

Questions Need Answering

(This is the 11th 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 M. Hersh, has received a Pulitzer Prize for his distinguished reporting on the My Lai tragedy.)

By Seymour M. Hersh

IN THIS FIRST public discussions of the case involving the fatal shooting of a woman at My Lai, Colonel Oran Henderson did not identify Captain Ernest Medina as the man who was being investigated for the murder, nor did he say that the victim was a woman.

Henderson's version of the shooting of the woman was similar in all aspects to that given the IG by Warrant Officer Thompson and Larry Colburn, with this important exception: "The individual (Medina) thought this (Vietnamese) person was dead, and as he walked away, the Vietnamese raised his arm, and instinctively the individual thought it was a hand grenade. He whipped out and fired with his weapon, and it was a regrettable incident.

But as a soldier, I can accept this. It was purely a result of the survival problem you're faced with. You only have a split second to react."

The on-the-spot interrogations in connection with the shooting of the woman was ended at that point, apparently because of Medina's explanation.

Henderson also gave two accounts of his subsequent interrogation on March 18 of some of the men of Charlie Company at LZ Dotti. He told one reporter: "I talked to about 40 of them and I asked them point-blank if there was



GEN. SAMUEL KOSTER
Actions were suspect

any truth to these reports. This was an informal inquiry. I got a negative from all of them. In all my questioning, there was only one admission that a civilian had been killed . . . (a reference to the Medina shooting.)"

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ACCORDING to another newspaper version, Henderson gathered 30 or 40 men, and approximately the following happened:

"From initial reports he (Henderson) had, some civilians might have been killed, perhaps promiscuously. This over-shadowed to a degree any success they had in the operation. It concerned him as brigade commander. He did not expect his soldiers to kill civilians. He asked whether anyone in the group had observed shooting or killing of civilians. Reportedly there was a general murmur: 'No, no.'

By the afternoon of the 18th, Medina was convinced that the matter was indeed closed. Colonel Barker later suggested that he tell the company not to discuss the incident with anyone else—a step Medina had already taken.

Henderson, meanwhile, concluded his investigation at LZ Dotti. There are again different versions of what took place. Secretary Resor told Congress later that Henderson, during his informal investigation of the incident, "interviewed the Task Force commander and S-3 (Major Calhoun, the executive officer), and the commanders of the two companies which had been in the immediate area. He also received some reports of the unnecessary killing through Vietnamese channels."

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BUT HENDERSON, making no mention of Vietnamese reports, told newsmen simply that the answers he received from the men of Charlie Company and Captain Medina "satisfied me and I accepted them." He then made an oral report of his findings to headquarters of the Americal Division. A few days later, around April 1, Henderson personally talked to General Samuel Koster about My Lai 4.

Within weeks the local Viet Cong units in Quang Ngai Province began distributing leaflets about the incident. Henderson forwarded some of the material—he called it propaganda—to division headquarters. Koster requested a written report on the incident. The colonel complied in late April by simply putting on paper his earlier findings.

Henderson said that sometime in May 1968, he was ordered by General Koster to conduct a formal inquiry.

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USUALLY a division commander will request his Inspector General's office—charged by regulation with responsibility for such investigations—to step in at that point. Henderson in turn assigned Lieutenant Colonel Barker to handle the formal inquiry, although it was his Task Force that was being investigated.

Barker reached the same conclusion as he had, Henderson explained: "Colonel Barker also talked to a number of the men who had been in on this operation, and he also got a negative." Barker's report was deemed satisfactory by Henderson, who signed it and sent it on to headquarters. Whatever Barker did do remains a mystery. Of over 40 members of Charlie Company who were later interviewed, not one could recall the Barker investigation.

Medina himself heard nothing about My Lai 4 after the brief on-the-spot interrogation in March until the Army contacted him in May, 1969, during the Calley investigation.

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ONCE BARKER'S REPORT was handed in, General Koster should have forwarded it to his superiors in Saigon and Washington. A Defense Department directive then in force said clearly that reports of civilian killings — whether substantiated or not — must be forwarded up the line.

Koster's actions throughout the March 16 incident were suspect. The officer, who later became commandant of West Point, is known to have been monitoring radio transmissions in the area that day. Most Vietnam combat veterans agree he should have taken it upon himself to at least fly over the My Lai 4 operation — the most significant for the Americal Division at that time.

Did he call for an immediate Inspector General's investigation after receiving Henderson's oral report on the My Lai 4 incident?

Did he follow the directive about forwarding such reports to his superiors in Saigon?

A three-star general was put in charge of a Pentagon investigation in November, 1969, to determine, among other things, the answers to those questions.

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Tomorrow: The uncovering.
