

My Lai 4

'...I Want Them Dead'

(This is the fourth of several articles excerpted from "My Lai 4," a book on the atrocity that occurred on March 16, 1968 in a South Vietnamese hamlet. The author, Seymour Hersh, has received a Pulitzer Prize for his distinguished reporting on the My Lai tragedy.)

By Seymour M. Hersh

NOBODY SAW it all. Some, like Roy Wood, of Richmond, Va., didn't even know the extent of the massacre until the next day.

Others, like Charles Sledge of Batesville, Miss., who served that day as Lieutenant William L. Calley's radio-man, saw more than they want to remember.

But they all remember the fear that morning as they climbed into helicopters at LZ Dotti for the assault on Pinkville. They all remember the sure knowledge that they would meet face-to-face for the first time with the enemy.

Calley and his platoon were the first to board the large black Army assault helicopters. They were heavily armed, each man carrying twice the normal load of rifle and machine-gun ammunition. Leading the way was Calley, who had slung an extra belt of M16 rifle bullets over his shoulder.

There were nine helicopters in the first lift-off, enough for the whole first platoon — about 20 men — and Captain Ernest L. Medina and his small headquarters unit of three radio-men, some liaison officers and a medic.

It was sunny and already hot when the first helicopter started its noisy flight to My Lai 4.

The time was 7:22 a.m.; it was logged by a tape recorder at Brigade headquarters. A brief artillery barrage had already begun; the My Lai 4 area was being "prepped" in anticipation of the day's search-and-destroy mission.



MY LAI 4
Devasted

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A FEW HEAVILY armed helicopters were firing thousands of small-caliber bullets into the area by the time Calley and his men landed in a soggy rice paddy 150 meters west of the hamlet. It was harvest season; the fields were thick with growth.

The My Lai 4 assault was the biggest thing going in Americal Division that day.

Brigade headquarters, sure that there would be a major battle, sent along two men from the Army's 31st Public Information Detachment to record the event for history.

Jay Roberts of Arlington, Va., a reporter, and photographer Ronald L. Haeberle of Cleveland, Ohio, arrived with the second wave of helicopters and immediately attached themselves to the third platoon, which was bringing up the rear.

The hamlet itself had a population of about 700 people, living either in flimsy thatch-covered huts—"hootches," as the GIs called them — or in solidly made red-brick homes.

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AS LIEUTENANT Stephen Brooks' second platoon cautiously approached the hamlet, a few Vietnamese began running across a field several hundred meters on the left. They may have been Viet Cong, or they may have been civilians fleeing the artillery shelling or the bombardment from the helicopter gunships.

Varnado Simpson Jr., of Jackson, Miss., saw a man he identified as a Viet Cong soldier running with what seemed to be a weapon. A woman and a small child were running with him. Simpson fired . . . again and again. He killed the woman and the baby. The man got away.

Reporter Roberts saw a squad of GIs jump off a helicopter and began firing at a group of people running on a nearby road. One was a woman with her children. Then he saw them "shoot two guys who popped up from a rice field. They looked like military-age men . . . when certain guys pop up from rice fields, you shoot them."

The first two platoons of Charlie Company, still unfired upon, entered the hamlet. Behind them, still in the rice paddy, were the third platoon and Captain Medina's command post.

Calley and some of his men walked into the plaza area in the southern part of the hamlet. None of the people was running away; they knew that U.S. soldiers would assume that anyone running was a Viet Cong and would shoot to kill. There was no immediate sense of panic.

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THE KILLINGS began without warning. Harry Stanley told the C.I.D. (Criminal Investigating Division), that one young member of Calley's platoon took a civilian into custody and then "pushed the man up to where we were standing and then stabbed the man in the back with his bayonet . . . The man fell to the ground and was gasping for breath." The GI then "killed him with another bayonet thrust or by shooting him with a rifle . . . There was so many people killed that day it is hard for me to recall exactly how some of the people died."

The youth next "turned to where some soldiers were holding another 40- or 50-year-old man in custody." He "picked this man up and threw him down a well. Then (he) pulled the pin from a M26 grenade and threw it in after the man."

Moments later Stanley saw "some old women and some little children — 15 or 20 of them — in a group around a temple where some incense was burning. They were kneeling and crying and praying, and various soldiers . . . walked by and executed these women and children by shooting them in the head."

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THERE WERE FEW physical protests from the people: about 80 of them were taken from their homes and herded together in the plaza area. A few hollered out, "No VC. No VC."

Calley left Paul Meadlo of Terre Haute, Ind., Allen Boyce of Bradley Beach, N.J., and a few others with the responsibility of guarding the group. "You know what I want you to do with them," he told Meadlo. Ten minutes later — about 8:15 a.m. — he returned and asked, "Haven't you got rid of them yet? I want them dead."

Meadlo followed orders: "We stood about 10 to 15 feet away from them and then he (Calley) started shooting them. Then he told me to start shooting them. I started to shoot them. So we went ahead and killed them."

Women were huddled against their children, vainly trying to save them. Some continued to chant, "No VC." Others simply said, "No. No. No."

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