase, headed for "Pinkville." Its mission: destroy the trouble spot and all of its inhabitants.

When "Butch" told me this I didn't quite believe that what he was telling me was true, but he assured me that it was and went on to describe what happened. . . . I asked "Butch" several times if all the people were killed. He said that he thought they were, men, women, and children. . . . Gruver estimated that the population of the village had been 300 to 400 people and that very few, if any, escaped.

After hearing this account I couldn't quite accept it. Somehow I just couldn't believe that not only had so many young American men participated in such an act of barbarism, but that their officers had ordered it. There were other men in the unit I was soon to be assigned to . . . who had been in Charlie Company at the time that Gruver alleged the incident at "Pinkville" had occurred. I became determined to ask them about "Pinkville" so that I might compare their accounts with Gruver's. . . .

The first men I looked for were Michael Terry and William Doherty. Both were veterans of Charlie Company and "Pinkville." Instead of contradicting Butch Gruver's story, they corroborated it, adding some tasty tidbits of information of their own. . . .

If Terry, Doherty, and Gruver could be believed, then not only had Charlie Company received orders to slaughter all the inhabitants of the village, but those orders had come from the commanding officer of Task Force Barker, or possibly even higher in the chain of command. . . .

It was June before I spoke to anyone who had something of significance to add to what I had already been told. . . . I ran into Sergeant Larry LaCroix at the USO in Chu Lai. LaCroix had been in 2nd Lt. Kally's [Calley's] platoon on the day Task Force Barker swept through "Pinkville." What he told me verified the stories of the others, but he also had something new to add. He had been a witness to Kally's gunning down of at least three separate groups of villagers. . . .

This account of Sergeant LaCroix's confirmed the rumors that Gruver, Terry, and Doherty had previously told me about Lieutenant Kally. It also convinced me that there was a very substantial amount of truth to the stories that all of these had told. If I needed more convincing, I was to receive it.

It was in the middle of November 1968 just a few weeks before I was to return to the United States for separation from the Army that I talked to Michael Bernhardt. . . . Bernhardt had served his entire year in Vietnam in Charlie Company and he too was about to go home. "Bernie" substantiated the tales told by the other men I had talked to in vivid, bloody detail. . . .

Exactly what did, in fact, occur in the village of "Pinkville" in March 1968 I do not know for *certain*, 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 and the equality of every man, however humble, before the law, that forms the very backbone that this country is founded on, then we must press forward a widespread and public investigation of this matter with all our combined efforts. . . .

\*Printed by permission.

I have considered sending this to newspapers, magazines, and broadcasting companies, but I somehow feel that investigation and action by the Congress of the United States is the appropriate procedure, and as a conscientious citizen I have no desire to further besmirch the image of the American serviceman in the eyes of the world. I feel that this action, while probably it would promote attention, would not bring about the constructive actions that the direct actions of the Congress of the United States would.

Nine letters—sent by registered mail—were addressed to: President Nixon; three Democratic Senators who were then the leading anti-Vietnam war spokesmen in Congress—Eugene J. McCarthy of Minnesota, J. W. Fulbright of Arkansas, and Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts; and the five members of the Arizona Congressional delegation—Republican Senators Barry M. Goldwater and Paul J. Fannin, House members Sam Steiger and John J. Rhodes, both Republicans, and Democrat Morris K. Udall. Letters were also sent by ordinary air mail to the Pentagon, State Department, Joint Chiefs of Staff, thirteen other members of the Senate, three members of the House, including Chairman L. Mendel Rivers of the Armed Services Committee, and to the House and Senate Chaplains.

Twenty-two of the offices later said they had no record of ever receiving Ridenhour's letter. The Reverend Edward Gardner Latch, Chaplain of the House, read the Xeroxed letter, but said later he did not answer it because "I don't answer letters of that kind." Five legislators—Congressmen Rhodes and Steiger of Arizona, and Senators Edward W. Brooke of Massachusetts and Goldwater and Fannin of Arizona—routinely referred it to the Army.

Only two men, Representatives Morris Udall, a liberal from Arizona, and L. Mendel Rivers, a conservative from South Carolina, took a personal interest in the letter. In both cases, their concern was the result of alert staff work.

When Ridenhour's letter arrived at the office of the Armed Services Committee, it was read by Frank Slatinshek, a staff lawyer, who took it to his superior, chief counsel John R. Blandford. "We couldn't brush it off," Blandford recalled later. "It had too many facts. There was too much of a germ of truth in it." A letter was drafted for Rivers' signature, urging the Department of the Army to investigate the matter, and Rivers signed it April 7, only three days after it was received by the committee.

One factor behind Rivers' quick action may have been Udall. Ridenhour had included Udall on his list of thirty largely because he represents his home state, and to a lesser degree because of Udall's political views. Both factors were important to what happened next. Udall was especially impressed by Ridenhour's letter, which was brought to his attention by Roger Lewis, an aide. "It just had a ring to it," Lewis said. "Furthermore, he was an Arizonan."

Udall wrote a letter to Secretary of Defense Melvin A. Laird about Ridenhour's charges, and took the unusual step of sending a copy to Rivers. Udall knew that any military investigation would have a better chance of being held if Rivers pushed it, and he thought Rivers might just—out of legislative courtesy—push. "He likes me," Udall said of Rivers. Udall's letter reached the Armed Services Committee April 7, the same day on which Rivers forwarded his letter to the Department of the Army.

There was additional pressure on the Army—from Secretary of Defense Laird, who later told newsmen he read Ridenhour's

letter on April 4, three days before Rivers' request for an investigation was mailed. Laird recognized that it was "more than a routine letter," an aide said, and forwarded it to the Department of the Army for handling. Laird's personal reading of the letter—one of thousands that arrive every day at the Pentagon—wasn't unusual, the aides explained; he often dealt directly with citizen complaints.

Thus, by the end of the first week in April, the Army had received a total of six Congressional referrals enclosing the Ridenhour letter; clearly it had to do something to avoid another public black eye. Udall was visited by a Pentagon officer soon after he mailed his letter; the officer "immediately promised an investigation." Precisely what the Army thought about Ridenhour's complaints at that time is unknown, but one general familiar with such investigations later commented that "any of us at the start would have thought it was a lot of baloney. There's less of that kind of stuff in Vietnam than in any other war we've had."

On April 12, less than two weeks after he mailed his letters, Ridenhour received a reply from Colonel John G. Hill, Jr., of the Army Chief of Staff's office, saying: "Because the circumstances related in your letter concern events of a year or so ago, a proper investigation will take some time. This investigation is under way now." The letter also thanked Ridenhour "for bringing this matter to our attention."

A few days later, the Army said in a letter to Congressman Udall that an attempt to investigate the matter from Saigon would be impractical, "as the people involved have since departed Vietnam and are now widely scattered. . . . Faced with these circumstances and considering the gravity of the allegation, it has been determined that a complete investigation will be required." On April 23, General Westmoreland, then Army Chief of Staff, officially turned over the case to the office of the Inspector General, the Army's main investigatory agency for administrative and procedural complaints and directed it to make a full-scale inquiry. Colonel William Vickers Wilson, a Southerner, was assigned the task of building the Army's case.

Wilson began at the beginning: he flew into Phoenix April 29 with a court reporter to question Ridenhour. He told Ridenhour, as he would tell others he interrogated, that he was conducting a special investigation for General Westmoreland. Wilson and Ridenhour carefully went over the allegations in an interview lasting an hour and a half. The former GI was told that if Wilson could find corroboration of the charges from just one other witness, a more intensive investigation would be ordered—with the ultimate aim of filing criminal charges against those responsible.

Wilson, operating in official secrecy, then began a cross-country journey. He interviewed Michael Terry in Orem, Utah, immediately after seeing Ridenhour; Terry told how he had shot and killed some wounded Vietnamese civilians in the drainage ditch at My Lai 4. Wilson tried to find Charles Gruver of Oklahoma City, but could not. He saw Michael Bernhardt May 8 in Washington, and received further confirmation of the details in Ridenhour's letter. He called on others in the Inspector General's office for help, and statements from other Charlie Company members began flooding in. On May 13, Wilson himself flew to Fort Benning, Georgia, and interrogated Captain Medina. Medina was stunned; he was then in the midst of a

nine-month career officers' advanced course that would enable him to get his promotion to major. Since leaving Charlie Company, Medina had been marked for advancement, handling key staff assignments with the First Battalion in Vietnam and later with the Americal Division's tactical-operations center. He had left Charlie Company, he said later, thinking, "We had a good combat record."

While Wilson worked, Ridenhour worried. He wondered if any of the witnesses named in his letter would confirm the essential details of the massacre. He had reason to believe that most of the persons quoted in his letter were implicated in some manner in the killings. His star witness, he thought, would be Michael Bernhardt. When they had talked in Chu Lai, where Bernhardt was recovering from a severe case of jungle rot on his feet, Ridenhour had sought assurance that Bernhardt would verify his story at the proper time. The GI said he would. Ridenhour began placing collect calls to Colonel Wilson, asking what was going on. He called sometimes twice a week during April and May, and learned that Bernhardt had told all he knew to Wilson on May 10. But nothing happened. In Ridenhour's eyes, Wilson had not kept his word and he took the colonel's reassurance as a stall for time while the Army sought a means of covering up the incident. His trust shaken, Ridenhour decided the only thing to do then was to try to make the details of My Lai 4 public.

On May 29, Ridenhour picked up a writer's guide to literary agents and found one whose blurb seemed sympathetic, Michael Cunningham, then a twenty-two-year-old part-time literary agent in Hartford, Connecticut. Ridenhour mailed Cunningham a copy of his letter with this comment: "It is my belief that the U.S. Army will, if at all possible, cover up this incident hoping that it will fade away and be forgotten. I believe very strongly that this should not be allowed to happen."

Ridenhour was basing his belief about a cover-up on flimsy evidence, fed in part by the Army's inability—or unwillingness—to brief him fully on the progress of its investigation. Since Cunningham did not personally know many editors or publishers, he sent telegrams over the next six weeks to a number of magazines. Only *Ramparts* responded, but Ridenhour did not want to be associated with the violently anti-Vietnam war politics of the magazine.

Ridenhour's persistent inquiries resulted in another report from the Pentagon, this one informing him that about 70 per cent of the persons cited in his letter had been interviewed. Ridenhour was not reassured by that information: only eight persons had been named in all in his letter. The Pentagon also noted that "the investigation is requiring considerable time and travel." To Ridenhour, it seemed like another stall. He got in touch with Udall's office and complained that the Army was burying the case. Udall's aide, Roger Lewis, began to think—it was now early June—that he might have been mistaken in assuming that Ridenhour was not a crackpot. "We still had nothing from the military," Lewis explained later, "no way of knowing. And the fact that it hadn't broken led one to wonder whether Ridenhour's information was good." Surely a massacre of that magnitude, and a Pentagon investigation of it, would have been leaked to the Washington press corps by then. Lewis decided to telephone Captain Medina. Medina was polite but firm; he couldn't discuss the case. Lewis then called Bernhardt and was told that the GI had been interrogated by the Inspector General's office.

The aide decided that the Army was trying its best to investigate the Ridenhour charges, whether they were accurate or not.

By then, Colonel Wilson had been working full-time on the case for nearly five weeks.

## IX. THE UNCOVERING—part 2

**A**t 8:30 A.M. on June 13, 1969, the Inspector General's office of the Army staged a police lineup at the new Forrestal Defense Building in Southwest Washington. One of the officers in the lineup was Lieutenant William L. Calley, Jr.

Calley had been abruptly pulled out of Vietnam in early June—at least one month before his tour of duty was over—and shipped home overnight to Fort Benning, Georgia, with special orders to report to Washington. Calley had been forewarned of trouble when the Army turned down his request to extend his tour of duty in Vietnam for a third time. He knew then, he recalled later, that something was up.

The lineup was called by Colonel Wilson to enable a key witness to the massacre—Warrant Officer Hugh C. Thompson of the 123rd Aviation Battalion—to identify the young officer who was directing operations at the bloody drainage ditch at My Lai 4. Wilson had brought Thompson to the Pentagon on June 11, and quizzed him repeatedly about the lieutenant who had said to Thompson at My Lai that the only way to remove civilians from a bunker was with a hand grenade. On the next morning Thompson picked out Calley as the officer at the drainage ditch in My Lai 4 on March 16, 1968. That fact was duly recorded by an Army stenographer. Thompson also had reported seeing a captain shoot a woman at close range during the same day. Wilson now turned to that charge. He had received Medina's explanation of the event during his interview with the captain on May 13 at Fort Benning.

"Could you identify the man who shot the girl?" Wilson asked.

"I think it was a captain, sir . . ."

Without mentioning Medina by name, Wilson then read the pilot Medina's version of the shooting "Now could this have happened?" he asked.

"... nothing is impossible," Thompson said. He added that he saw Medina back at LZ Dotti two days after My Lai 4. "He asked me how everything was going and I said, 'Everything is going just fine,' and saluted him and walked away." He said nothing else to Medina, Thompson said, "because I didn't care anything about talking to him."\*

On June 19, Wilson heard testimony from Larry Colburn, who corroborated Thompson's testimony and also identified Medina and Calley as the officers involved in the shootings. Colburn picked out the Charlie Company officers from photographs shown by Wilson; the ex-GI also was shown detailed aerial maps of My Lai 4. Wilson next began interrogating Medina's radio-men and others in the command group who had knowledge of the captain's movements that day.

Colonel Wilson and other officers in the Inspector General's

\*On October 15, 1969, four months after his testimony at the Pentagon, Thompson was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for heroism in the line of duty at My Lai 4. The citation credited Thompson with "disregarding his own safety" to rescue fifteen children hiding in a bunker "between Viet Cong positions and advancing friendly forces."

office had interrogated thirty-six witnesses by the end of July, ranging from Colonel Henderson, the Eleventh Brigade commander, to Paul Meadlo, whose extraordinary confession was considered to be most significant. The evidence mounted swiftly against Calley and on July 23, Wilson was able to order Colonel James D. Kiersey, chief of staff at Fort Benning, to "flag" Calley's records, an Army procedure freezing any promotion or transfer for a soldier. Wilson's lengthy report was submitted to General Westmoreland, and on August 4, Westmoreland responded by ordering the Inspector General's office to turn over the results of its investigation to the Provost Marshal's office of the Army and its Criminal Investigation Division to determine whether there was enough evidence to file criminal charges against Calley and others in the company.

Once the CID took over the case, its men retraced Colonel Wilson's steps and began to interrogate all of the available members of Charlie Company to determine how many GIs or ex-GIs were involved. Many of the investigators became personally involved in the investigation. Michael Bernhardt said that he was visited three times by CID agents who were trying to pry out the truth about Medina's shooting of the woman.

On August 25, the CID agents found Ronald L. Haeberle in Cleveland, and he gave them a set of his color photographs of the shooting. Haeberle had been discharged shortly after the My Lai 4 incident; upon his return to the States he had assembled his best photographs into a slide show which he screened, upon request, for civic organizations in Cleveland. Haeberle's series of photographs began with the Eleventh Brigade in training at Schofield Barracks in Hawaii, and moved with the unit to Vietnam. Then, amidst pictures of smiling peasants and GIs came the scenes from My Lai 4. "They caused no commotion," he said. "Nobody believed it. They said Americans wouldn't do this." Haeberle also told the military police agents that, as far as he knew, his unprinted rolls of black-and-white film were still lying around the public-information office of brigade headquarters. The CID sent someone to check; the film was there.

By the end of August, interrogations of former Charlie Company members were being conducted all over the United States and Vietnam.\* Many witnesses were quizzed a second time and shown the Haeberle photographs. The photos jogged memories and the GIs began recalling what happened in more detail.

On August 8, four months after the Army first received the Ridenhour letter, Major General William A. Becker, chief of the Congressional liaison for the Army, began giving oral briefings on the My Lai 4 case to members of Congress. L. Mendel Rivers was visited first. Congressman Udall was seen by Becker and Colonel Wilson on August 11. "They came to say that there was something to the Ridenhour story," Udall recalled. "They said charges would be brought, and that it would take some time to draft them and make arrests. They hoped I wouldn't do anything publicly about it." Udall had been handled very carefully up to then, with full colonels visiting him at his office from time to time to assure him that the Army was

proceeding properly with the case. "I was in a position to have grandstanded on this for several months if I wanted to," Udall said later. "They [the colonels] would keep on reporting, saying they were making an investigation, no stone was being left unturned. They'd ask, 'Are you happy?'"

While the Army was preparing its case against him, Lieutenant Calley found himself a lawyer, George W. Latimer of Salt Lake City. The elderly Latimer was highly regarded in military legal circles, having served for ten years on the Military Court of Appeals in Washington and also on the Utah State Supreme Court. Latimer was defending one of the eight Green Berets in connection with another controversial murder charge in mid-1969 when Calley first approached him. He was immediately impressed by the young lieutenant and agreed, as a matter of principle, to take the case.

It was now clear that the Army was going to institute proceedings against Calley. As one military source later explained: "If they don't prosecute somebody for this, the Army's going to get clobbered. And if the story ever breaks without the Army taking any action, it would be even worse." On August 19, Colonel Wilson flew down to Fort Benning to brief the legal officers there about the case. Under Army regulations, the commanding officer of Fort Benning and his legal staff were the ultimate authority for reviewing the evidence and filing charges against Calley, but the Pentagon wanted to make sure that the infantrymen at Benning knew exactly what was going on. A few days earlier the Pentagon had notified the officials at Benning by telegram that Calley must be charged with a general court-martial offense—a military proceeding for more serious offenses such as murder—in order to retain him in the service beyond September 6, the day his two years' obligation ended.

By then it was clear in Washington that the Army was going to have an unprecedented murder case on its hands, one that could become an international liability and might even affect the progress of the war in South Vietnam.

In late August, Defense Secretary Laird, who had been kept abreast of the case by the Department of Army, flew to the Summer White House at San Clemente, California, and handed over a detailed summary of Colonel Wilson's findings to the President. Nixon was reportedly angered by the Army's delay in finding out about and investigating the massacre.

The Army cautiously waited for the President to study the documents and react—if he chose to. In late August, Colonel Kiersey—the Fort Benning chief of staff—was ordered to "hold" the processing of charges against Calley because "you may be receiving additional instructions through channels." The order came from four-star general James K. Woolnough, the commanding general of the Continental Army Command at Fort Monroe, Virginia. The delay nearly precipitated a staff revolt among the young legal officers at Benning, some of whom were fearful that the Administration would decide not to charge Calley with the murders. But the young officers also knew that under the Military Code of Justice the Army had the right to disregard the White House and other superiors and ask for a court-martial anyway. Many of the officers would have wanted to sign the murder charges against Calley, and Captain William R. Hill, a non-career officer who was then legal officer for The Student Brigade, Calley's unit, talked briefly about flipping a coin with them to determine who would, but then decided, as a matter of principle, to sign the charge sheet himself. Hill also

\*The CID interviewed more than 75 witnesses by November 26, 1969. Many of them recalled being asked about the use of marijuana in Charlie Company; that question seemed to be of special interest to the investigators. The GIs all acknowledged that many members of the company smoked or otherwise made use of marijuana, which is plentiful in South Vietnam, but none believed it was in any way a significant factor in what happened at My Lai 4.

## X. THE PRESS

urged his immediate superior, Colonel Lon D. Marlowe, to go ahead with the trial even if he had to defy the Pentagon. Hill was convinced that the Army was reluctant to charge Calley because of the potential propaganda advantage to the Viet Cong. But Marlowe, about to retire from the service, was cautious. "You know the President is involved in this?" he asked Hill. The captain did know by then, as did most of the legal officers at Fort Benning, that Laird had taken a report on the case to the President at the Summer White House, and that there had been a "hold" placed on further proceedings.

There was no opportunity to challenge the White House, however. On September 4, two days before Calley was to be released from the Army, Fort Benning officials were told to go ahead and file the charges, if they were so determined. "It's all yours," a general told Colonel Kiersey. "You are not receiving any instructions."

On the next day, charges were formally preferred against Calley. Six specifications of premeditated murder were drawn up, accusing Calley of killing a total of 109 "Oriental human beings, occupants of the village of My Lai 4, whose names and sexes are unknown, by means of shooting them with a rifle." Preparing the charge sheet had been a difficult task: at one time the Army planned to charge Calley with only four specifications. The officer who wrote the charges, Colonel Robert M. Lathop, chief legal official at Fort Benning, had flown to Washington in August to get assistance in drafting the language. Lathop later recalled that the information for many of the specific charges came from Paul Meadlo's statement.\*

Once the charges were filed, the Army immediately began an Article 32 hearing to determine whether the charges were justified. The hearing is a phenomenon of military law, roughly equivalent to a grand-jury proceeding, in which the evidence against a suspect is weighed to determine whether or not he should stand trial. At that time Calley refused to testify against Captain Medina, his commanding officer, and continued to refuse in subsequent legal proceedings. Asked later to explain this refusal, he said cryptically, "Because I don't scare easily." Sergeant Isaiah Cowen, one of Calley's sergeants in the first platoon, was a witness at the Article 32 hearing and also refused to testify against Medina "because he was the company commander."

Calley's refusal to testify against Medina was apparently based on his strong sense of loyalty, both to Medina and to the military, but the Army thought there might be a different reason. Calley later said that Major Kenneth A. Raby of Fort Benning, his appointed military legal officer, unsuccessfully tried on at least one or two occasions to persuade him to take a sanity test.

The House Armed Services Committee was also told at the same time by the Department of the Army of its action against Calley. "We are exercising utmost caution," a communiqué said, "to avoid any public discussion which could prejudice the continuing investigation or the rights of Lieutenant Calley."

The Pentagon, well aware of the potential impact of the story, debated how to release it to the public. It found a way that managed to bring no credit either to the military—or to the press.

\*The charges were later reduced to 102 on February 6, 1970, after Calley's lawyer protested that they were too broadly drawn. The Army also made clear in subsequent pretrial hearings that it was not accusing Calley personally of killing each of the Vietnamese victims, but with killing some and "causing others" to kill them.

The first public hint of the My Lai 4 massacre was a blandly worded news release issued to the Georgia press on Friday afternoon, September 5, by the public information office at Fort Benning. It said, in full:

*1LT William L. Calley, Jr., is being retained on active duty beyond his normal release date because of an investigation being conducted under Article 32 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice.*

*1LT Calley, who was to have been separated from the Army on 6 Sep 69, is charged with violation of Article 118, murder, for offenses allegedly committed against civilians while serving in Vietnam in March 1968.*

*Whether the matter will be referred to trial by court-martial will be determined by the Commanding General, Fort Benning, upon completion of the Article 32 investigation. In order not to prejudice the continuing investigation and the rights of the accused, it is not appropriate to report further details at this time.*

The press release did not state that six specifications of murder had been laid against the young lieutenant, nor did it state that he was accused of murdering, by deliberately shooting with a rifle, 109 Vietnamese civilians. There is nothing in military law that precluded the release of such information. The Army said that publication of the specific charges would jeopardize Calley's rights.

As released, the fact that Calley was being kept in the service because of pending murder charges was a routine story. A reporter in Georgia for the Associated Press asked for more information and was referred to the Pentagon, where he was told that no further details were available. The AP's subsequent dispatch did no more than repeat the essential facts as released by Fort Benning. The wire-service story was published in dozens of newspapers over the weekend, but none gave it prominence: The *New York Times*, for example, published an edited version of the AP story at the bottom of page 38 of its September 8 editions.

Officers in the Pentagon were prepared for a flood of questions that weekend from all news media—but it didn't come. "I was amazed that it didn't get picked up—just amazed," said one colonel. Secretary of Defense Melvin A. Laird later revealed that he had ordered the news wires monitored to see if the announcement would spark immediate controversy.

Five days after the original announcement, the news of Calley's arrest was telecast on the Huntley-Brinkley nightly evening news show. Robert Goralski, NBC's Pentagon correspondent, told the millions of viewers that Calley "has been accused of premeditated murder of a number of South Vietnamese civilians. The murders are alleged to have been committed a year ago and the investigation is continuing. A growing number of such cases is coming to light and the Army doesn't know what to do about them."

For weeks there was nothing more in the press about Calley, but the Army continued to gather evidence for his court-martial. Paul Meadlo, the most important prosecution witness, was interviewed for a third time by CID agents on September 18 at his

home in Terre Haute. And Captain Lewellen decided at about that time to turn over his tapes of the radio traffic above My Lai 4 to the prosecution at Fort Benning. He kept a few copies for himself, however. (Later Lewellen explained that he was planning to sell the tape to the highest bidder as soon as the court proceedings against Charlie Company were completed. "It paints a picture," Lewellen said of his recordings.)

Ridenhour became convinced that the Army's failure to publicize details of the case against Calley meant not only that "Calley was going to get hung as a scapegoat" but higher-ranking officers who passed down the order to Calley would get off without a reprimand. He also suspected that the Army would make a deal with Calley through his lawyers, "to keep him quiet." On October 13, the Army again wrote Ridenhour, telling him that Calley's Article 32 hearing on the murder charges would begin that month, and noting: "It is not appropriate to report details of the allegations to news media. Your continued cooperation in this matter is acknowledged." On October 22 Michael Cunningham, his agent, wrote Ridenhour conceding defeat: "Quite frankly, Ron, I am doubtful of my ability to be of much more help. I honestly feel the matter is best handled at this stage by waiting until your next response from the Army."

Details of the charges against Calley were now known to dozens of officials—Senator John C. Stennis and his shocked Senate Armed Forces Committee were given a private briefing that fall—yet nothing reached the press. Despite the widespread official knowledge of the Calley case a few Pentagon officers actually thought Calley could be court-martialed without attracting any significant public attention. The opinion was far from unanimous, however. Perhaps anticipating a future furor over My Lai 4, General Westmoreland included these unusual words during a speech October 14 to the annual meeting of the Association of the U. S. Army in Washington: "Recently, a few individuals involved in serious incidents have been highlighted in the news. Some would have these incidents reflect on the Army as a whole. They are, however, the actions of a pitiful few. Certainly the Army cannot and will not condone improper conduct or criminal acts—I personally assure you that I will not."

The Calley case remained dormant as far as the news was concerned until the inevitable Washington tipsters got to work. The *New York Times* heard something about a massacre case being tried at Fort Gordon, Georgia. It was the right case, but the wrong base. The *Washington Post* queried the Pentagon about some officer's being charged with more than 150 civilian murders in connection with a Vietnam operation. One *Post* reporter even managed to locate George W. Latimer, Calley's attorney, at his Salt Lake City office and ask him about the case. Latimer begged off, saying, "I'm hoping maybe we can come up with some kind of resolution that won't make it necessary for this to be public. I can't see it would do any good to anybody." No news story was written.

I was in the midst of completing research for a book on the Pentagon when I received a telephone tip on October 22. "The Army's trying to court-martial some guy in secret at Fort Benning for killing 75 Vietnamese civilians," the source said. At that time, in fact, the Army had done nothing more than prefer charges and it was still trying to keep any word about the events at My Lai 4 out of the newspapers.

It took two days and twenty-five telephone calls before somebody told me about the AP story on Calley. From there, it was a short step to Latimer, and on October 29, a Monday, I flew from Washington to Salt Lake City to interview the lawyer. Before leaving Washington, I had received confirmation of the essential facts of the story from a government source. Latimer confirmed them, adding that "whatever killing there was was in a firefight in connection with an operation. To me," Latimer said, "the thing that's important is this: why do we prosecute our own people while on a search-and-destroy mission and they kill some people, be they civilian or not? Is there a point in the chain of command at which somebody could be tried? I think not."

On November 11, a Tuesday, I decided to fly down to Fort Benning and find Calley. But Calley's name did not appear anywhere in the Fort Benning telephone book, nor did the file of tenants in the bachelor officers' quarters list him. It was ten hours afterward and very late at night before I found a warrant officer, who was a downstairs neighbor of Calley's, at one of the officers' quarters. As we were talking, he suddenly hollered at a slight young man walking toward us—"Rusty, come over here and meet this guy." Impatient, I began to leave. "No, wait a second," the officer said. "That's Calley."

Calley was apprehensive. All he wanted in life was to stay in the Army and be a good soldier. He reminded me of an earnest freshman one might find at an agricultural college, anxious about making a fraternity. We went to a party at a friend's apartment, and had some drinks. I wanted to leave. Calley wanted me to stay. He knew what was coming and he knew I was the last reporter with whom he would talk, and drink, for many months. He told me, that evening, a little bit about the operation; he also told me how many people he had been accused of killing. I flew back to Washington the next day and began to write my story. I did it somewhat hesitantly, my thought being that Calley, perhaps, was as much of a victim as those infants he and his men murdered at My Lai 4.

The first story began: "Lieutenant William L. Calley, Jr., twenty-six, is a mild-mannered, boyish-looking Vietnam combat veteran with the nickname of 'Rusty.' The Army says he deliberately murdered at least 109 Vietnamese civilians during a search-and-destroy mission in March 1968 in a Viet Cong stronghold known as 'Pinkville.'"

Once I had completed my research on My Lai 4, I tried to get it published. *Life* and *Look* magazines weren't interested. With some hesitation, I turned over my story to the Dispatch News Service, a small news agency run by David Obst of Washington. Fifty newspapers were offered the initial Dispatch story by cable on November 12; more than thirty—including many of the leading newspapers in the nation—published it the next day, a remarkably high number.

Even more remarkable, however, was the fact that only the *New York Times* chose to pursue the story at the most logical point—South Vietnam. In Saigon, Henry Kamm, the *Times'* roving correspondent in Southeast Asia, was assigned to locate the victimized hamlet, which was identified only as "Pinkville" in the first Dispatch account. Kamm bribed his way on a commercial flight to Da Nang, and ended up in Quang Ngai City a few hours later. But he couldn't find out which hamlet was "Pinkville." On the next day, he drove to the Americal Division headquarters at Chu Lai, and ran into Andre C. R. Feher, an

investigator for the CID, who "lectured me in a heavy German accent as to why he couldn't tell me anything." By Saturday, November 15, the Army gave in to the inevitable and flew Kamm, along with representatives from *Newsweek* magazine and the American Broadcasting Corporation, to a relocation hamlet in Song My village where some My Lai 4 survivors were living.

The newsmen were given only one hour on the ground and their interviews with the villagers were taped by a public-information officer from the Americal Division. Kamm borrowed a typewriter, banged out a dispatch in which he quoted survivors as saying that 567 Vietnamese men, women, and children were massacred by the Americans, and telephoned it to the *Times'* Saigon bureau in time for it to make page one of Monday's paper.

Kamm's report was treated coolly by the *Times'* main competitor, the *Washington Post*, which chose to publish a Pentagon statement describing Kamm's story as exaggerated. This denial was placed on page sixteen. Other newspapers were similarly skeptical and initially few commented editorially on the massacre.

On Tuesday, November 18, Joseph Eszterhas, a general-assignment reporter for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, took a telephone call from an old schoolmate, an ex-GI named Ronald L. Haeberle, who said he had photographs of the massacre. Eszterhas was properly cautious: he conducted hours of taped interviews with Haeberle at the newspaper office, trying to put together a full picture of the photographer's involvement. On the 19th, he telephoned the Pentagon seeking confirmation that Haeberle was indeed at My Lai 4 on March 16, 1968. He did not get it immediately. Later in the day, Haeberle was called at home by Captain Aubrey Daniels of Fort Benning, then directing the prosecution against Calley, and was asked not to publish his pictures. Daniels warned that the photos would "infringe public opinion" and might seriously jeopardize the rights of Calley and the others. Haeberle told Eszterhas about the call and the reporter, still reluctant to release the story without confirmation of Haeberle's mission that day, telephoned Fort Benning and received the same warning that Haeberle got from Daniels. The *Plain Dealer* now knew the photographs were authentic. The interview with Haeberle, and some of his photographs depicting slaughtered women and children, were published November 20, the same day my interviews quoting Bernhardt, Terry, and Olsen were made available.

The articles and photographs had an immediate shock effect in England, where the My Lai 4 massacre reports pushed news of the second U. S. landing on the moon off front pages on eight of Britain's nine morning newspapers.

The reaction to the revelations about My Lai 4 in Great Britain was profound compared to that in the United States. In America, perhaps because of the less prominent newspaper coverage, the public was unable to comprehend the full significance of the incident. The impact of Haeberle's photographs and Bernhardt and Terry's eyewitness reports was partially diminished by the *Washington Post*, for example, in a story suggesting that the hardships suffered by Charlie Company might be responsible for its action. "For Company C, in March 1968," said one *Post* story, "the Pinkville rice paddies and battered hamlets were a nightmare of booby traps and mines." One Associated Press dispatch attempting to explain the atmosphere in

Vietnam included the following in its fourth paragraph: "In Vietnam the killing of civilians was a practice established by the Viet Cong as a major part of the war long before the U.S. ground troops were committed in March 1965." The statement, though factual, was not relevant to what Charlie Company did on that March 16.

On November 25, the Army formally announced that Calley had been ordered to stand trial at a general court-martial for the premeditated murder of 109 Vietnamese civilians. Charges against Sergeant David Mitchell had been announced a few days earlier; he was accused of assaulting thirty Vietnamese civilians with intent to commit murder.

As yet there was little investigative reporting on the part of the American press to determine exactly what had happened, perhaps because newspapers did not try to locate former members of Charlie Company. By Friday, November 21, I had found Paul Meadlo in Terre Haute, Indiana. Meadlo agreed also to tell his story on television, and David Obst and the Dispatch lawyers arranged to produce him—for a fee—on the CBS evening news with Walter Cronkite. His confession, later published in newspapers around the world, stunned the nation. "Many of us sat in sheltered living rooms," wrote columnist Richard Harwood and Laurence Stern of the *Washington Post*, "perhaps starting in on a dinner martini as Meadlo's face showed on the screen. . . . From the vantage point of those living rooms Meadlo was the American 'gook'—the scapegoat and the buffer between the torn bodies in open graves at My Lai and ourselves." That Sunday the *Post* devoted three full pages to the story. At the least, Meadlo's CBS appearance made the American press finally face up to the fact that something very terrible indeed happened at My Lai 4.

## EPILOGUE

For a few GIs, the experience at My Lai 4 changed their former outlook on life; they became increasingly critical about the way the war was being conducted. "I was a candidate for the Minutemen before this," Michael Bernhardt said. "Now I'm all turned around." He had felt no remorse for the Vietnamese civilians while watching them get slaughtered, but he had thought that perhaps he was the odd one. "Maybe this was the way wars really were," he later explained. "Maybe what we saw in the movies and on TV wasn't so, that war was running around and shooting civilians and doing this kind of thing. Maybe all along everybody else knew. I felt like I was left out, like maybe they forgot to tell me something, that this was the way we fought wars and everybody knew but me."

Herbert Carter shot himself in the foot, perhaps to get out of My Lai 4. For him, there was no later sense of personal shame, only a feeling of amazement and irony at the response to the event. "I still wonder why human beings claim to be human beings but still conduct themselves as savages and barbarians," he said. "The United States is supposed to be a peace-loving country; yet they tell them to do something and then they want to hang them for it."

As far as he was concerned, Carter said, what happened at My Lai 4 was not a massacre, but a logical result of the war in Vietnam: "The people didn't know what they were dying for and the guys didn't know why they were shooting them." □