

BOOKS

The Meaninglessness of My Lai

MY LAI 4 by Seymour M. Hersh, 210 pages. Random House. \$5.95.

ONE MORNING IN THE WAR by Richard Hammer, 207 pages. Coward-McCann. \$5.95.

When news of the massacre broke last November, most Americans at first refused to believe that it had happened. When the basic facts became incontestable, many people still considered them too mundane to merit such a fuss or thought the whole thing ought to be kept quiet so as not to comfort the enemy. Anyone who can read these two books and still cling to either view has lost all sensibility or is beyond the reach of the written word.

Both books bring the horror back with new impact. And both are based on the reports of many witnesses whose willingness to incriminate themselves lends credence to their testimony. Hersh, a freelance Washington journalist who has just won a Pulitzer Prize for his effort, places the number of dead at between 450 and 500. Describing the murderous mood of the U.S. troops, he writes: "A G.I. was chasing a duck with a knife; others stood around watching a G.I. slaughter a cow with a bayonet. A G.I. with an M-16 rifle fired at two young boys walking along a road. The older of the two—about seven or eight years old—fell over the first to protect him. The G.I. kept on firing until both were dead." Hammer quotes a U.S. soldier who watched one of his friends hurl a grenade into a group of ten women and children: "You could hear the screams and then the sound and then see the pieces of bodies scatter out, and the whole area just suddenly turned red like somebody had turned on a faucet." Why didn't he stop his buddy? "All you had to do was take one look at his face. I think if I had even said a word to him at all, he would have turned and killed me and not thought a damn thing about it."

Chasing G.I.s. To get the original story, Hersh doggedly pursued a tip from a friend at the Pentagon until he was able to reveal the extent of the massacre—initially through the obscure Dispatch News Service. He logged some 50,000 air miles chasing ex-G.I.s for their versions. In pinpointing the involvement of Charlie Company's officers, including Captain Ernest Medina and Lieut. William Calley Jr., he names the accusing witnesses and scrupulously uses no anonymous quotes. His book bluntly lays out much of the prosecution's case in the impending military trials. He even had access to some reports of the Army's Criminal Investigating Division.*

* Because of the widespread discussion of the case in the press, Lieut. Calley's lawyer has contended that a fair trial is impossible. These books are sure to bolster his argument.

Largely devoid of adjectives, Seymour Hersh's style is that of the dispassionate police reporter, which he once was in Chicago. Hammer more vividly conveys the feelings, the thinking and the language of the troops by freer use of description, rhetorical questions, assertive judgments. A longtime freelance journalist now with the Week in Review section of the *New York Times*, Hammer also adds another dimension—mainly by revealing how dozens of Vietnamese survivors viewed the attack. "I have no idea why the G.I.s come and do this thing," said one despairing grandmother, who had watched much of her family perish. "I am too old. I



BOY SHIELDING COMPANION AT MY LAI
Tragedy in a broader perspective.

just want to die." Most of the survivors had been told by the Viet Cong that Americans would rape and kill them if U.S. forces ever reached their village. Ironically, they had doubted the Viet Cong charge because a number of G.I.s had come through before and handed out candy to the children.

Hammer also provides new details about a second massacre that took place during the attack of March 16. He claims that while Charlie Company was shooting up My Lai, Bravo Company killed nearly 100 civilians in another hamlet about two miles away.

Both writers cite small acts of compassion by some of Charlie Company's G.I.s while the killing went on all around

them. One soldier saw three children peek from some brush where they were hiding, motioned them to lie flat. Several G.I.s shouted to distract a soldier just as he was about to shoot an elderly woman. About the only heroic figure in the mad morning was Lieut. Hugh Thompson, a helicopter pilot who marked spots where he saw wounded children and women so that ground troops could provide medical aid. He was astonished and furious when he saw officers and G.I.s rush over to shoot the victims instead. Thompson landed several times to rescue civilians, mostly children. He even ordered a crewman to fire at his fellow Americans if they tried to interfere.

Wrong Village? How could American troops behave that way? Hammer contends that the attack was partly a mistake; misreading their confusing maps, Charlie Company hit a hamlet occupied only by civilians, instead of another that was near by and known to be held by tough troops of the Viet Cong's 48th Battalion. When the G.I.s met no resistance, they did not stop shooting. Both writers quote members of the company who claim that Captain Medina ordered them to kill everything in the village, and some who declare he took part in the killing himself. Both books quote soldiers who say that Lieut. Calley ordered others to kill and shot freely himself. Most of the other G.I.s claimed they acted under orders.

Hammer, especially, views the tragedy in a broader perspective. He argues, surprisingly, that for most rural Vietnamese the years of warfare have rarely affected daily living. Only the nature of village tax collectors changed with the change of regimes—from the French, years ago, to various Saigon governments. There was not even much difference when the Viet Cong began controlling the village. The big change came, Hammer contends, when massive American forces transformed guerrilla warfare into a conflict in which killing became impersonal—with napalm attacks, free-fire zones and search-and-destroy missions like the one conducted at My Lai.

For U.S. troops it is all different—from any war they have known. With considerable sympathy for the young G.I.s who see companions die in taking a village that is abandoned the next day, Hammer describes the depersonalization of the war. He understands how U.S. troops can come to hate and fear all Vietnamese indiscriminately because they cannot tell friend from foe. (A similar confusion affects the Vietnamese. "All Americans look the same, except some are black and some are white," one My Lai survivor told Hammer.) The fact that in at least one operation "a large number of American soldiers became indiscriminate butchers" is to Hammer simply one more senseless act in a war that has already become meaningless.