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Story of a War

Editor — Many Americans are justifiably horrified by reports of mass executions of civilians in Vietnam. The most recent incident at Song My, or "Pinkville," in Quang Ngai Province now centers around two servicemen, Lt. William Calley and Staff Sgt. David Mitchell who stand accused of murder. Experience in Vietnam and Quang Ngai Province as journalists has led us to write this letter in hopes of dispelling two possible misapprehensions; that such executions are the fault of men like Calley and Mitchell alone, and that the tragedy of Song My is an isolated atrocity.

We both spent several weeks in Quang Ngai some six months before the incident. We flew daily with the FACs (Forward Air Control). What we saw was a province utterly destroyed. In August 1967 during Operation Benton, the "pacification" camps became so full, that Army units in the field were ordered not to "generate" any more refugees. The Army complied. But search and destroy operations continued. Only now peasants were not warned before an airstrike was called in on their village. They were killed in their villages because there was no room for them in the swamped pacification camps. The usual warnings by helicopter loudspeaker or air-dropped leaflets were stopped. Every civilian on the ground was assumed to be enemy by the pilots by nature of living in Quang Ngai which was largely a free fire zone.

Pilots, servicemen not unlike Calley and Mitchell, continued to carry out their orders. Village after village was destroyed from the air as a matter of de facto policy. Airstrikes on civilians became a matter of routine. It was under these circumstances of official acquiescence to the destruction of the countryside and its people that the massacre of Song My occurred.

Atrocities of this kind were and are the logical consequences of a war directed against an enemy which is indistinguishable from the people.

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