

Washington: The Massacre of Songmy: Who Is to Blame?

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Nov. 25—The massacre of women and children by American soldiers at the South Vietnamese village of Songmy in Quangngai Province raises some fundamental questions. Who was to blame—the men who killed the people in the village, the officers who gave the orders to kill them, or the “system” of war which trapped them all?

Beyond this, there is another question, which Vice President Agnew has raised. Whatever happened in the massacre of Songmy, should it be reported by press, radio and television, since clearly reporting the murder of civilians by American soldiers helps the enemy, divides the people of this country, and damages the ideal of America in the world?

The main facts of this tragedy are not in dispute. Even the President and the Secretary of Defense were discussing them on the telephone this morning and agreeing that they had to deal with the main charge: that members of “Company C, First Battalion, 20th Infantry, did, at Mylai 4 (Songmy village), Quangngai Province, on or about 16 March 1968, with premeditation, murder an unknown number of Oriental human beings, not less than 70, males and females of various ages, whose names are

unknown . . . by means of shooting them with a rifle.”

Some of the men of Company C who did the shooting, and some who refused to shoot, have recently reported to the press and television networks what happened. It is an appalling story of confusion and brutality, of gunning down children and women, of American soldiers who could not do it, and others who felt it was their duty to carry out orders, and some who were so brutalized or so confused or ignorant that they didn't know what they were doing or were being asked to do.

The Official Reports

It is interesting, in the light of this testimony by the men who fired the guns, to look back at the official reports of this “incident” at the village. The text of the American MACV communiqué of March 16, 1968, reads:

“Operation Muscatine: Quangngai Province. Thus far, 128 enemy have been killed in an engagement between elements of the American division's Eleventh Flight Infantry Brigade and an enemy force of unknown size. . . .” A shorter version of this official communiqué said: “In an action today, American divisional forces have killed 128 enemy near Quangngai City.” Nothing was said

about small gunfire against the residents of the city.

The reporters missed the tragedy of Songmy, and no wonder. They were conned by the Pentagon propaganda chiefs in Saigon, but the Americans are a moral and gabby people, and the truth finally came out. After all, there are now over a million Americans back in civilian life who have fought in Vietnam, and some of them have now told what they saw in that tragic village.

What they saw was “the enemy,” and they wiped it out “on orders,” not only the Vietcong but the women and the children, and now that the facts have been told, everybody concerned, including the President and the Secretary of Defense, is appalled and apologetic.

But the village of Songmy or Mylai 4 was what the Pentagon and General Abrams in Saigon called a “free fire zone.” That is to say, it was a village under control of the enemy, and therefore a fair target for the B-52 bombers and the artillery.

M-16's and B-52's

The B-52's hit villages like this all the time in the “free zone,” killing anybody in the area. Ditto the artillery guns. The only difference in the attack of Company C was that they saw the human beings in the village and killed them

with their M-16's anyway, and then told their story on TV.

So there is a question, which is now going to the military courts. Is Paul Meadlo of Terre Haute, Ind., this tragic and limited human being, to blame? Or William L. Calley Jr., the hard-faced lieutenant, who gave the orders? Or the higher officers who watched the carnage and let it go on?

Or was it “the system?” What is the difference between the B-52 bombardier or the long-range artillery officer who wipes out the women and children in the village and the man who fires the M-16 under orders? One sees the human agony before he fires and the other doesn't. In human terms it is a big difference—but the end for the villagers is the same.

The President and the Secretary of Defense now have to deal with this question. The facts are out, and as Vice President Agnew says, they hurt the Government and the country, but what is to be done? Should the facts be suppressed, the soldiers who kill on the ground be hung and the airmen in the B-52's who kill many more be praised?

It would be interesting to hear from the President and the Vice President on these questions, but they are remarkably silent.