

# My Lai, 4 Years Later

**COVER-UP**, By Seymour M. Hersh, Random House, \$6.95.

*Reviewed by Robert Sherrill*

Lest we forget, March 16 was the fourth anniversary of the most highly publicized war crime ever committed by U.S. troops, that being the day in 1968 when elements of the Americal Division descended on a cluster of hamlets in the Songmy area of South Vietnam and, without provocation, butchered several hundred unarmed civilians.

The Army still refuses to say how many Vietnamese were killed that day by Company C, First Battalion, 20th Infantry, 11th Brigade when it destroyed the hamlet of My Lai 4. Seymour Hersh says the secret documents from which he developed this book show that at least 347 women, children, and old men died there. This is twice as many as the highest previous estimate.

Their work done at My Lai, the men of Charlie Company sat down among the bodies and ate lunch.

Meanwhile, in another hamlet nearby, this one known as My Khe 4, Bravo Company was getting in some practice. "We were out there having a good time," one of the participating GIs told Hersh. "It was sort of like being in a shooting gallery." Estimates of the dead at My Khe 4 range up to 155. Hersh's account of this episode is the first that has been made public, just as he was the first to report the My Lai 4 murders in 1969.

For the slaughter at My Lai 4, the army (after intense public pressures) eventually brought charges of murder or assault with intent to murder against 12 officers and men; but charges were dismissed against six, and of the others only Lieutenant William Calley was convicted.

For the murders at My Khe 4, nobody has been court-martialed, and apparently nobody ever will be.

So the evidence is all in now, and already becoming vintage history, that even where there are many witnesses, the military's system of justice is incapable of coping with war crimes.

That brings us to the even more important question: Why officers of the highest rank failed to investigate and prosecute the guilty immediately after the offenses occurred, when even the creaking court-martial system might have been expected to produce a reasonable quantum of justice.

"Cover-Up," another of Hersh's awesome reporting achievements, is the best answer we are likely to get. It may be futile to argue about whether the murders at My Lai and My Khe prove that most young soldiers in moments of convulsive emotions can become war criminals; but certainly little doubt can remain, after reading the evidence here, that in moments of stress — as when they feel their careers imperiled — high field officers in the United States Army are quite willing to boil their code of honor down to the old practical barracks motto, "Cover Your Ass."

When Hersh broke the My Lai massacre story on November 13, 1969, and it was followed by numerous articles from a battalion of reporters, the Pentagon realized that the second public reaction, after shock, would be the suspicion that high army officers had known about the crime and had helped cover it up.

To subdue this suspicion, the Pentagon appointed a board of inquiry headed by Lieutenant General William Peers. The Peers Panel was hardly a smashing success. In fact, it added to the crust of secrecy. Hersh shows that General Peers himself helped cover up the killings at My Khe 4. But the panel might have done better if it had not had to contend with so much forgetfulness, obfuscation, deceit, and just plain lying from the 401 witnesses. It was further handicapped because many key records were "missing."

More than 40 volumes of testimony came out of the investigations, and although the Pentagon has refused to release any of the material to the public, someone on the inside purloined a set of the transcripts and slipped them to Hersh and it is from these that much of the book is written.