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'Pinkville' Gadfly

Ronald Lee Ridenhour

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 28—

One full year before the American public heard the first reports about a massacre at Songmy, Specialist 4 Ronald Lee Ridenhour of Phoenix, Ariz., had completed the fundamental detective work on the case in Vietnam as an individual mission of conscience. Now

Man 23 years old, Mr. Ridenhour is a student at Claremont College in Claremont, Calif. He observes the widening preoccupation with the alleged incident with only partial satisfaction.

It was Mr. Ridenhour's letter to Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird that prompted the Army to reopen the matter and charge First Lieut. William L. Calley Jr. with murder.

But Mr. Ridenhour says that he is convinced that the Army is determined to protect the senior officers who allegedly gave Lieutenant Calley his orders, and that he is still more profoundly troubled by the hostility and delay with which his friends at home, the national press and the "doves" in Congress responded to the evidence he presented long ago.

Participation Confirmed

Specialist Ridenhour heard the first rumors about Songmy, nicknamed Pinkviller, "with some skepticism" in April, 1968, a month after the massacre supposedly took place. At the time, he was a door gunner on an observation helicopter, assigned to the 11th Light Infantry Brigade. He was soon transferred to commando reconnaissance around Chulai. The reassignment, he says, gave him an unusual opportunity to talk with soldiers in many different camps.

By June, he had found four members of C Company, 1st Battalion of the 20th Infantry, 11th Light Infantry Brigade, who, he said, confirmed their participation and offered matching details about the reported killings in the previous March. In November, just before he returned to the United States, he said he met a fifth member of the company, who corroborated the account and

added that the company commander, Capt. Ernest Medina, had warned him against talking about the event.

"The guys I talked to," Mr. Ridenhour said in a telephone interview today, "didn't want to believe that they had taken part in this thing. I really don't know why it didn't bother them more. But that's something that everybody should be asking at this point."

A 1,500-Word Letter

Mr. Ridenhour spent the first months of this year in Phoenix, recovering from malaria and talking with friends about "how to handle this thing." Most of his friends told him to forget it.

But at the end of March, he compiled everything he had heard about Pinkville, naming his sources in a 1,500-word letter. He mailed copies to President Nixon, Secretary Laird, Senators Edward M. Kennedy, George S. McGovern and Eugene J. McCarthy, and "at least 20 other members of Congress."

Only members of the Arizona Congressional delegation responded to his letter, Mr. Ridenhour said, and only Representative Morris K. Udall of Arizona expressed any personal interest.

In April, Mr. Ridenhour was interviewed by an Army investigator, but by the beginning of June, he said, he was convinced that the Army would "whitewash" the case and keep his evidence secret.

From a "Writers' Guide" in the Phoenix Public Library, Mr. Ridenhour picked the name of Michael Cunningham, a "literary agent" in Hartford. The selection was random, he said, and possibly unwise. "But he seemed to have the right geographical location for what I wanted, and his blurb in the book suggested that he might be sympathetic."

Reaction by Media

Mr. Cunningham, who works for a Hartford Insurance company, has not yet documented any efforts to release the account. But Mr. Ridenhour said he believed that his evidence was offered to major newspapers in Boston and New York, three national magazines, two news agencies and at least one of



United Press International

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the three major television networks.

"Everybody Mike Cunningham talked to actively discouraged him," Mr. Ridenhour said. "Supposedly responsible people all said: 'What are you associating yourself with something like this for.'"

Mr. Ridenhour had considered the possibility that Ramparts magazine and the underground press would pursue his account. "But those people have a reputation for being radical and nutty," he commented today. "They're not taken seriously by the public at large. And, let's face it, it's the public at large—the silent majority—that has to face this sort of thing."

The recent news accounts about the Army's investigation that Mr. Ridenhour had prompted were developed

without any help from Mr. Ridenhour himself or from files that he had tried to publicize.

Mr. Ridenhour, who was born April 6, 1946, in Oakland, Calif., and grew up in what he described as middle-class surroundings in Phoenix, said there was no political feeling in his moral outrage about Songmy.

"I still haven't defined my position on the war in general," he said. "I'm not a peacenik—not particularly, anyway, and that certainly hasn't been my motivation in all of this. I was never trying to create a situation where the Administration would have to pull out of Vietnam. But what happened at Pinkville was very definitely wrong. If we believe in all these platitudes about American life, you simply can't let a matter like this pass."