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 pat-rolled looking for a particular unit - the 4th 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 minesfields and boobytraps.

They were Charlie Company, part of a battalion-sized 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 the first they would go into vil- lages and the locals would be friendly - the kids would come and cagde 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 that 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 desolated 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 attack was defeated by the Marines, 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 govern-

ment in Washington DC. Now more than ever, the message was clear: the war had to be taken to the enemy.

Charlie Company's 30 men and two other infantry companies were specially chosen to root the 4th VC Battalion out of an area of the Ravanig Peninsula in Quang Ngai Province. They never succeeded, in fact their efforts were a sham-

bles. Lt-Col Barker's boys - the newly arrived commander of the 1st Light Infantry Brigade, Colonel Don K. Hen-
derson - was convinced the wrong tactics had let the enemy get the upper hand.

On March 15, Barker was told by Hen-
derson, at a special briefing at a fortified firebase and landing zone called LZ Ditt-
ie, that his men simply weren't being aggressive enough. He criticized the way they allowed local Vietnamese, including children, to pick up weapons discarded by the VC and get away. When they had sus-
tained losses Barker's troops had taken a defensive attitude. Instead of going after the enemy they allowed them just enough away to allow the "dust off" medical evac-
uation 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 he met his new CO, Major Lai. AGGREGATION. And Barker, to his horror, had left his company commanders in no doubt as to what he expected them to AGGREGATION. Gathered in the detailed 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 Crewell. "They were going to do an insertion, a combat assault at P Pikachu (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 cour-

tesy call. I had no business there, chaplain." do this, they just pop in to say "hello."" What happened next surprised Crewell. - today's priest in a parish out on the Texas front. They had maps laid out on a board and there was 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... 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 head-

quarters. And of course they assaulted My Lai the next day..." Before their own briefing with Captain Medlar that same night, the boys in Charlie Company watched a pornographic movie at steak and drink beer. Later Medlar gathered them together and used a stick - a map on a round, laying out the plan for the assault on My Lai. Charlie Company would land from the west as rice fields just outside the village at dawn. Bravo Company would go in on the east.

"They were going to do an insertion, a combat assault at Pikachu (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, chaplain do this, they just pop in to say "hello."" What happened next surprised Crewell. - today's priest in a parish out on the Texas front. They had maps laid out on a board and there was 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... 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 head-
We mostly started losing members of the company through booby traps and snipers. We would go to a village and give 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 sympathizer and we 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 43rd VC Battalion must be wiped out. Intelligence showed the villagers would go to market at 0700.

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 hooches, 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 shot 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.

Fred Widmer was 18 when he volunteered for the draft. A year later he was in Vietnam with C Company of the 64th 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 Pittsburgh, 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.
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 valor 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, having divorced 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 about what was going on. ‘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, 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. John Conn was in the first helicopter to land. Although he never killed anyone in the village he said they were all psychopaths 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 grabbing one 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 Michaels, landed on the opposite side of My Lai. A landmine 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 Khé 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 stopped 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 Loan, 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 grenade then dismembered her body completely. The tunnel Lien and her grandfather 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 Khé, 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 administrated 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 paddies. 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 while all the soldiers carried. The simple straw-covered homes where these crimes had taken place were then set on fire by the ‘Zippo squads’ of the GIs with cigarette lighters.
Hey look, he’s got a camera

Ronald Haerberle 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. Haerberle took the photographs which are on the spreads overleaf – pictures 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: Haerberle at Culler’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 hold 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 stepped 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 kneading down beside me with his M-16 rifle pointed at the child. Then I suddenly heard the crack and I saw this child fling 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 bad, 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.

Denis Conti, on his own admission, liked to fool around with girls. He earned a special commentary 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 eyewitness, 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 in a ditch. Many refused – but one young boy from Indiana called Paul Mecola 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 were 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 too far, have pity.”

“We 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 [100 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 night. 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 into 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 old men, women and children. Mary Ann Ebert and another soldier on the right of the platoon ordered a Vietnamese child to get up. When he refused they kicked him, then Calley pointed his pistol at the boy and ordered him to get up. The soldier on his right fired into the child, killing him.

Woodward and Thompson were just two of the men who supervised the massacre. They were not alone – the rest of the platoon was there to witness and encourage the soldiers. They were not alone – the rest of the platoon was there to witness and encourage the soldiers. They were not alone – the rest of the platoon was there to witness and encourage the soldiers.
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: Huey helicopters ferried the 120 men of Charlie Company to the dried out rice paddies on the western edge of My Lai. Culley’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 curing for his grandsons, Truong Duc (4) and Truong Ge (2), when the soldiers arrived. They ignored the villagers’ pleadings that the Vietcong’s 18th Battalion were not in My Lai that day, but in the mountains.
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 Ha So (right), aged 60, from the nearby village of Son Hoa.

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 Vieux, an artillery observer (in helmet nearest camera) is sat with members of the mortar platoon — (right to left): Sgt Leo Maroney, Sgt Martin Fagan, Sgt Nguyen Dinh Phu (Vietnamese interpreter), and Private James Flynn.

8: Accompanying “Barker’s Bastards” during the operation was 2nd Lt Dennis Johnson, (above), middle of the 52nd Military Intelligence Detachment whose job was to interrogate prisoners. With his interpreter, Sgt Duong 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.

9: Every home in My Lai was destroyed in the operation, set on fire by the ‘Zippo’s’ squads using their cigarette lighters. Three My Lai villagers died in this single, straw house, Mr Nguyen-gap aged 50 (nearest camera); his wife, Truong Thi Huyen, aged 45; under the drying trays and their son, Nguyen Tan, aged 6, lying hidden behind his dead mother’s body.
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 realized 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 tunnels that had collapsed, and to rescue the survivors. Then I found my cousin.

Afterwards I travelled to various countries to tell them about the massacre in every time I recalled these events I go very upset. There were times when I couldn't go on telling the story — but I tell myself that I must talk and tell the people who haven't yet understood about Viet Nam and who didn't know how atrocious the war in Vietnam had been.

After the war the Americans didn't give it a simple thought. They left behind the terrible wounds of war but showed humanity, they didn't support the Vietnamese people in their reconstruction, to raise the quality of life.

I want those people who massacre my relatives and killed the Vietnamese people to think again and realize that the world is no longer what it was. It is time for reconciliation so that we do always think of Vietnam as the enemy, have been cared for by the State but it is State very large and it has to look after people of, which is a heavy responsibility. If those Americans feel they've promised then they must bear some responsibility for the reconstruction and rebuiding of our village.

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 band over my mouth to prevent her from crying. She was crying. Long afterwards, when the shooting had completely stopped, I pushed some corpses away to free myself. I looked up and saw dead bodies curving up in the ditch. Then I took

group and took the 45 back to Carter and told him there were still rounds in it. He was cleaning the weapon when he accidentally shot himself in the foot. We carried him to the dust-off helicopter and got him medicated in the field. I was a picture of us taken to this day and I don't remember it being taken, yet we were standing 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. Sany and Srey Phom as he moved through the village, Haeberle began capturing many of unbelievable carnage — photography that a year-and-a-half later would show a thing that would have occurred in Vietnam.

All three crew members in Thompson helicopter were decorated for valor in rescuing Vietnamese civilians that Air-Column and Andretta were awarded a Bronze Star on Thompson's recommendation. Andretta was killed by hostile fire three weeks after the incident. Much later another officer recommended Thompson for the Distinguished Flying Cross. A citation mentioned that Thompson's actions took place while he was engaged in military operations against hostile force. It never mentioned that enemy was his own side, or that Thompson was forced to turn his machine gun on AmericanGs. The original recommendation said that Thompson's courage and sound judgement greatly enhanced Vietnamese-American relations in operational area.

The carnage in My Lai and My Khe lasted for about four hours. When Thompson landed at the firebase to refuel his craft he threw his flying helmet on the ground and told his commanding officer that he had heard of the deaths of innocent Vietnamese and wanted to leave. But when he was told that he was needed to continue his mission, he insisted on staying and helping to clean up the area. He then flew back to the firebase and reported what he had seen.

Pham Thi Thuan 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 husband and son were both killed in the massacre. She was pushed into a ditch with her daughter and other villagers when the AmericanGs opened fire. She survived by hiding under the dead bodies of other villagers.

Meanwhile, Charlie Company took lunch break and eventually left Vi...
People were terrified, they were frantic

Pham Dung is a 68-year-old farmer who lost nine members of his family in My Lai, including his wife, Do Thi Thu 48, who died trying to shield their 2-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 her.

"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 stained red with blood. Some of the children were being carried in their parents’ 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 forget they were fathers, children forget 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."

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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 Bemhardt was singled out for a
special warning and told not to write home
to his Congressman, Thomas Purtch,
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 investi-
gation 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 any-
body. I think I wanted to, but in another way
I didn’t.
Ronald Haerle, 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 accompa-
nied him were going to keep quiet. “If they
knew we had written something could have
happened to one of the people in our office.
Their life would be in danger, easily dis-
posed of—it’s called frapping.”
The villagers in My Lai and My Khe
emerged from body-filled ditches, from
destroyed shelters, from hiding in muddy
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 had
sprayed with high-caliber, 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 4th
VC Battalion that day. In fact it stayed
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 as a civilian aid worker 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 Hughes 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 more than 28 civilians had been accidentally killed by crossfire, but 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. Hughes 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 Buchanan was among the first to alight from the helicopter: “We got off the chopper, and he stopped and asked as 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 11th March operation, the Americans killed 280 civilians.”

The 11th Infantry Brigade, acting on the orders of General William Westmoreland, commander of all US forces in Vietnam, sent a signal to Koster giving the order to a divisional commander on March 19. The divisional commander ordered the 11th Infantry Brigade to report to him on the incident. General Westmoreland congratulated both Charlie Company for outstanding conduct, and Koster added his own congratulations. “The team work and aggressiveness exhibited” by the two companies, this closely followed the message to both General 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 reflects expert guidance, leadership, and determination. The quick response and professionalism displayed during this action is an enhanced this brigade’s image in the eyes of higher commands. Henderson was now the chief. He over the day before the My Lai operation and could have expected to promote to the rank of one-star general very soon. Any hint that My Lai was a disaster in proportion to what 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 19, 1968. At no time were any VC or other than US forces killed. By this time, he was confirmed. The allegations US Forces shot and killed 450 to 500 civilians is obviously a Vietnam propaganda 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 knew. For many of them, the idea that a US soldier could murder innocent civilians was utterly incredible. The total extent of the atrocities committed that day remained hidden from them. Every element in that atrocity was lost to the US Army had had nothing to do with the massacre — and it may have been.

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 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 for some time and knew what could happen. It was my job to report it to the authorities.

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, was killed for his efforts when they were believed to be the ones who set the fire that destroyed the village. Today the Creswell has a park near Cu Chi called ‘In my army days.’

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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—nothing mattered. 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 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 were 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 wouldn't, 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 nothing but 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 made it worse. It almost made it as though it hadn't happened, even to the people where actually there.

Twelve of them were charged with covering up a war crime— but they never faced a 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 Maquette, 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 honorable 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 his trial was a travesty of justice: some thought the crime had been committed, others—the anti-war activists—believed the general should have been at the dock.

Before his trial the American Legion in Jacksonville, Florida—Calley's home state—opened a $200,000 national defense fund. Calley flew there to attend a dinner party for the fund in January, 1971. He was greeted at the local airport where several people recognized 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 told his story to Esquire magazine. All along he never denied shooting civilians—his defense 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 Vietnamese veterans. He was sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labor. 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.

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 reduced to 20 years. His lawyer appealed. In April, 1974, the sentence was reduced to 10 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.