

Captain Medina, in an Interview, Says That a

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Capt. Ernest L. Medina, commander of the Army company involved in the alleged massacre of Vietnamese civilians at Songmy, said yesterday that a massacre "could have taken place."

The captain, in a 90-minute interview with reporters for The New York Times, also said that he would conduct the Songmy operation differently if he had it to do over again.

"It is possible that it could have taken place," the captain said when he was asked about the alleged killings on March 16, 1968. But he repeated his earlier statement: "I did not see any massacre take place, and I did not order any massacre."

When he was asked whether he would use a different procedure if he were directing the operation again, he said:

"If anything has come out in accusations and allegations and everything else, it is just like a football game, a Monday morning quarterback after the football game on Sunday.

Lists Precautionary Steps

"You can sit down and say we should have done this. We should have ran that play. We could have gone for the touch-down, and we could have won the game. And for this reason I can answer your question yes.

"Even if I had the same intelligence reports, that the 48th [Vietcong] Battalion would be in that village, that the civilians would be out of that village at 7 o'clock, gone to mar-

ket, and if I had any reason whatsoever to believe that there would be any women or any child or any innocent noncombatant in that village, that there would be—you know, we would take extra precautionary steps such as leaflet drops in the area, loud-speaker broadcasts at the same time that the combat patrol is coming in, warning the people not to move, not to run, to assemble in a particular area, insuring that each individual soldier knew and understood specifically that they would not engage or shoot a non-armed civilian.

Captain Medina was asked if any of these precautions had been taken before the attack on Songmy.

"I do not know," he replied. "I can't say that they weren't done or that they were done. I knew that these things are periodically done throughout the entire country of South Vietnam."

Shows Signs of Strain

The chunky, dark-haired captain showed signs of tension and strain as he sat on a sofa in a suite of the Capitol Arms Hotel and answered the questions. His responses were controlled and immediate, but it was apparent as he sat back, with tunic undone and legs crossed, that he was a very tired man.

He had waited all yesterday morning to appear before an investigating panel of the House Armed Services Committee, but had not been called. He had been ordered to report to the Pentagon in the early afternoon, only to be told that he was to appear in the committee room this morning.

Captain Medina was commander of Company C of the

First Battalion, 20th Infantry, 11th Infantry Brigade, last year when, as an element of the Task Force Barker, the company was ordered to enter the Songmy village complex. The Army is investigating whether the men of his company killed a number of civilians in the village.

A court-martial has been ordered for one platoon leader in the company, First Lieut. William L. Calley Jr., of Miami, who has been charged with the premeditated murder of 109 civilians.

The Army has also brought charges of assault with intent to murder against S. Sgt. David Mitchell of St. Francisville, La. who was in Lieutenant Calley's platoon. However, no decision has been made as to whether Sergeant Mitchell will be court-martialed.

In addition, the Army has said it is interviewing scores of other people, both soldiers and former servicemen, to determine whether a massacre took place, and it has said that 24 other people are being investigated in connection with the incident.

Captain Medina has not been charged with any crime, and the army has refused to say whether he is one of those under investigation.

Present in the hotel room with Captain Medina during the interview yesterday were the captain's military attorney, Capt. Edwin J. Richards; Gerald Alch, an associate of F. Lee Bailey, the captain's civilian attorney, and Wayne Smith, who said he was acting as public relations assistant to the captain and to Mr. Bailey.

Mr. Alch advised the captain in a half dozen instances not to answer questions put to

him. In most cases, the questions involved the captain's views on present or past behavior by other members of Company C.

At one point, the captain was asked why he had refused to speak with the press before a ruling was issued Nov. 25 by Lieut. Col. Reid W. Kennedy, a military judge, that potential witnesses not submit to interviews.

"Well, the order had been issued," he said, "and I was in the military."

He was asked who had ordered him not to talk to the press.

"That is in an area which I can't say anything. I was under restraint insofar as not being able to discuss anything," Captain Medina replied.

The captain indicated that he had been able to grant the interview because of a "clarification" that Captain Richards had obtained from Colonel Kennedy, allowing him to speak to the press.

Tells of Songmy Operation

The captain said he had not been told he would be called as a witness at the court-martial of Lieutenant Calley.

In the interview, the captain recapitulated and added to his earlier accounts of what happened when Company C was put down on the outskirts of Songmy by helicopters.

He said he assembled the whole company in "just one large group" the day before and, as his troops sat in front of him, briefed them on the mission.

Among other things, he said, "I told them that the intelligence reports indicated that the 48th VC Battalion was in the village and the intelligence reports also indicated that

Massacre of Civilians 'Could Have Taken Place' at Songmy

there would be no women and children in the village, that they would be gone to market." When he landed, he said, "my instant impression was that I didn't hear the familiar crackle of rifle bullets zinging over my head . . . I reported the LZ [landing zone] is cold. Immediately thereafter the helicopter pilot broke in and reported, 'Negative, negative, negative, LZ is hot. You are receiving small arms fire.'"

Suspects Taken Prisoner

While the captain said that he did not personally hear or see any fire coming from the village, he reported that his carbines and two U.S. M-1 rifles" and took prisoner a number of Vietcong suspects. The captain said he remained outside the village with his command group. He said he was linked to the three platoons by radio but could not see them from the command post.

He said he went into the village only once, in order to meet troops on the other side of the village. When he went through, he recalled, "I wasn't looking for anything in particular. They [his men] were burning the village. They were shooting the livestock and closing the wells."

The captain was asked whether he had seen any bodies in the part of the village that he walked through, which he described as the central portion.

"Not that I remember," he replied. He said he recalled seeing and reporting, the bodies of 20 to 28 dead civilians, who he believed had been the victims of "artillery fire, fire from the gunship or small arms fire."

"I did not ask how the peo-

ple had been killed," he said, "and I did not go over and inspect the individual bodies."

At one point, he said, "I got a radio transmission from higher command stating that there was a possibility that there were civilians in the village and that some of them might have been shot and I was to put out the transmission to all three platoons to try to make sure that none of our people shot any civilians."

After the action was over, Captain Medina said, he asked his three platoon leaders if any civilians had been killed. "I received negative indications from all platoon leaders," he recalled.

He said he had also received "a total report from all the platoon leaders, and the total amount of VC that had been

killed was turned in as 128."

The captain conceded that after the operation he urged Sgt. Michael A. Bernhardt, then a private, not to write his Congressman about the operation at Songmy.

"I called him over," he said, "and I told Bernhardt that I understood that he was going to write his Congressman, and I told him he could write his Congressman if he wanted to. I recommended that he didn't write his Congressman because it would probably just create a big uproar.

"It was something that was being investigated and, since it was being investigated, I recommended that he wait until the investigation was complete."

The captain was asked what he thought Sergeant Bernhardt

was going to write his Congressman about. "I don't know," he said. "I didn't ask him."

He said he had also "made reference to the other members of the company that they should refrain from discussing it amongst themselves or with anybody else until it could properly be investigated."

Captain Medina recalled that soon after the operation he was told he was under investigation for shooting a woman. He said he shot the woman, who he said was about five feet from him, when she made a suspicious movement.

The captain said he had never been informed about the outcome of that investigation. Asked if he had inquired about the outcome, he said he had not.

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