

Songmy Boy Pantomimes Slaying of Mother

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QUANGNGAI, South Vietnam, Dec. 3—A little boy in a blue jockey cap picked up a toy tommy gun, jammed it low against his side and pointed it menacingly, making the plastic weapon describe an arc before him.

Then he put it down and raised his hands, palms against each other, in supplication. He looked upward, as though pleading with someone much taller than himself.

The boy picked up the gun again and this time, as he wielded it in an arc, he made the appropriate clattering noise to go with it. The three South Vietnamese Senators and others watching shuddered at the realism captured in the 8-year-old's pantomime.

He did not act out the rest, but only because his hearers thought the play had come too close to reality for them to bear. They coaxed the rest of the story out in words.

Sister Was Also Wounded

The man wielding the gun, the boy said, was an American soldier, and the imploring gesture was that of the boy's mother. The burst of fire killed the woman and wounded the boy and his sister.

It happened, the boy said, in the house where he used to live. The house stood in his hamlet, in Songmy village which was destroyed during a sweep by American troops on March 16, 1968.

An undetermined number of men, women, and children died in the incident, allegedly in a manner similar to that described by the boy, who said his name was Cu. This is a nickname for all little boys in

central Vietnam, who learn their names when they get older.

Senator Tran Van Don, head of a Senate defense committee group studying atrocity charges against American soldiers, heard of the boy yesterday from his father, Nguyen Then. He decided to try to hear the boy's story but had him sent for without notice today to forestall coaching.

The boy, like his father, said no stranger had ever asked him about what had happened.

Friend's Toy Gun Used

The gentle, almost playful interrogation took place in the living room of the house of a friend, where Senator Don stayed during his fact-finding visit to this provincial capital. The friend has a young boy with toys, including the tommy gun.

Cu's account came out in the images of a 7-year-old, as he then was, rather than as a narrative. But the Senator found that it seemed to be accurate and that it was consistent with other accounts heard in the last two days. Some of those accounts have put the death toll as high as 567.

When shells started to fall in the vicinity of the hamlet, Cu related, he and his mother and sister darted into the underground bunker that is a standard feature of all houses in Vietnam's contested areas. They climbed back to the ground floor of the brick structure when the shelling ended.

The boy, speaking without eagerness or emotion, said they stood together near the door. One of the family's buffalo had also come inside. When the soldiers burst in the man who did the shooting stood near the animal.

Cu said there were five soldiers, but further questioning disclosed that he says five when he means several. The soldiers did not speak.

The boy said the soldier raised his rifle and his mother

pleaded for life. The soldier fired, Cu said, they all fell and all the soldiers left. He did not say whether the others had fired.

The next thing the boy said he remembered was an older sister's picking him up and carrying him to be treated. His right thigh shows the scar of a bullet's entry and exit.

The boy, who smiled rarely and often drew close to an aide to Senator Don who had brought him, spoke in a deep and harsh voice through a wide gap in his missing front teeth. He chewed avidly on caramels, picked his teeth and occasionally twisted his cap in his hands and bit on its visor.

He lives with his father, who ran away when the shelling started, and his stepmother in Quangngai. The father told Senator Don yesterday that he also found the body of another son, aged 3, under a pile of corpses when he returned to the village after the American troops moved out the same day they arrived and the Vietcong returned.

He said he buried his wife, his son, a grandchild and a daughter-in-law near where their house had stood.