

G.I.'s Near Songmy Doubt Any Massacre

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CHULAI, South Vietnam, Nov. 29—The Americal Division still operates in the region of Songmy, as it did last year. But its riflemen have not read much about the massacre some of their predecessors say they committed there, and they don't want to believe it happened.

To a man, the five young soldiers manning an outpost at the edge of a hill on the perimeter of a clearing known as Landing Zone Bayonet shook their heads and said it could not be that some men of Company C of the First Battalion, 20th Infantry, killed a hundred or two hundred or more men, women and children on March 16, 1968.

"Our officers are very careful about not firing into civilians," said Specialist 4 William J. Minear of Moline, Ill.

"But a lot of VC dress up like villagers," said Pfc. Walter Pierce of Tampa, Fla.

A Year Nearly Over

Both men have finished almost a year in Vietnam and have spent most of it in the field with the 198th Infantry Brigade of the Americal Division, which is the parent unit also of the 20th Infantry.

The men of Company C of the Fourth Battalion, Third Infantry, who are based at Landing Zone San Juan Hill near Ducpho, discussed the case gingerly, as if mentioning it amounted to reproaching every United States infantryman. The first reaction of the young soldiers, many wearing strings of colored beads or peace symbols on chains around their necks, was defiance.

"The only good Dink is a dead Dink," said Specialist 4 James Farmer of Houston, who is 22 years old. He used his

outfit's favorite word—pronounced with little malice—for all Vietnamese, North or South. Others prefer "gook" or "slope."

"I'd have done the same thing," said another, and the thought was echoed through the group.

"We have very bad relations with those people," said Specialist 4 Antonio Victorin, a softspoken Mexican-American from Los Angeles. "But we don't know them at all."

Women Berated Also

The others, white and black, continued berating "the Dinks." The women, they said, can be as bad as the men, and they all work for the Vietcong. Even the South Vietnamese Army cannot be trusted not to fire intentionally on the Americans, one said, and others agreed.

But one soldier brought out a copy of the newspaper Pacific Stars and Stripes and read aloud from an account of the event at Songmy. There was a moment of thoughtful silence and expressions of disbelief. "Our company wouldn't shoot a lot of women and children," a Southern voice said.

"Our company wouldn't but maybe another would," said Specialist 4 Billy Arnold of Aurora, Ill.

The company commander, Captain Jude E. Shea of Bordentown, N.J., said softly:

"The Army isn't a police state. No one has to obey an order to shoot women and children after they have been brought under control, even if the village was VC."

He said he would be committing murder if he issued such an order. But he added: "That's what you say here. But when you're out there and get a pretty good fight, you're not yourself. It's a lot harder to control things then."

"There isn't a company that

would go and shoot beaucoup Dinks if they weren't fired on," said Specialist 4 Robert Hibit of Buffalo.

Others came forward with many reasons to explain how such a thing might have happened. They centered on the nature of a war in which the enemy wears no uniform, hides among the civilian population. A war in which none of the standard rules seem to apply.

They have fired on women, they said, because they made suspicious moves, and some of the Vietcong they have killed have not been old enough to be called adults. But the story as it has been told so far must be incomplete, they said.

"There's gotta be something missing," said Specialist 4 Lawrence Curtis of Buffalo.

"The company must have been hit hard before the action," said Pfc. David Snyder of Stanley, Wis. "You get your buddy next to you blown away, you ain't gonna love the Dinks," he said.

They talked of booby traps and mines and boys who throw hand grenades and old women who know about booby traps and sit placidly while the young American soldier takes the step she knows will kill him and says nothing to stop him. And they talked of "kill zones" where they fire on anything that moves because the people have been warned to get out and those who remain must be the enemy.

The Real Young Men

The long conversation that began in defiant disbelief grew thoughtful and their spirits were disturbed, and they seemed less like battle-hardened soldiers and more like their real selves—perplexed young Americans in an ugly war in which they are certain of nothing and from which they

are looking for a way out. They thought the soldiers at Songmy must have been like themselves.

"We hate shooting people," said Specialist Victorin.

The further one gets from front-line soldiers, the harder are the opinions expressed. The unenthusiastic draftees around division headquarters here are ready to believe the worst and say so. They say this sort of thing happens all the time, but they mean only that they heard many civilians are killed. No one has heard of hundreds of women and children being gunned down.

Career officers are distressed because unlike the draftees they consider the Army their life, and they believe in its righteousness.

The chief chaplain of the division, Lieut. Col. James E. Shaw, said "We should be proud of our country because the Americal Division's rules of engagement are based on Judeo-Christian traditions and are moral, unlike those of the enemy."

The chaplain said there were cases when a soldier should obey God rather than men but the decision in each case was up to each soldier's Christian convictions. He said some of the other chaplains in the division had been asked by soldiers about the moral problems raised by the case but he had not given any thought to preaching sermons about those problems.

A psychiatrist said the war and the military life removed the social controls that restrained man's murderous instincts and encouraged him to give them free rein.

A staff major said, "We are at war with the 10-year-old children. It may not be humanitarian, but that's what it's like."