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MY LAI: A I

This is William Calley. Today he lives in obscurity in Columbus, Georgia, running his father-in-law's jewellery business. But once he was Lieutenant Calley, villain and scapegoat, the only man found guilty after dozens of American soldiers massacred almost 500 Vietnamese villagers. Were those men really following orders? Did their dire and maddening circumstances really explain what they did? And how could it be that Calley alone was convicted? Last year, two producers from Yorkshire Television embarked on an investigation that took them across America and to Vietnam; they talked to the people who were at My Lai on March 16, 1968: to the killers, of whom there were frighteningly many, and to the survivors, of whom there were frighteningly few. They discovered how those involved had been able to live with their memories. And they examined the contemporary reports and judicial investigations. What emerged was that the My Lai Story had been only half told. What happened on that day was worse than we even supposed – the full extent of the mayhem as well as the dreadful catalogue of sexual brutality has been suppressed from that day to this. The cover-up was itself remarkable, burying examples of American goodness as well as brutality. Yorkshire Television's *First Tuesday* film will be broadcast on ITV on May 2. Here we publish for the first time the producers' account of that terrible day. It is the whole story, both vivid and horrifying. It makes very disturbing reading. We publish it for the truths it discloses about the evil of war and about what can happen when ordinary men lose all self-control. Those are truths which should never be suppressed

Report by Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim
Photographs by Frank Pocklington

HALF-TOLD STORY

For weeks "Barker's Bastards" had been having a rough time. They had been out in the field searching for an enemy they never found. Twice in February they patrolled looking for a particular unit – the 48th Vietcong Local Force Battalion. They were given the run around, and kept taking casualties, occasionally from sniper fire, but most of their dead and injured came from minefields and boobytraps.

They were Charlie Company, part of a battalion-size infantry unit commanded by Lt-Col Frank Barker. They had never been in a fire-fight, yet in seven weeks they had four of their number killed and 38 wounded. They were getting more and more angry. At first they would go into villages and the locals would be friendly – the kids would come and cadge candy, old men would bow their heads deferentially. Not long afterwards they would return to the same village and be ignored. Nobody would look them in the eye.

Sgt Kenneth Hodges, the 1st Squad leader in the 2nd Platoon, frequently warned his men that this meant danger. And he was often proved right – a mine or booby trap would go off. But the villagers never warned the soldiers of the danger they were in. Hodges and his troops found it hard to believe the local people were not in some way involved.

"They were basically doing a number on us," said Private Fred Widmer, radio operator for Charlie Company's commander, Captain Ernest Medina. "We were letting them, helping them, so the whole mood changed. You didn't trust them any more. You couldn't trust anybody."

The men from Charlie Company who arrived in Vietnam in December, 1967, were only boys really; ordinary American boys from ordinary American towns, boys who were fresh out of school mostly, some who were just learning how to shave. Their jungle training in Hawaii had been their first time away from home. They joined 515,000 American troops who, together with 310,000 South Vietnamese regulars and a further 400,000 local militia, had been waging an increasingly frustrating war against an enemy whose spirit they couldn't break, whose allies among the local people they could not identify and whose combat troops they often couldn't find. They faced an enemy of 263,000 combat troops – Vietcong and North Vietnamese soldiers – and they never even looked like winning.

Here was the maddening conundrum of Vietnam for the United States: in theory the strategy was to win over the population, to build strong local support for the South Vietnamese government but in fact the people in the countryside either willingly or by coercion were supporters of the Vietcong. The tactics the Americans devised to win the war almost ended up destroying the very country they had come to defend. Villagers were herded into strategic hamlets, free-fire zones were created and combat troops went on search-and-destroy missions which laid waste everything in sight. What happened in one morning of deranged brutality at My Lai in March, 1968, had its seeds in this strategy.

Six weeks earlier, on the night of January 31 – the Vietnamese New Year holiday called Tet – 84,000 communist troops launched an offensive against every major town and city. The attacks were driven off with heavy losses but the very fact the enemy had been able to mount such a massive campaign after four years of war had a devastating psychological impact on the American generals in the field and the government in Washington DC. Now more than ever, the message was clear: the war had to be taken to the enemy.

Charlie Company's 120 men and two other infantry companies were specially chosen to root the 48th VC Battalion out of an area of the Batangan Peninsula in Quang Ngai Province. They never succeeded, in fact their efforts were a shambles. Lt-Col Barker's boss – the newly arrived commander of the 11th Light Infantry Brigade, Colonel Oran K. Henderson – was convinced the wrong tactics had let the enemy get the upper hand.

On March 15, Barker was told by Henderson, at a special briefing at a fortified firebase and landing zone called LZ Dottie, that his men simply weren't being aggressive enough. He criticised the way they allowed local Vietnamese, including children, to pick up weapons discarded by the VC and get away. When they had sustained losses Barker's troops had taken a defensive attitude. Instead of going after the enemy and forcing them far enough away to allow the "dust off" medical evacuation helicopters in, they had let the enemy forces withdraw under cover of its own mortar fire.

Before he flew off to his brigade HQ at Duc Pho, Henderson left Barker in no doubt what he expected when his men took My Lai. AGGRESSION. And Barker, in turn, left his company commanders in no doubt as to what he expected of them. AGGRESSION. Gathered in the fortified command post for the briefing were the senior officers. One who just happened to be making a flying visit that day was the divisional artillery chaplain, Captain Carl Creswell. "They were going to do an insertion, a combat assault at Pinkville [the military name for My Lai because it was coloured pink on their maps]. It was where the 48th VC Battalion was apparently located. I went into the briefing as a courtesy call, I had no business there, chaplains do this, they just pop in to say 'hello'."

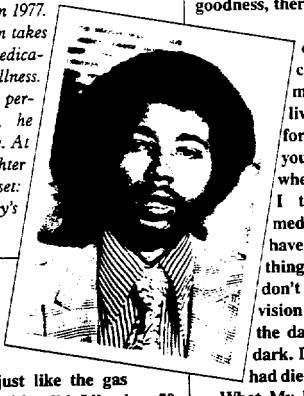
What happened next surprised Creswell – today a priest in a parish out on the Texas Panhandle, near Amarillo. "They had maps laid out on a board and there was a major there who was on the task-force staff. He said: 'We're going in and if we get one round out of there we're gonna level it.'

"I looked at him and I said: 'You know, I didn't really think we made war that way.' He looked at me and he said: 'It's a tough war, chaplain.' I left shortly after that. I got in my 'bird' and flew back to division headquarters. And of course they assaulted My Lai the next day..."

Before their own briefing with Captain Medina that same night, the boys in Charlie Company watched a soft-porn movie, ate steak and drank beer. Later Medina gathered them together and used a stick to draw a map in the ground, laying out the plan for the assault on My Lai. Charlie Company would land from the west in the rice fields just outside the village at dawn. Bravo Company was going to land on the eastern side of My Lai – the enemy would be caught in the middle. Charlie Company's 1st Platoon would take a southern

I think of death constantly

Varnado Simpson *is unemployed and lives in Jackson, Mississippi, in a small single-storey house near his mother which has become his prison. He has bars on all doors and windows. According to his doctors he suffers from a severe form of stress disorder associated with his experiences at My Lai and the death of his 10-year-old son from a shooting incident in 1977. Every day Simpson takes massive doses of medication to control his illness. The curtains are permanently drawn, he rarely goes outside. At 40, he has a daughter and is divorced. Inset: Simpson at Calley's trial, late 1970.*



"This woman looked like she was running away from the hedge line with a weapon. She was carrying something. I was given an order to shoot. I told the officer [Calley]: 'You shoot.' I didn't want to kill a woman. He gave me a direct order so I shot her. There was a little baby with her that I had also killed. I turned her over and there was the baby's face – half gone. My mind just went. Then I started killing; old men, women, children, water buffaloes, everything. We were told to leave nothing standing. I killed another 20 to 25, cut their throats, cut off their hands, cut out their tongues, their hair, scalped 'em. I did it. A lot of people were doing it, so I just followed suit. It just came. I didn't know I had it in me. I don't think beforehand anyone thought that we would kill so many people – I mean we're talking 400 to 500 people. It's just like the gas chambers – what Hitler did. I lined up 50 people, women, old men, children, everybody, and just mowed 'em down. I have nightmares about the children.

In 1977 my 10-year-old son was shot when some teenagers across the street got into an argument. I came out and picked him up and he died in my arms. And when I saw him I saw the face of the child that I had killed and I said: 'This is punishment for the people that I killed.'

When I later went back to work people started spitting on me: 'Child-killer, baby-killer, woman-killer'. The friends I used to have I don't have any more because I don't trust them and they don't trust me. I don't trust nobody. I don't like to be around people, I like to be by myself, all locked up. I'm thinking in my mind that the people I killed are not really dead, and that I can walk outside and they'll try to get me.

There's a part of me that's kind and gentle – there's another part of me that's evil and destructive, very evil. There's more destructiveness in my mind than goodness, there's more wanting to kill or to hurt than to love or to care. I don't let anyone get close to me. I can't forgive myself and I can't forget. I live with it every day. It's easy for people to say get on with your life but how can you when this is holding you back. I take 1200 milligrams of medication every four hours. I have to take it – that's the only thing that keeps me stable. But I don't sleep at night – I watch television all night. I try to sleep in the daytime. I can't sleep in the dark. Looking back on it, I wish I had died in Vietnam.

What My Lai means to me is death. Death. Destruction. Killing. Death. Programmed to kill. To kill. To kill. That's what I am – a walking time bomb. All I think of is death, constantly. Marriage, love feelings – I don't have that. I lost that a long time ago.

Even when I was married my wife could not sleep in the same bed. She would have to sleep in the guest bedroom. If she touched me I would wake up. I would catch myself choking her, thinking she was one of the people I killed."

Fred Widmer *was 18 when he volunteered for the draft. A year later he was in Vietnam with C Company of the 20th Light Infantry, as radio operator to the company commander, Captain Ernest Medina. Widmer admits to murdering two children in My Lai – he insists they were mercy killings. Bought up in a suburb of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, he now works as an engineer in Indiana at the same factory as his live-in girlfriend. He is divorced with a ten-year-old son. Left: some of C Company. Widmer, standing, top right, Captain Medina, sitting, bottom right.*

It's all right to kill but we were murderers

"We mostly started losing members of the company through booby traps and snipers. We would go to a village and given them medical treatment, take care of them. Then later we would go back and get shot at by a sniper.

Prior to My Lai we had a briefing. This was supposed to be our first real chance to come face to face with the enemy, one on one. This was our chance to get even. Our instructions were that it was an enemy strongpoint. Anybody or anything that was left in the village was considered to be VC, or a VC sympathiser and we were to obliterate the village. We were going to get into a helluva fight and were going to kick some ass. It didn't turn out the way we thought. There was no enemy.

I wandered about with the other guys, burned some hootches, searched a couple of tunnels. I witnessed things I had never seen before – people being executed.

The most disturbing thing I saw was one boy ... and ... this was something ... you know ... this is what haunts me from the whole ordeal down there. It was a boy with his right arm shot off, half hanging on. We stared at each other. He had this bewildered look on his face: 'What did I do, what's wrong?' He just ... it's hard to describe ... couldn't comprehend ....

I shot the boy, killed him. I fired three shots in the boy with an M-16. I like to think of it more or less as a mercy killing, because somebody else would have killed him in the end. But it wasn't right.

Coping with it all now, years later, is hard because you can never suppress it. I have a face etched permanently in the back of my mind. It's the face of the little boy ... and ... it's something that won't be erased until I go to the grave. When you go in the service you are in a situation where your values can be altered. 'We're gonna fight a war and kill'. We were killers. It's all right to kill but in my instance it was out and out murder. It's one thing to face an enemy that's shooting back at you but that's not what we faced.

After it was over, everybody knew it was wrong. The damage was already done – it was too late. What prevented me from saying 'No!'? That's not what I was trained to do. The whole company had just run amok. After My Lai there was a sense of remorse, it finally hit everybody what had happened. They tried to hide us out in the jungle hoping we'd all get killed. But we didn't."

route through the village; the 2nd Platoon would take the northern section and the 3rd would follow behind mopping up.

There is agreement on a lot of what Medina told his men that night. This was a chance to get their own back on the enemy for all the company's losses. They were to go in hard on a search-and-destroy mission. Livestock would be killed; crops destroyed; homes and property burned down; wells polluted. By the time they were finished the 48th VC Battalion must be wiped out. Intelligence showed the villagers would be going to market at 0700 hours – so those left in the village would be either the enemy or VC sympathisers.

Gregory Olsen, a 19-year-old Mormon from Salt Lake City, denied they were told to slaughter non-combatants: "Captain Medina made the statement that we owed the enemy something. The troops had a feeling that they should revenge their fallen comrades. He would never have given an order to kill women and children."

However, it was already clear that some members of Charlie Company would stop at nothing. Only the day before Olsen had scrawled a letter in pencil to his father. His buddies were beating children, even stomping a Vietnamese woman to death. He wrote: *Why in God's name does this have to happen? They are seemingly normal guys, some are friends of mine. For a while they were like wild animals.*

The woman was murdered after a member of Olsen's platoon was killed and four others injured when a booby-trapped artillery round exploded. Olsen continued: *They kicked her to death and then emptied their magazines into her head. They slugged every little kid they came across. It was murder and I am ashamed of myself for not trying to do anything about it. This is not the first time Dad, I have seen it many times before – I just want to get it off my chest.*

What did Captain Medina actually tell his men to do the night before they flew into My Lai? Charles Hall, a 21-year-old from Columbus, Ohio, later recalled Medina telling them to "waste anybody that ran from us or fired on us. He did not instruct us to waste or kill everybody." The captain's radio operator, Fred Widmer, thought the mood was like the pep talk for a high-school rally: "Your adrenalin just started to flow thinking about the ⇛

next day and that you were gonna get into it. Hey, finally we've got an enemy. We're gonna get even for everything that you have done to us so far."

All the men discussed their orders with their buddies after the briefing. Harry Stanley, a grenadier with the 1st Platoon, was convinced about Medina's instructions: "He ordered us to kill everything in the village. The men in my squad talked about this among themselves that night because the order was so unusual." Richard Pendleton, from Richmond, California, discussed the briefing with other members of the 3rd Squad of the 3rd Platoon: "That evening, as we cleaned our weapons and got our gear ready, we talked about the operation. People were talking about killing everything that moved. Everyone knew what we were going to do."

Denis Conti was a member of the 1st Platoon led by 2nd Lt William Calley, who held another briefing for his platoon after Medina's. "Calley told us that 90 per cent of the population were VC or VC sympathisers. 'If you see a man, he is carrying a weapon; if you see a woman, she is carrying a pack.' He said something about children, also, something like they could be future VC. He said cattle and crops were VC food. Calley struck me as all psyched up. He said not to hesitate to kill anything that moves. That stands out in my mind. He reminded us that we had lost a lot of men in that area, and we were going to make up for it."

Others, however, were not so sure. Michael Bernhardt, an experienced soldier, said Medina did not tell them to kill everyone: "He said everything was to be destroyed. It was sort of like Captain Medina's benediction. What had been building up all along, he was giving his blessing to – I am sure that was the way most of the men interpreted it. He didn't specifically say to kill every man, women and child. He stopped just short of that, but he gave just about every other indication that this is what he expected."

Nine War Lord helicopters from the 123rd Aviation Battalion flew Charlie Company into My Lai just as the villagers were making their early morning meal around 0730 hours. Accompanying them were "The Sharks" – helicopter gunships from the 174th Aviation Battalion, who laid down suppressive fire to protect the landing. Also in the air were Aeroscout helicopters flying reconnaissance, spotting enemy targets, dropping smoke canisters near the wounded enemy so that they could be searched for weapons. One of these 'recon' aircraft was flown by Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson, aged 24, who had two young crewmen with him. During the next four hours not a single shot was fired at them or any personnel involved in the landings in and around My Lai. Thompson and his door-gunner, Lawrence Colburn, and many others that day, were confused that they never once came under enemy fire. This was not what they expected.

Within 20 minutes all 120 men and five officers of Charlie Company had dispersed. The 1st and 2nd Platoons spread out – firing as they went. Denis Conti was in the first helicopter to land. Although he never killed anyone in the village he says they were all psyched up when they arrived: "As a result, when we got there the shooting started almost like a chain reaction. The majority of us had expected to meet VC combat troops but this did not turn out to be so. Originally we saw a few men running in the brush-line, and the next thing we were shooting at everything. Everybody was just firing. After they got into the village I guess you could say the men were out of control."

Soldiers were slaughtering animals, firing wildly at anything that moved – pigs, oxen, people. Women and young girls were dragged away to be violated and then butchered, often with knives. Some were scalped, others had their hands cut off. Many were disembowelled. One soldier witnessed a GI clambering on to the back of a water buffalo, stabbing it repeatedly with his knife until the beast collapsed.

An hour later Bravo Company, led by Captain Earl Michels, landed on the opposite side of My Lai. A landmine soon killed one man and several were injured but they never once came under enemy fire. Within 30 minutes the 1st Platoon, led by Lt Thomas Willingham, had made its way into a small hamlet called My Khe where the local population were either hiding in their homes or sheltering in tunnels. A mile-and-a-half away from My Lai, where mass executions were taking place, Willingham's men began their own slaughter. Fleeing peasants were cut down by raking machine-gun fire which poured into the village. As they mopped up, the GIs went from house to house, tunnel to tunnel, lobbing in grenades, bayonetting old men, women and children as they tried to escape. Pregnant women had their stomachs slashed open and were left dying in the hot sun; whole families sheltering in make-shift tunnels were quite literally blown apart. An 11-year-old girl, Vo Thi Lien, later ran from tunnel to tunnel trying to find members of her family. Earlier her grandmother tried to approach the American soldiers and had been shot in the chest, a hand grenade then dismembered her body completely. The tunnel Lien and her grandparents were sheltering in had both entrances blown up with TNT and collapsed. They were only dug out by the few survivors in the village after the Americans left. Of the 97 people killed in My Khe, 33 were part of Lien's family. Women and young girls were stripped naked, some had been raped, others had been stabbed in the vagina.

Back in My Lai, the mass executions were being conducted in orderly and efficient manner. Much of it was administered by a handful of men from Calley's 1st Platoon but the other two platoons were involved as well. Villagers were shot in their homes, on paths and in the paddy fields. Others were gathered together, rounded up by soldiers who marched them to a central point. Many of the women of My Lai were stripped, raped or sodomised, some were gang-raped, and then they were killed, either by being shot or stabbed with bayonets which all the soldiers carried. The simple straw-covered homes where these crimes had taken place were then set on fire by the 'Zippo' squads, the GIs with cigarette lighters.

We were supposed to be the good guys

Hugh Thompson *was a career soldier in the US Army. In Vietnam he was a helicopter pilot. He was decorated for valour against a hostile force at My Lai. What the citation didn't say was that the hostile force was American. Twice Thompson and his crew landed to rescue villagers from the carnage. The first time he ordered his crewmen to train their machine guns on the American soldiers, led by Lt William Calley, and to open fire if Calley's troops started shooting the Vietnamese villagers. Aged 46, today Thompson is a civilian, still flying helicopters for a living. Four marriages behind him, he now lives with his girlfriend. Discussing the My Lai massacre caused him severe emotional stress and bouts of depression. Inset: Thompson at Calley's trial.*

"During the mission we started seeing a lot of bodies. It just didn't add up. We'd go back over an area that we knew was clean and there would be a bunch of dead people. Women and kids. You start thinking after a while: 'What's going on here? We're not getting shot. Who's doing the shooting?' I saw a wounded female and called on the radio to get some assistance for her. She didn't have a weapon and she needed help. An American captain walked up to her, nudged her with his foot, stood back and blew her away. Now I knew who was doing the killing.

We came across a ditch and it had bodies in it, a lot of them – women, kids, old men. I remember thinking: 'How did these people get into the ditch?'

At one point I saw some people who were still alive in a bunker. I stopped the aircraft, set down, got out and went up to this lieutenant in charge [Calley].

I said: 'Hey I've got some civilians in the bunker.' I asked if there was any way he could get them out, meaning to help get them out. He replied the only way he could get them out was with a hand grenade. Here we were supposed to be the good guys in white hats. It upset me.

I said to my crew: 'If the Americans start shooting, if they fire on the civilians, open up on 'em'. I was very mad and upset. I don't know how I'd have felt if they had opened-fire but I think that on that day I wouldn't have given it a second's thought. *They* were the enemy at that time, I guess. They damn sure were the enemy on the ground. We put women, children and old men on board and flew them out to a safe area.

Later in the day I flew over the ditch again – the one with the bodies in it. We noticed some kind of movement down there. We were all upset by then. My crew chief spotted a child among the bodies. I have no idea how the child survived, it could have been under its mother, they could have been out of ammunition. We put the little girl in the back with my gunner [Lawrence Colburn] who held her on

his lap. I had a son about the same age. I thought it could have been my kid.

There were good people who didn't take part but there were no heroes that day – some of us just did our job and tried to do it good. What I did was right – it wasn't anything exceptional. We tried to help people who needed our help. They damned sure needed someone to help them.

Even after 20 years it makes me feel guilty just thinking about it. If you were involved you can't forget about My Lai. A lot of people to this day still don't even think it happened.

Denis Conti, on his own admission, liked to fool around with girls. He earned a special notoriety all of his own – the joke went that he got VD so often the company medic, Sgt Nick Capezza, nearly ran out of penicillin. Conti was so fond of the ladies that he cut the hair off one Vietnamese girl, braided it into a plait and carried it on his helmet as a trophy. According to one eye-witness, while Conti was in the village he tried to persuade a woman to have oral sex with him while holding her child at gunpoint. Calley saw this and stopped it – later the young lieutenant was to remark that Conti's sexual appetite was not helping the war against communism. Calley meanwhile had been directing his platoon to turn their weapons on a large collection of people gathered at a ditch. Many refused – but one young boy from Indiana called Paul Meadlo obeyed the order and opened fire with a machine gun. More than 50 Vietnamese were mown down in one go. The old men, women and children who were lined up began falling into the ditch, most of them were dead, some were mortally wounded.

Mrs Sa Thi Quy, who had given water to American soldiers on an earlier visit, was one who survived underneath the bodies of several dead villagers. "People were crying: 'Oh my God, please let me up! I haven't done anything, have pity! They're shooting me, poor me. We're innocent people. Have pity.' There was silence, then a second group came – they shouted: 'We're shot, dear God. I'm hit, have pity!'

"You could see the very young children crawling along the edge of the ditch and it broke your heart. One of them cried out: 'Mother, mother' but she was dead. He was crawling and crying: 'Come back mother.' It was so tragic." Shot in the buttock, Mrs Quy lost consciousness.

Another villager, Pham Dung, aged 67, tells how he too survived in a ditch under layer upon layer of bodies. His wife died trying to push their 12-month-old baby into the mud at the bottom of an irrigation ditch in a vain effort to save it. Several lines of villagers had been taken to a dyke – pleading and begging the soldiers not to shoot them. "The Americans began pushing them with the butts of their rifles into the ditch. Those who didn't fall were shot and then kicked down. The people were terrified. They became so frantic seeing their friends and family killed in front of them that they jumped into the ditch on top of dead bodies. The ditch was filled with several layers of dead bodies as well as live people. I jumped down into the ditch to hide. A number of people were shot dead and their children were left standing there crying: 'Mother, mother.' The soldiers heard the cries and came back and shot them too.

"Later on it got cold – I was bleeding all over, the brains of the dead people were all over me, the stench was awful." Mr Dung lost nine members of his family including his wife and daughter. "The earth ran with blood – I am not exaggerating, so many were killed [170 in that dyke alone]."

From the air Hugh Thompson had been dropping smoke canisters to mark people who had been injured so they could be searched for weapons or given medical assistance. He witnessed a large group of Vietnamese fleeing along a path. When he returned later they were all dead. He saw Captain Medina approaching a woman whom he had earlier marked with smoke: "I asked for help ... she got help all right. He nudged her with his foot, stepped back and blew her away."

Flying over a ditch, Thompson saw that it was full of dead bodies. The sight appalled him: "I thought about the Nazis – marching everyone down to the ditch and blowing them away. We were supposed to be the good guys in the white hats."

Calley, meanwhile, was ordering his platoon to get on with dispatching the civilians, but fewer and fewer members of his platoon wanted to take part. Robert Maples refused to hand over his machine gun, at which point Calley drew his .45 pistol and threatened him. Several soldiers, Maples's buddies, quickly turned their rifles on Calley and he backed down. Later he turned to others and said: "Come on, we've got work to do".

At one point, Thompson, from his ➤➤➤

Hey look, he's got a camera

Ronald Haeberle *served in Vietnam in the US Army as a photographer with a public information unit. At My Lai he covered the operation for the* Stars and Stripes *newspaper. Haeberle took the photographs which are on the spread overleaf – positive proof of the scale and spread of the horror. They were only published when news of the massacre broke, 18 months on. In his mid-40s, he works today in a factory in Cleveland. He is divorced with a teenage daughter. Inset: Haeberle at Calley's trial.*

At the time I didn't consider it an atrocity. I knew something was wrong. It didn't have to happen. Taking pictures in this situation is the worst thing in the world, people don't know what a bullet can do to a body.

At one time they did try to stop me. At that instant there was a group of people, Vietnamese women and children surrounded by GIs, huddled together as I walked up on them. I noticed one girl was kind of frantic. An older woman in front was babbling on in Vietnamese like she was pleading... begging. One woman had a sad look, one child was screaming, the older woman behind her was trying to shield her. One woman was buttoning her blouse and holding a baby. I had my camera round my neck and one of the Americans yelled out: 'Hey, he's got a camera' and they stopped what they were doing and dispersed a bit until I walked past. I took the picture – I thought they were going to question them. But as I turned and walked away I heard firing.

They were all shot. I just kept on walking. I did not pay attention to who did it. By that time I knew the score.

Later I noticed this one small boy had been shot – part of the foot was torn off, he was walking towards the group of bodies looking for his mother. I didn't notice a GI kneeling down beside me with his M-16 rifle pointed at the child. Then I suddenly heard the crack and I saw this child flip end over, on top of the pile of bodies. The GI stood up and just walked away. It was weird, just a shrug of the shoulder, no emotional reaction.

One guy was shot and thrown down a well. There were so many bizarre things happening that day. They were killing the animals like they were wild people. I remember one GI jumping on top of a water buffalo, pulled out his blade and started stabbing the animal to death while riding on its back. Unbelievable. The 'Zippo' squads were burning hooches – destroying the village by fire, using their Zippo lighters to start the fire. They burned everything they could find.

Being a photographer I was very sensitive to what was happening around me. Seeing happy things made me feel great – and seeing things like the incident at My Lai made me feel really bad.

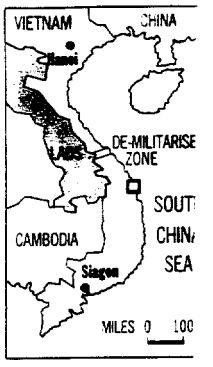
On the return flight to our base camp the *Stars and Stripes* reporter and I started talking. We knew we had something really hot, some very damaging evidence. We decided just to keep quiet about it. We felt we were not going to break this story because we were part of it. If they knew we had ratted, broke the story – something could have happened to one of the people in the public information office.

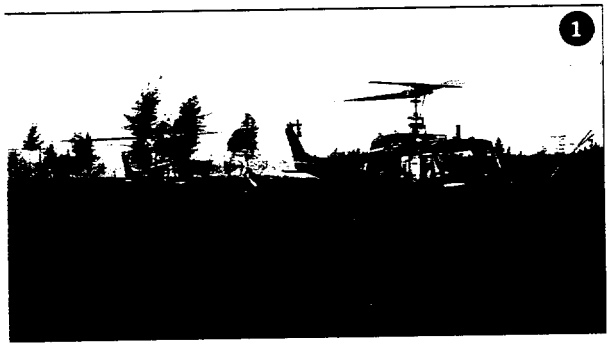
When I came home from Vietnam [18 months before the news of the massacre broke] I processed my slides and I put together a slide show – it started off real nice showing Hawaii, moved on to Vietnam showing the villages, what our medical group did for the villagers and more shots of the children, and finally the My Lai massacre.

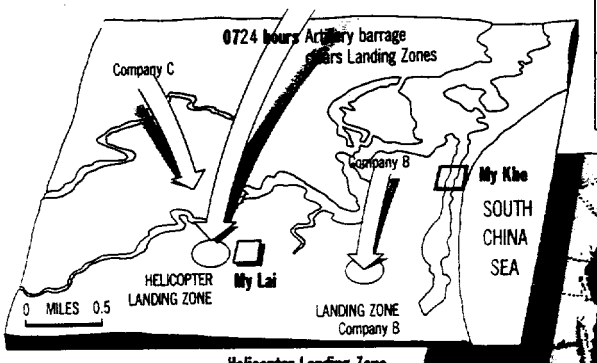
The reaction was mixed. Some people couldn't believe this actually happened. 'Why would American GIs do this, especially to old men, women and babies?' A couple thought it had been done in Hollywood, that it was made up. They just didn't want to believe it. A lot of people wanted to know: 'Why?' In my own mind I didn't know why. Twenty years later it's become part of history and I hope the photographs tell enough that this will never happen again.

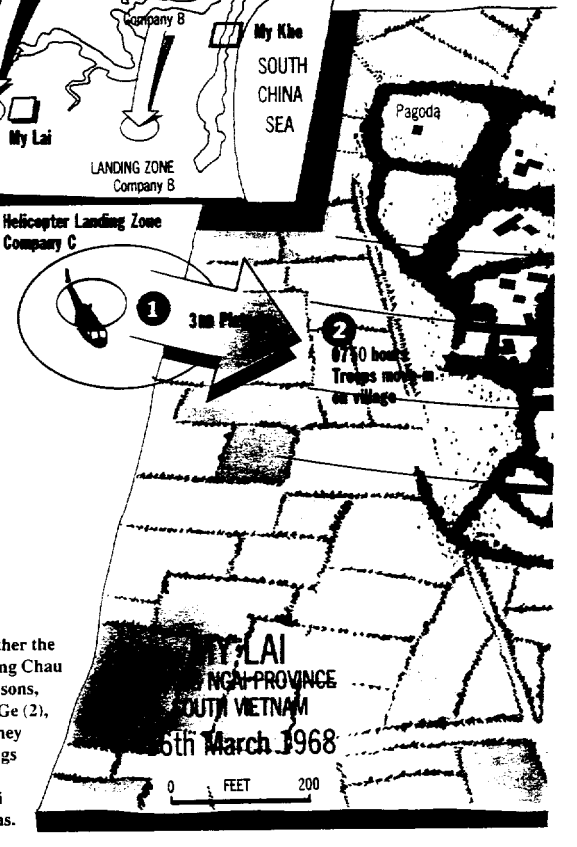
Haeberle's My Lai

This is part of the photographic record of the My Lai massacre, taken by Ron Haeberle, the US Army photographer with the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper. The pictures, coded to the maps in the centre of the page, show the progress of C Company's mission into Quang Ngai Province on March 16, 1968. 120 men were landed. By the time they left they had caused unimaginable destruction. Almost 500 villagers were killed, their homes and their crops were burned and their livestock slaughtered. Haeberle kept quiet about the massacre, fearing reprisals against other newsmen in Vietnam. But when he returned to the United States, he processed his pictures and showed them for the first time (some 18 months after the massacre actually took place). 'The reaction was mixed. Some people couldn't believe this actually happened. They just didn't want to believe it.' It was My Lai, perhaps more than any other incident, that changed US public opinion of the Vietnam war. *Illustrations by Phil Green.*

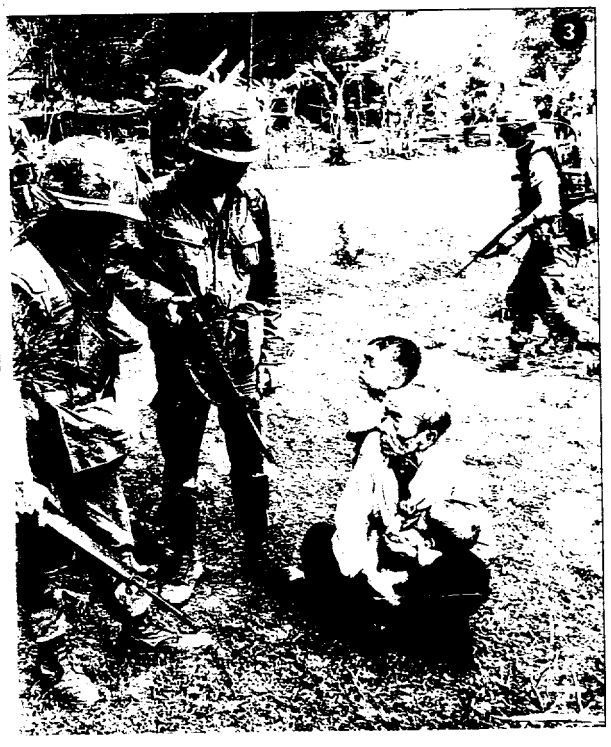




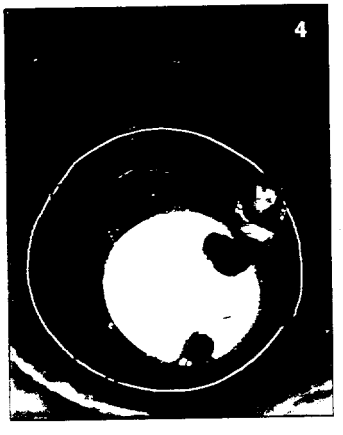




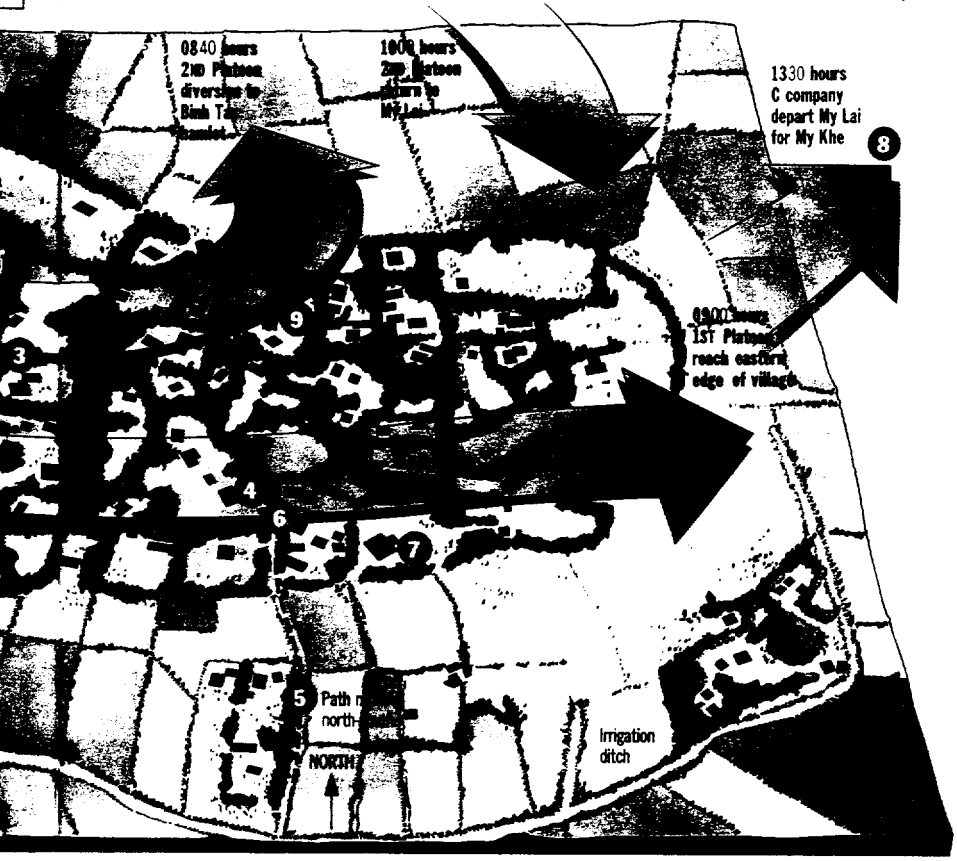
1 and 2: Nine helicopters ferried the 120 men of Charlie Company to the dried out rice paddies on the western edge of My Lai. Calley's platoon landed first, fanned out for their combat assault, and then moved in, firing as they went. Unarmed villagers working in the fields were shot without warning. Everybody was surprised at the reception. Not a single hostile bullet was fired at C Company that day.



3: No mercy was shown to either the very young or very old. Truong Chau (80) was caring for his grandsons, Truong Duc (4) and Truong Ge (2), when the soldiers arrived. They ignored the villagers pleadings that the Vietcong's 48th Battalion were not in My Lai that day, but in the mountains.



9: Every home in My Lai was destroyed in the operation, set on fire by the 'Zippo' squads using their cigarette lighters. Three My Lai villagers died in this simple, straw house, Mr Nguyen Gap, aged 50 (nearest camera); his wife, Truong Thi Huyen, aged 45 (under the drying tray), and their son, Nguyen Tan, aged 6, lying hidden behind his dead mother's body



4: Ron Haeberle's reflection was caught on film when he photographed the body of Truong Tho (80) after he was thrown down a well and shot dead.
5: Haeberle saw more bodies on a North-South path and then came across a group of seven peasants huddled together, seconds before they were slaughtered.
6: Among them was, pleading for her life, Mrs Ba So (right) aged 60 from the nearby village of Son Hoa.

8: Accompanying "Barker's Bastards" during the operation was 2nd Lt Dennis Johnson, (above, middle) of the 52nd Military Intelligence Detatchment whose job was to interrogate prisoners. With his interpreter, Sgt Doung Minh, he questions one of the elderly villagers at nearby My Khe where members of Bravo Company ran amok and killed 97 people while hundreds were being killed at My Lai.

7: Chow Time for Charlie Company. Haeberle was able to record the apparent casualness with which the soldiers took their lunch-break at 11 am. 2nd Lt Roger Alaux, an artillery observer (in helmet nearest camera) is sat with members of the mortar platoon – (right to left) Sgt Leo Maroney, Sgt Marin Fagan, Sgt Nguyen Donh Phu (Vietnamese interpreter), and Private James Flynn.

Vo Thi Lien *was 11-years-old when her village of My Khe, a mile-and-a-half from My Lai was entered by US soldiers searching for Vietcong forces. Thirty-three members of her immediate and extended family were among the 97 innocent civilians who were killed in the village in a second massacre. Today she is married with two children and lives at Da Nang. The village lies on the coast of the South China Sea. There local peasants earn their living fishing, and pulping coconuts to make rope. Inset: Thi Lien, as a girl, at one of the many lectures she gave about My Lai.*

I was crying but crying without noise

"When the Americans came I was hiding in a tunnel with my grandparents. We could hear shells and guns, so all morning we hid. Later the Americans crossed the bridge over the river and began entering our village. I stayed in the tunnel until they got closer. The Americans hit the tunnel at both ends and it began to collapse. My grandfather and I both fainted. We stayed there until about five o'clock in the evening, when we couldn't hear the Americans any more. In all they killed 97 people in the hamlet. That day 33 members of my close and extended families were killed.

When I came out of the tunnel the image that stayed in my mind was my grandmother being shot and then being blown to pieces. At the time I was totally fearless, I ran all over the place looking for survivors in tunnels. I went to all the tunnels and realised there had been a massacre. As I ran from one end of the hamlet to the other I was crying but crying without noise, and yet my voice became all hoarse. People advised me to remain calm, to look for tunnels where my relatives might have remained hidden, to listen for moans coming from tun nels that had collapsed, and to rescue th survivors. Then I found my cousin.

Afterwards I travelled to various cour tries to tell them about the massacre bu every time I recalled these events I g very upset. There were times when couldn't go on telling the story – but I tol myself that I must talk and tell the peopl who haven't yet understood about Vie nam and who didn't know how atrociou the war in Vietnam had been.

After the war the Americans didn give it a single thought. They left behin the terrible wounds of war but showed n humanity, they didn't support the Vie namese people in their reconstruction raise the quality of life.

I want those people who massacre my relatives and killed the Vietname people to think again and realise that th world is no longer what it was. This is time for reconciliation so that we don always think of America as the enemy. have been cared for by the State but th State is very large and it has to look aft all the people, which is a heavy respons bility. If those Americans feel they've r pented then they must bear some responsibility for the reconstruction and rebuilding of our village."

helicopter, saw Calley and a group of GIs approaching a bunker. He was certain they were going to kill the occupants and landed his aircraft between the bunker and the soldiers. Thompson told his two crewmen to turn their guns on the GIs and open fire if they shot the Vietnamese.

"I went up to Calley and said: 'Hey, I've got some civilians in the bunker.' I asked if there was any way we could get them out. He replied the only way he could get them out was with a hand grenade. I was very upset. I walked over to the bunker and motioned to the people to come out. I went back to the aircraft and radioed to the gunship that was covering me. He landed and we put the women, children and old men on board and flew them out to a safe area."

All around My Lai people were lying dead or dying. Many had terrible wounds. Among the most pitiful sights were children with limbs blown off but still alive. Some GIs who had not been involved in the carnage took it upon themselves to put them out of their misery.

Fred Widmer borrowed a .45 pistol from another soldier called Carter: "I walked back to the group and several of them were still moving after being shot, they were still twitching. I shot into the group and took the .45 back to Carter and told him there were still rounds in it. He was clearing the weapon when he accidentally shot himself in the foot. We carried him to the dust-off helicopter and got him medivaced out. There was a picture of us taken and to this day I don't remember it being taken, yet we were staring direct at the camera."

One of the most extraordinary features about the My Lai massacre was that it was documented so thoroughly by a US Army photographer. Ron Haeberle was present with Charlie Company that day, covering the operation for the Army newspaper *Stars and Stripes*. As he moved through t village, Haeberle began capturing imag of unbelievable carnage – photograp that a year-and-a-half later would he convince the world that a terrible atroc had occurred in Vietnam.

All three crew members in Thompso helicopter were decorated for valour f rescuing Vietnamese civilians that d Colburn and Andreotta were awarded t Bronze Star on Thompson's recommend tion. Andreotta was killed by hostile three weeks after the incident. Much l another officer recommended Thomp for the Distinguished Flying Cross. T citation mentioned that Thompso valorous actions took place while he engaged in military operations again hostile force. It never mentioned that enemy were his own side, or that Thom son was forced to turn his machine guns American GIs. The original recommend tion said that Thompson's courage a sound judgement greatly enhanc Vietnamese-American relations in operational area.

The carnage in My Lai and My K lasted for about four hours. When Thom son landed at the firebase to re-fuel his craft he threw his flying helmet on ground and told his commanding offi about the deaths of many innocent lians at My Lai. Not long after, instr tions went out over the radio: "Stop shooting." Thompson took the ma further, complaining to his chaplain, C tain Carl Creswell, and eventually saw brigade commander, Colonel Henders

Meanwhile, Charlie Company too lunch break and eventually left My

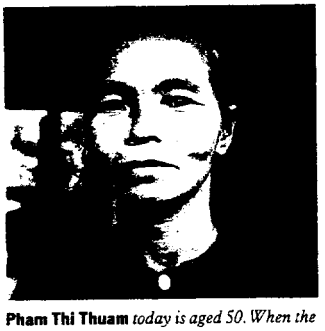
I pretended to be dead and dared not move

"In the ditch I pushed my daughter down under my stomach and told her not to cry and tried not to move. I pressed my daughter under my tummy while my body was covered with the dead above me. I pretended to be dead and dared not move. The Americans were waiting to see if anyone moved, and then they shot them. I put a hand over my child's mouth to prevent her from crying. She was covered in blood. Long afterwards, when the shooting had completely stopped, I pushed some corpses away to free myself. I looked up and saw dead bodies curled up in the ditch. Then I took hold of my child and ran.

I ran and managed to reach the furthest part of the road, a great distance from the Americans. I run up to the neighbouring hamlet crying. There I washed the blood away from my clothes. The people in the village came to help me and gave me clean clothes to put on.

I don't know why the Americans came and landed here and killed people, we didn't do anything. This was a region where there was security. There was a South Vietnamese military post on Elephant Hill (overlooking My Lai). Down here in the hamlet the people lived and worked normally.

After the massacre life was a struggle, life was very hard. It was a hand-to-mouth existence. We had to hide the things we produced in the field. The soldiers stayed up in their military post. We rebuilt our shelters and put up tents. My daughter is Nguyen Thi Lieu. She is married now."



Pham Thi Thuam *today is aged 50. When the Americans arrived at her village she was a widow caring for a young daughter. She still lives in the hamlet of My Lai. Six members of her family were killed in the massacre – her father, sister, younger brother and three nephews. She was pushed into a ditch with her daughter and other villagers when the American GIs opened fire. She survived by hiding under the dead bodies of other villagers.*

People were terrified, they were frantic

Pham Dung *is a 68-year-old widower, who lost nine members of his family at My Lai, including his wife, Do Thi Thiu (48), who died trying to shield their 12-month-old baby boy, Pham Quoc Nam, in her arms. The baby died but, although shot in the arm, his 8-year-old daughter, Pham Thi Su, survived. Today Pham Dung looks after his ox.*

"On previous occasions the Americans had come into the village, met with the old men and given them cigarettes, and the children sweets and food. Then they arrived here by helicopter and killed everyone.

They were doing nothing wrong. They were innocent people working peacefully. They were rounded up and taken to where the irrigation ditch was situated. Some had been shot, one had a broken arm, they were bleeding from their injuries, their clothes were coloured red with blood. Some of the children were being carried in their parent's arms, including very young babies only one or two months old. The Americans began pushing them with the butts of their rifles into the ditch. The people were terrified, they became so frantic seeing their friends and family killed in front of them that they jumped into the ditch on top of the dead bodies. The ditch was filled with several layers of dead bodies as well as live people. The soldiers kept shooting into the ditch.

When they opened fire there was one GI standing at one end and one standing at the other, I am telling you what I can honestly remember, what I know. At the ditch fathers forgot they were fathers, children forgot they were children, it was everyone for himself. I jumped down into the ditch to hide. There were very few who survived, hidden by the dead bodies above them.

I lost all my family. I lost my wife and daughter, my uncle, my brother and all his family, nine people altogether. The Americans came so early in the morning that the majority of people in the village had not even had their breakfast. I believe that it is very unlucky to die with an empty stomach."

and got on with the war. To make sure there were no leaks, the word went out to the men that they were to talk to nobody about what had happened that day. Michael Bernhardt was singled out for a special warning and told not to write home to his Congressman. Thomas Partsch, from Johnstown, Pennsylvania, wrote in his personal diary two days after the massacre: *There is a lot of fuss on what happened at the village. There is going to be an investigation on Medina. We are not supposed to say anything. I didn't think it was right but we did it. At least I can say I didn't kill anybody. I think I wanted to, but in another way I didn't.*

Ronald Haeberle, who had taken the photographs in My Lai, decided he wouldn't go public with the story either. If the higher-ups wanted to ask him about it, he would tell them; otherwise, he and the *Stars and Stripes* reporter who accompanied him were going to keep quiet. "If they knew we had ratted, something could have happened to one of the people in our office. Their life would be in danger, easily disposed of – its called fragging."

The villagers in My Lai and My Khe emerged from body-filled ditches, from destroyed shelters, from hiding in paddy fields, to find that both hamlets had been completely destroyed. All animals had been slaughtered and all food stuffs had been burned, along with their homes. For those survivors who escaped death, buried underneath bodies piled on top of them, their clothes were stained with blood; chunks of flesh, the obliterated remains of what were once human beings who were sprayed with high-calibre, automatic-weapon fire, were stuck to their clothing. The pools of blood began to dry out in the noon-day sun. Dazed and bewildered, they began to search for their families – almost always in vain. Not a shot had been fired against the American troops; hardly a weapon was found. Nobody saw the 48th VC Battalion that day. In fact it →

was not even in the area. Later interrogations of VC prisoners revealed it was probably still in the mountains. Military intelligence officers believed the local CIA representative, working undercover on a civilian-aid project in Quang Ngai, provided them with faulty intelligence.

Reports of a massacre began filtering back to brigade HQ as early as noon. Lt-Col Barker had been told by Hugh Thompson's company commander that one of his men had complained of a high number of civilian casualties. This information also reached Colonel Henderson, who ordered Barker to ascertain the exact number of civilians killed. The transmission of this message was intercepted by the two-star division commander, Major-General Samuel Koster. He demanded to know the reasons for the order. Barker explained the background and said that no more than 28 civilians had been accidentally killed by crossfire, he didn't particularly want his men to go back to a dangerous combat zone. Koster promptly countermanded the order to check-up on civilian casualties. No body-count check was ever made to ascertain exactly how many civilians had been killed, or how they had met their deaths.

But the allegations of an atrocity would not go away. Hugh Thompson's complaint to the man who was giving him baptism classes, the chaplain, Captain Carl Creswell, was reported to his boss, the divisional chaplain, Lt-Col Francis Lewis. The following morning two senior officers from the Aviation Battalion went to the assistant divisional commander, Brigadier-General George H. Young, who in turn communicated their fears to Koster. At this point Koster ordered "a thorough investigation" by Colonel Henderson. The next day, March 18, a meeting was held of senior officers from the 11th Brigade which ended with Colonel Henderson interviewing some of the helicopter crews who reported seeing atrocities.

Later, when Charlie Company were ferried back to their firebase at LZ Dottie, Henderson had just arrived. Sgt Jay Buchanon was among the first to alight from the helicopter: "We got off the chopper pad and he stopped and asked us if we felt during this operation we had left a good impression and if they saw us coming again would they say we were friends. At first this question was directed at the group and nobody said anything. Then he looked directly at me. 'What about you?' I said: 'I have no comment, sir!'"

Henderson, describing the scene later, said: "They were proud, their heads were high, they were standing tall and in good spirits." Henderson asked if they had seen anything unusual or had seen any unnecessary killings – they all replied: "No sir!"

Only a very perfunctory investigation was ever carried out. Some of the local Vietnamese officials, part of the South Vietnamese government administration, were outraged by what had happened. They sent in reports giving details of a massacre. One of them, Lt Tran Ngoc Tan, wrote: *In the 16th March operation, the Americans, in anger, killed too many civilians. Only one American was killed, however the allies killed nearly 500 civilians in retaliation. Really an atrocious attitude if it cannot be called an act of insane violence. Request you intervene on behalf of the people.* A copy of this report was sent to the American HQ at Quang Ngai.

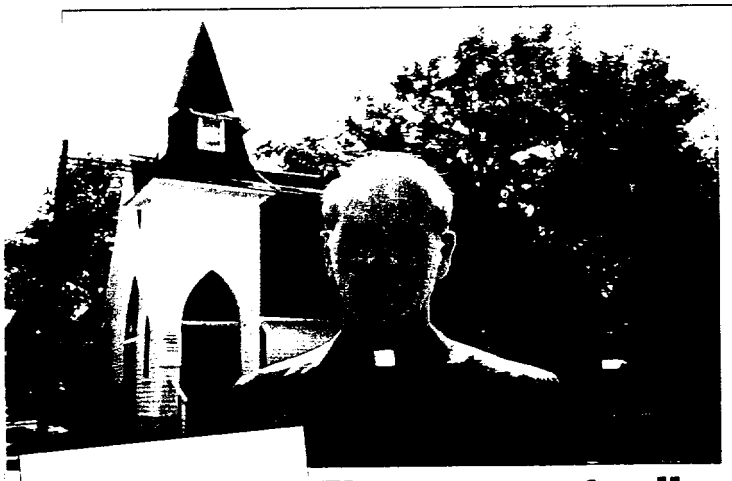
The official record showed, however, that the operation in My Lai had been a great success. The Pacific edition of the *Stars and Stripes* reported the operation a victory, with 128 VC killed. The same body count of 128 VC dead with three weapons found was documented by Lt-Col Barker when he filed his combat-action report, ten days after the completion of the mission. His analysis claimed: *This operation was well planned, well executed and successful. Friendly casualties were light and the enemy suffered heavily. On this operation the civilian population supporting the VC in the area numbered approximately 200. This created a problem in population control and medical care of those civilians caught in the fire of opposing forces. However, the infantry unit on the ground and helicopters were able to assist civilians in leaving the area and caring for or evacuating the wounded.*

Not long afterwards – the 'hero-train' arrived. General William Westmoreland, commander of all US forces in Vietnam, sent a signal to Koster saying that the operation on March 16th *dealt the enemy a heavy blow.* He congratulated both Charlie and Bravo companies for outstanding action. Koster added his own congratulations "for the team work and aggressiveness exhibited" by the two companies. This was closely followed by a message to both Captain Medina and the CO of Bravo Company from the brigade commander, Colonel Henderson: *The success of this operation and the praiseworthy role of units of the 11th Infantry Brigade directly reflect your expert guidance, leadership and devotion to duty. The quick response and professionalism displayed during this action has again enhanced this Brigade's image in the eyes of higher commands.*

Henderson was new to the job. He took over the day before the My Lai operation and could have expected to be promoted to the rank of one-star general very quickly. Any hint that My Lai was a disaster of epic proportions would have ended Henderson's career on the spot. He wrote a report about his own investigation of the massacre. It was sent to Koster and dated April 24, 1968. *At no time were any civilians gathered together and killed by US soldiers,* he wrote emphatically. *The allegation that US Forces shot and killed 450 to 500 civilians is obviously a Vietcong propaganda move to discredit the United States in the eyes of the Vietnamese people.*

What happened at My Lai was far worse than the American public ever believed. For many of them, even the idea that groups of American boys from decent homes could murder innocent civilians was utterly incredible. The total extent of the barbarities committed that day were hidden from them. If some elements in the higher echelons of the US Army had had their way nothing whatever of the massacre would have been known.

It only came to light through a GI called Ron Ridenhour, who was not even at My Lai. But he did have several friends who were there and were deeply troubled by what went on. At the end of March, 1969, twelve months after Charlie Company had rampaged through the hamlet, Ridenhour wrote a four-page, double-typed letter setting down all that he had learned. He made numerous copies and sent them to the Pentagon and various



They were not evil

Carl Creswell, *a career soldier, served as a captain in the US Army Chaplain Corps at the time of the My Lai massacre. Hugh Thompson, a helicopter pilot responsible for the rescue of women and children, went to him for help when he realised his superiors were trying to cover-up the massacre. Today the Rev Creswell has a parish near Amarillo. Inset: in his army days.*

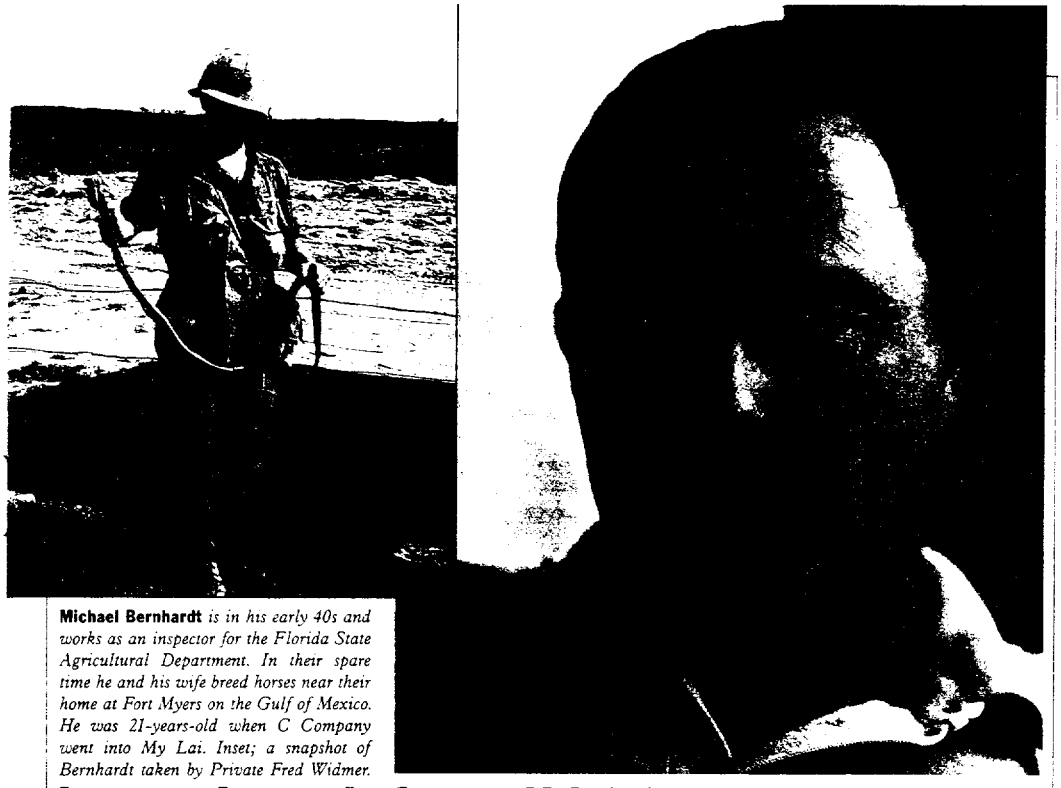
"Hugh Thompson used to be my pilot. When he came to tell me about what had happened that day at My Lai he walked into the doorway of my office, still wearing his flying clothes. He had obviously just come down from the line and he was really emotionally upset and very, very angry. He told me that American troops were killing civilians at 'Pinkville'.

I accepted what he had to say – I thought it was absolutely bizarre, we don't normally do things like that but I had been in the Army a long time and by then I knew that aberrations occur in everybody's army. My feeling was that some type of group insanity had taken over from the top down and the leadership didn't stop it.

I wouldn't say the soldiers at My Lai were evil people. These people did evil things – the wilful destruction of the innocents, that's an evil act. If there is a moral lesson to be drawn from My Lai it is the one we knew and forgot – if you are going to have to get involved in a war it had better be for a just cause and you better limit the destruction.

I went to the division chaplain and I went to the unit chaplain of the 11th Brigade and I told him. I went back to each of those men several times and was told it had been turned over to their respective chiefs-of-staff and that it was being investigated. I had tremendous faith in the Army at that point. In that particular instance that faith was not justified. Certain people decided not to deal with it. I didn't know that at the time, I really didn't. The massacre happened in March, I went on R-and-R in April. I came back a little later and heard very little about it again.

If anyone ever told me that God could never forgive them I'd have to discuss their ego with them. God is capable of forgiving everybody and he does. People talk of punishment, what can be worse than self-inflicted punishment for two decades? I feel tremendous sadness for them. These men participated in acts of total insanity for one day, and as a result of that they have become convinced that they can never do anything to relieve themselves of the guilt or the burden. I don't believe that is true, but I know a lot of people do."



Michael Bernhardt *is in his early 40s and works as an inspector for the Florida State Agricultural Department. In their spare time he and his wife breed horses near their home at Fort Myers on the Gulf of Mexico. He was 21-years-old when C Company went into My Lai. Inset; a snapshot of Bernhardt taken by Private Fred Widmer.*

I was ashamed of myself, I didn't stop it

"Before My Lai there were several occasions when American soldiers mistreated civilians, although I didn't see anyone murder them. It seemed to me that the situation was getting worse and worse. They didn't differentiate between the sexes – if they wanted to beat somebody, they would beat a man, woman or child – it didn't matter. I sometimes came across soldiers in C Company doing this. Until My Lai I had never seen a soldier raping a Vietnamese woman. I heard about it.

When I saw Americans committing atrocities I guess I was prepared for it. You had basically a company of 150 adolescents held together by nothing but military discipline which they had got Stateside which was beginning to wear.

I was ashamed of myself because I was part of this group, this unit that was representing my country somehow and because I didn't do anything to stop it.

I met up with my platoon some time later – some people were talking about it, what they had done, but they didn't want to say much when I was within hearing. They knew I was some kind of oddball and they knew I disapproved of the way they acted with the Vietnamese. I had to spend the rest of the tour – eight or nine months with a company of men just about all of them who would be considered culpable, and they knew it. They probably would not be too unhappy if I didn't make it home.

Later, when I was in hospital, Ron Ridenhour [the soldier who exposed what had happened] asked me if I would be willing to testify. I told him that I would – I didn't even hesitate. But still, when I was asked to point the finger at certain individuals, I didn't feel really comfortable about that. I'd spent a lot of time with these people; I also knew their other side. We spent a long time over there – it was not one long string of murdering Vietnamese civilians. Most of the time they did soldiering stuff, fighting and sweating.

How were they able to do it? Killing a bunch of civilians in this way, babies, women, old men, people who were unarmed, helpless – was wrong! Every American would know that. And yet this company was sitting out here isolated in this one place and didn't see it that way. I'm sure they didn't. They felt they were answerable to the company commander and the other people around and nobody else. Covering it up only made it worse. It almost made it as though it hadn't happened, even to the people who where actually there."

members of Congress in Washington.

Lt-General William Peers investigated what happened at My Lai and the subsequent cover-up. A press conference was called to announce the findings of the inquiry. Peers was told that under no circumstances was he to go into detail about the contents of his report. Instead of referring to a "massacre" or "a war crime", he was to call it a "tragedy of major proportions". Nor was there to be any mention of the raping, sodomising, and subsequent butchery of women and young girls.

Thirty officers closely associated with the operation in My Lai – including Major-General Koster, Brigadier-General Young, and several full colonels – had kept what happened a closely-guarded secret. Twelve of them were charged with covering up a war crime – but they never faced trial. The charges were withdrawn.

Forty-six members of Charlie Company were under serious investigation for crimes of murder, attempted murder, rape and sexual assault. In 18 cases the Army's Criminal Investigation Division (CID) found sufficient evidence to prove the charges – but the soldiers had by then left the Army and were no longer under military jurisdiction. They were never charged and never faced trial.

The CID had evidence that at least 15 members of Charlie Company were involved in horrifying sex crimes – it was the great dark secret that the US Army managed to keep covered up even when all the trials and inquiries were completed. Four people who had committed crimes at My Lai were still serving soldiers but only two of them were formally charged and, though the Army's own records show clearly the CID had applied rigorous standards before recommending charges be brought, the charges were dropped.

Twelve men were charged with murder but only four came to court, including Charlie Company's commander, Captain Medina, who was acquitted at a court martial. He left the army shortly afterwards. Today, he is a respected citizen of Mainette, Wisconsin. Married, with children, he works as an estate agent.

Only one man was found guilty of crimes committed at My Lai. On September 5, 1969, a few days before he was scheduled for honourable discharge from the Army, Lt William Calley, leader of the 1st Platoon, was formally accused at Fort Benning, Georgia, of the murder of 109 civilians. For a great many people this was a miscarriage of justice; some thought no crime had been committed, others – the anti-war activists – believed the generals should have been in the dock.

Before his trial the American Legion in Jacksonville, Florida – Calley's home state – opened a $200,000 national defence fund. Calley flew there to attend a lunch party for the fund in January, 1970. He was greeted at the local airport where several people recognised him: "Good luck, son."

The court martial dragged on for months. It was a curious affair in which the accused became a celebrity. In his quarters – a two-roomed apartment – he was able to have visits from his friends, including a girlfriend, and regularly saw members of the media. He sold his story to *Esquire* magazine. All along he never denied shooting civilians – his defence was that he had been ordered to do so by the company commander – Medina – and thus his actions were justified.

Eventually he was found guilty of 20 murders by a jury of Vietnam veterans. He was sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labour. Public reaction to Calley's conviction and sentence was quite extraordinary. Many still believed he was tried for doing his duty. Indiana's governor, Edgar Whitcomb, ordered all flags on state property to be flown at half-mast in protest against the verdict. George Wallace, governor of Alabama and a declared candidate in the forthcoming presidential election, paid a call on Calley *en route* to a well-attended rally in his support attended.

Jimmy Carter was the governor of Georgia and ordered an American Fighting Man's Day the week Calley was convicted. He asked those who supported Calley to drive with their car lights on. Draft-boards in Athens, Georgia, and Huron County, Michigan, resigned. The Texas Senate called for a presidential pardon. One preacher, in Columbus, Georgia – the town closest to Fort Benning – saw links between Calley's conviction and the crucifixion of Christ. A record, on the Plantation label, called *The Battle Hymn of Lt Calley* sold 200,000 copies. Calley had so many letters of support that he had to employ a secretary.

In August, 1971, Calley's life-sentence was reduce to 20 years. His lawyers appealed. In April, 1974, the sentence was reduced to ten years. Again Calley appealed and in September the following year he was released on parole. On President Richard Nixon's instructions, he served his sentence under house-arrest in his apartment at Fort Benning until the appeals procedure was exhausted. He never spent a day in prison.

Today he still lives in Columbus, Georgia. He married the daughter of a local jeweller and runs his father-in-law's business in the Cross Plaza Shopping Mall. He doesn't talk about My Lai ●