

# Again, the Suffering of Mylai

By MARTIN TEITEL

PHILADELPHIA—On May 4, I visited Mylai 2, the camp where most of the survivors of the 1968 massacre have been corralled for the past few years. I was accompanied by several Vietnamese-speaking American staff members from the Quaker Rehabilitation Center, which is located in Quangngai City four miles away.

From what I learned that day, and from numerous interviews by the Quaker medical staff with patients and former patients in Mylai 2 and elsewhere on the Batangan Peninsula, it appears that following renewed fighting in that area, the suffering of the people of Mylai is again being misrepresented and misunderstood, just as the original Mylai massacre went unreported because journalists on the scene relied upon official sources for their information.

A report in The New York Times April 26, based on the view from a military helicopter, described "mounds of blackened ashes" as all that remains of the Mylai camps, their burning attributed to a "swift, violent" Vietcong sweep of the area.

What happened, according to all firsthand reports I have gathered, is as follows:

About 5 A.M. on April 15, a group of National Liberation Front soldiers approached Mylai 2 (known locally as Tucung). From a nearby ridge, they called over bullhorns, demanding that the South Vietnamese soldiers guarding the camp throw down their guns and flee—which the South Vietnamese promptly did, in panic, leaving the camp in Vietcong hands. The Vietcong troops tore down the gate to the camp, told the people they were liberated to return to their ancient homesites, and left.

The next day, fully 24 hours after the Vietcong had departed, the South Vietnamese soldiers returned, this time in armored personnel carriers. They

fired on the village, but the only people there were innocent villagers—mostly women, children, and older people. South Vietnamese base camps nearby also shelled the camp. Forty to fifty per cent of the camp was destroyed that day. On the next day, April 17, two A-37 Dragonfly subsonic jets—which carry their own weight in bombs—bombed the village area, killing at least two more people. Nobody knows exactly how many died as a result of that allied action, but many of the villagers have fled the camp and are, I was told, hiding in the woods near their original homesites.

The story of Mylai 2 is unfortunately typical of villages and camps on the Batangan Peninsula. In several instances the Front has burned the Government-built "refugee camps," but with relatively few known civilian casualties and always with an invitation to return to the old homesites and ancestors' graves that are so integral to Vietnamese culture.

The Government camps are, indeed, more like concentration camps than the attractive-sounding "return to village" programs, as they are called by the Government. Conditions in these camps are appalling, and the movement of the people is severely restricted. The camps are crowded, treeless and hot, surrounded by rows and rows of barbed wire and bamboo fences. At night, all adults were forced to sleep on the perimeter of the camp, between the rows of fences, presumably so they could be guarded.

In 1969 a large amphibious assault force—Operation Bold Mariner—in-  
vaded the area, destroyed the dikes which held salt water back from the rice fields, and blew up and plowed under the irrigation wells. Because of the Government's determination to prevent rice from falling into Vietcong hands, the people were forbidden to transport rice from the city, and forbidden to grow rice even where that was possible. The people who had

long prospered on the Batangan Peninsula as a rice paddy culture were forced by the Government to subsist on hoots and banana stalks. The official quoted in The Times as saying that the people were "fat and happy" was apparently saying what he thought he ought to say.

The Front during the last few months has quietly taken control of most of Quangngai Province (strategically located south of Danang, north of Pleiku) except for a few district headquarters and Quangngai City itself. Resistance to the Front has been negligible. This easy takeover would have been impossible but for the absolute failure of American and South Vietnamese "pacification." The "return to village" program has been little more than an effort by the Government to control the lives of the people while placing them in the vicinity of their old homesites, and the people are glad to see an end to the program.

The Front has been busy establishing its own government and schools. It appears that they have deliberately avoided attacking Quangngai City to avoid the massive retaliation that would surely come.

South Vietnamese Army camps continually lob shells into the area; the U. S. 7th Fleet bombards from the sea; and both South Vietnamese and American planes bomb from the air. The Vietcong actions at Mylai, contrary to published reports, are not examples of Vietcong vengeance against successful "return to village" programs. In the eyes of Mylai survivors, they have been given finally a chance to return to the soil of their ancestors, only to bear once again the suffering of allied retaliation. Far from suffering at the hands of the Front, the people of Mylai have been subjected once again to the mindless use of firepower by the U. S. and its allies.

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