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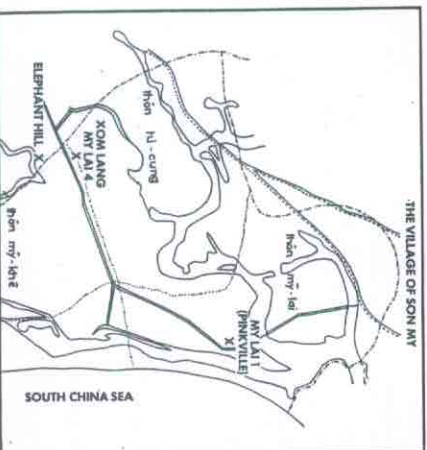
MY LAI: DID AMERICAN TROOPS ATTACK THE WRONG PLACE?



THE FINAL, tragic irony of the massacre of more than 500 Vietnamese civilians on March 16, 1968, may lie in this question: Did American troops that day destroy the wrong place—not the one that was their prime target but another about three miles away?

I am convinced they did. This conclusion becomes inescapable after some days spent at the scene of the massacre: after talking with American soldiers directly involved in the action and with other Americans at staff level; after interviewing at least 50 Vietnamese who once lived in Son My village; after examining the reports of the action; and after studying Vietnamese and U.S. Army maps of the area.

What was attacked and destroyed within a few hours that March morning was not My Lai, the so-called "Pinkville" (from its color on the Army's maps). My Lai, a hamlet of the village of Son My, was the target of Task Force Barker that day, for it was a major base of the Vietcong's 48th Local Force Battalion. But the violence that morning fell on sub-hamlets of Son My about three miles inland from My Lai, sub-hamlets where Ameri-



On March 16, 1968, U.S. troops destroyed "My Lai 4," Vietnamese called it Xom Lang. They knew only one My Lai, three miles east. The VC were there. It was Pinkville. Was it the real target that day?

can soldiers had operated three times previously without running into any trouble.

A village in Vietnam is not what a village is in the United States: it is a large administrative unit with a number of small settlements—hamlets and sub-hamlets. Son My was the name of such a village of 10,000 people living in four hamlets—My

Lai, My Khe, Co Luy and Tu Cung—and 20 sub-hamlets on the South China Sea.

Son My no longer exists. On March 16, 1968, and in succeeding days, all of its hamlets were totally destroyed, its houses burned and bombed, its fields laid waste, some of its people killed and the rest scattered to refugee camps.

Except for the killing, this was the aim of Task Force Barker, a unit in Operation Muscatine, which was a campaign to drive the Vietcong forces from areas that they had long occupied and to remove the civilian population to safer and protected camps.

But the initial thrust of Task Force Barker was, supposedly, to strike at the heart of the Vietcong's base in Son My: My Lai, or Pinkville. And the soldiers who took part in

the operation were told before the day began that they would meet heavy resistance at Pinkville; indeed, they would have if they had gone there first.

But the initial action that morning, during which the massacre took place, centered on a sub-hamlet of Tu Cung called Xom Lang. On American military maps, Xom Lang is labeled My Lai 4. Soon after the Americanization of the war in Vietnam, survey teams began a remapping of Vietnam, using the latest techniques. But when it came to labeling the various settlements, the Americans did not bother to give many hamlets and sub-hamlets their Vietnamese names. Instead, new names were given them, frequently one name with a variety of numbers to indicate different settlements. Thus what was known to the people as My Lai became My Lai 1; Xom Lang became My Lai 4; four other sub-hamlets were also called My Lai. But the people continued to call their communities by their original names, and did not even know of the Americanized names.

What happened during the attack on the morning of March 16 gradually began to emerge as I talked with former residents of Son My at refugee camps, and with American soldiers both in Vietnam and in the United States. For the Americans, there was no question but that they were about to attack a Vietcong complex, would face heavy fighting and would have to depend on surprise and a lightning thrust. They would be attacking,

they were certain, My Lai, or Pinkville.

But questioning the Vietnamese brought out a different picture. Queries about My Lai invariably brought the response that, indeed, the Vietcong had operated extensively from the hamlet and had controlled the area for some years. But questions about a massacre at My Lai brought blank looks and denials. There had been no massacre at My Lai, I was told again and again. By the time the Americans reached My Lai

on the afternoon of March 16, both the Vietcong and the civilian population were long gone, scattered as the sound of guns drew ever closer. The Americans faced almost no opposition in My Lai and destroyed it, as they destroyed everything in Son My.

Had there, then, been any massacre at all? Questions about a place called My Lai 4 brought only incomprehension. No Vietnamese had ever heard of such a place, not even the military. There was only one My Lai. But the question that brought a positive response was: Had there been a massacre anywhere in Son My village that morning? There had. At Xom Lang. The location of Xom Lang coincides with the designation My Lai 4 on the American military maps. Xom Lang is inland, just north of a dirt road leading to the sea; it is directly across the road from the present refugee camp of Son My, where some of the survivors now live and from which some of the overgrown ruins of Xom Lang can be seen.

As the survivors recounted their story of that morning, one thing struck stronger with each retelling. It was the almost universal surprise expressed by the survivors over the suddenness and viciousness of the attack. There had been none of the usual leaflet and loudspeaker warnings.

If the area, as the U.S. Army maintained, was dangerous territory, under strong Vietcong control, why then should the people have been surprised by the attack or its suddenness? (Surprise at the

massacre is a different matter.)

That the Vietcong did, indeed, maintain control over all of Son My village is indisputable. The survivors said as much. But such control varied. It was stronger to the east, along the sea, than it was to the west, inland—and for very good reason. According to former residents of Son My and many others in the province (though no confirmation can be obtained either from the South Vietnamese Government or Army), Xom Lang had long been under the guns of a unit of the South Vietnamese Army's Regional Forces. That unit was stationed atop Elephant Hill, which directly overlooks Xom Lang. As a result, the Vietcong had stayed away from the area during the day, not wishing to provoke action that would destroy the hamlet and their sources of supply. They had entered the settlements near Elephant Hill only at night, to collect taxes, to lecture, and occasionally to draft recruits. If shots had been fired from Xom Lang, retribution would have come sooner than it did.

Further, on three occasions in the months preceding Task Force Barker, American infantry patrols had entered Xom Lang. No shots had been fired at them from the settlement. According to some Americans and to survivors of Xom Lang, during these patrols the people had shared their rice with the Americans, and the Americans had given them cigarettes, chewing gum, candy and rations.

Americans had heard—and they had heard from many Vietnamese, including people who lived in Son My—that the Vietcong were at My Lai in force. The helicopters brought C Company down outside what the American maps called My Lai 4, apparently convinced that it was Pinkville. The sub-hamlet and all that was in it were destroyed.

But what the U.S. maps showed as My Lai 4 was not My Lai, not Pinkville. It was not even a sub-hamlet of My Lai. It was Xom Lang, a sub-hamlet of Tu Cung. My Lai, or Pinkville, with the waiting Vietcong, was about three miles away, to the sea.

Just before Christmas of 1969, this information was given to the American military, both in Vietnam and Washington. About 21 months after the massacre, it evoked surprise and shock—but not disbelief.