

SFChronicle
25 Nov 69

Pinkville Story

Ex-GI Says He Was Ordered to Kill Civilians

By Seymour M. Hersh

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Terre Haute, Ind.

A 22-year-old former GI told in interviews yesterday how he calmly executed, under orders, many South Vietnamese civilians during the U.S. Army attack on the village of Song My in March, 1968.

He estimated that he and his fellow soldiers shot 370 villagers during the operation.

Paul Meadlo of West Terre Haute, Ind., a farm community near the Illinois border, gave an eyewitness account—the first made available thus far—of what happened when a platoon led by Lieutenant William L. Calley Jr. entered a village—known to GIs as Pinkville—on a search-and-destroy mission.

The Army has acknowledged that at least 100 civilians were killed by the men; Vietnamese survivors had told newsmen that the death toll was 567.

Meadlo, who was wounded by an enemy land mine the day after the Pinkville incident, said that the company

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Ex-GI's Chilling

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captain, Ernest Medina, was in the area at the time of the shootings and made no attempt to stop them.

Calley, 26, of Miami, has been accused of the premeditated murder of 109 civilians in the incident; Medina, as commander of the 11th Infantry Brigade unit, is under investigation for his role in the shootings.

Last week the Army said that at least 24 other men are under investigation, including Calley's chief non-commissioned officer, Sergeant David Mitchell, 29, of St. Francisville, La., who is being investigated for assault with intent to commit murder.

STORY

Here is Meadlo's story as given during interviews at his mother's home:

"There was supposed to have been some Viet Cong in Pinkville and we began to make a sweep through it. Once we got there we began gathering up the people . . . started putting them in big mobs. There must have been about 40 or 45 civilians standing in one big circle in the middle of the village . . . Calley told me and a couple of other guys to watch

them."

"You know what I want you to do with them," he said," Meadlo related. He and the others continued to guard the group. About ten minutes later Calley came back. 'Get with it; he said. 'I want them dead.'

SHOOTING

"So we stood about 10 or 15 feet away from them, then he (Calley) started shooting them. Then he told me to start shooting them . . . I started to shoot them, but the other guys (who had been assigned to guard the civilians) wouldn't do it.

"So we (Meadlo and Calley) went ahead and killed them. I used more than a whole clip — actually I used four or five clips (there are 17 M-16 shells in a clip)," Meadlo said. He estimated that he killed at least 15 civilians — or nearly half of those collected in the circle.

Asked what he thought at the time, Meadlo said, "I just thought we were supposed to do it." Later, the young man said that the shooting "did take a load off my conscience for the buddies we'd lost. It was just revenge, that's all it was."

The company had been in the field for 40 days without relief before the Pinkville in-



—AP Wirephoto
PAUL MEADLO

He said he followed orders

cident on March 16, and had lost a number of men to mines. Hostility to the Vietnamese was high among the company, Meadlo said.

The killings continued. "We had about seven or eight civilians gathered in a hootch (dwelling), and I was going to throw a hand grenade in. But someone told us to take them to the ditch (a drainage ditch in the village into which many civilians were reportedly herded and shot).

"Calley was there and said to me, 'Meadlo, we've got another job to do.' So we pushed our seven to eight people in with the big bunch of them. And so I began shooting them all. So did Mitchell Calley . . . (at this point Meadlo could not remember any more men involved). I guess I shot maybe 25 or 20 people in the ditch.

GRENADE

"After the ditch, there were just some people in hootches. I knew there were some people down in one hootch, maybe two or three, so I just threw a hand grenade in."

Meadlo is a tall, clean-cut son of an Indiana coal mine worker, who married his high school sweetheart in suburban Terre Haute, began rearing a family (he has two children) and got drafted. He had been in Vietnam only four months at the time of Pinkville. On the next day, March 17, his foot was blown off, when, while following Calley on an operation, a land mine was triggered.

As Meadlo was waiting to be evacuated, other men in the company had reported, he told Calley that "this was his (Meadlo's) punishment for what he had done the day

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before," and warned according to onlookers, that Calley would have his day of judgment too. Asked about this, Meadlo said he could not remember.

DISABILITY

Meadlo is back at a factory job now in Terre Haute, fighting to keep a full disability payment from the Veterans Administration. The loss of his right foot seems to bother him less than the loss of his self-respect.

"This has made him awful nervous," said his mother, Myrtle Meadlo, 57, of New Goshen, Ind. "He seems like he just can't get over it."

"I sent them a good boy and they made him a murderer."

Why did he do it? "We all were under orders," Meadlo said. "We all thought we were doing the right thing . . . at the time it didn't bother me."

He began having serious doubts that night about what he'd done at Pinkville. He says he still has them. "The kids and the women — they didn't have any right to die."

"In the beginning," Meadlo said, "I just thought we were going to be murdering the Viet Cong." He, like other members of his company,

had attended a meeting the night before, at which time company commander Medina promised a good fire fight.

Calley and his platoon were assigned the key role of entering the Pinkville area first. "When we came in we thought we were being fired upon," Meadlo said, although the company suffered no casualties, apparently because the Viet Cong had fled the area during the night.

'GOOK'

"We came in from this open field, and somebody spotted this one gook out there. He was down in a shelter scared and huddling . . . someone said 'There's a gook over here' and asked what to do with him. Mitchell said, 'Shoot him,' and he did. The gook was standing up and shaking and waving his arms when he got it.

"Then we came onto this hootch, and one door was hard to open."

Meadlo said he crashed through the door and "found an old man in there shaking. I told them I got one and it was Mitchell who told me to shoot him. That was the first man I shot. He was shaking his head, and waving his arms, trying to tell me not to shoot him."

After the carnage, Meadlo said, "I heard that all we were supposed to do was kill the VC. Mitchell said we were just supposed to shoot the men."

But women and children were shot. Meadlo estimated that at least 370 persons were shot to death that day. "I know it was far more than 100 (as the Army now claims). I'm absolutely sure of that. There were bodies all around."

He has some haunting memories, he says. "They didn't put up any fight or anything. The women huddled against their children and took it. They brought their kids real close to their tomachs and hugged them, and put their bodies over them trying to save them. It didn't do much good."

Two things puzzled him. He vigorously disputes the repeated reports of an artillery barrage before the village was approached.

The South Vietnamese government said Saturday that 20 civilians were killed in the Pinkville attack, most of them victims of tactical air raids or an artillery barrage laid down before the U.S. troops moved in.

Meadlo is also curious about the role of Captain

Medina in the incident. "I don't know of the CO (company commander) gave the order to kill or not, but he was right there when it happened. Why didn't he stop it? He and Calley passed each other quite a few times that morning, but didn't say anything. Medina just kept marching around. He could've put a stop to it anytime he wanted."

As for Calley, Meadlo told of an incident a few weeks before Pinkville. "We saw this woman walking across this rice paddy and Calley said 'shoot her.' So we did. When we got there the girl was alive, had this hole in her side. Calley tried to get someone to shoot her again; I don't know if he did."

In addition, Calley and Medina had told the men before Pinkville, Meadlo said, "That if we ever shoot any civilians, we should go ahead and plant a hand grenade on them."

Meadlo isn't sure, but he thinks the feel of death came quickly to the company once it got to Vietnam.

"We were cautious at first, but as soon as the first man was killed, a new feeling came through the company . . . almost as if we all knew there was going to be a lot more killing."