

# Books of The Times

## 'Anything That's Dead and Isn't White Is a VC'

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

**MY LAI 4. A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath.** By Seymour M. Hersh. 210 pages. Random House. \$5.95.

**ONE MORNING IN THE WAR. The Tragedy of My Lai.** By Richard Hammer. 207 pages. Coward, McCann. \$5.95.

THE responses to whatever exactly it was that happened on the morning of March 16, 1968, in the sub-hamlet of My Lai 4 in the village of Songmy, South Vietnam, have now had time to pass and events have begun to light. For Wood, a sergeant in the 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry, was the first to be killed in the attack. The next day, a platoon of the 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry, found a body in a drainage ditch. The body was a young girl, and it was the first of many.

Mr. Hersh went to My Lai 4 on March 18, 1968, and he was the first of a number of reporters to go there. William C. Wilson, then commander of United States Forces in Vietnam, sent a message to the press, in which he mentioned My Lai 4 as a "massacre" and "enemy" as "anybody." But Ronald L. Ridenhour, not present at My Lai but privy to stories that something terrible had happened, made his own mind to somehow bring the rumors of a massacre to public attention.

A year later, after Ridenhour had succeeded and word was out that perhaps between 400 and 500 Vietnamese civilians had been slain that morning, President Nixon assured the nation that massacre was not part of American policy in Vietnam. Certain readers of *Life* magazine wrote in to say that they found the published pictorial evidence of the slaughter "obscene" because some of the mutilated bodies were unclothed. But Seymour M. Hersh, a freelance journalist, and Richard Hammer, a staff member of *The New York Times News of the Week in Review* section, decided to write the books in which the foregoing information is contained.

Mr. Hersh, going on the assumption that his audience was not immune to moral shock, thought to let the facts speak more or less for themselves. After briefly sketching in the background of Charlie Company, and characterizing the company commander, Capt. Ernest Medina, and one of its platoon leaders, Lieut. William L. Calley Jr., as ambitious hard nosed officers who saw their fortunes rising with the daily body count, Mr. Hersh launched into an eyewitness reconstruction of the event and its aftermath.

He told how Charlie Company encountered no resistance at My Lai, yet how the blood ran. He told how old men were

tortured and women raped and dying children thrown into a drainage ditch that made one think of Babi Yar and Treblinka. He told how chips of bone went whistling off the people and cattle that were used for target practice while the G.I.'s laughed. He told of the aftermath: how the Vietcong crawled in and buried the dead and printed leaflets that made Americans and South Vietnamese who weren't there believe that talk of massacre was so much propaganda. How Ronald Ridenhour nagged Washington into an investigation. How the story slowly dawned on an unbelieving American public, and how many turned against the informers.

Seymour Hersh didn't try to make us understand. He just told it, and let it go at that. Richard Hammer—knowing perhaps that Hersh, as the reporter who first broke the story to the American press, had the jump on him—tried to put the incident in perspective and thereby ended up writing the better book.

Mr. Hammer told the whole story of the war. He tried to make his readers see the events leading up to the attack from both the American and Vietnamese points of view. He took the trouble to explain the gradual depersonalization of the Vietnamese in American soldiers' eyes—to make us understand how even women and children begin to seem hated and dangerous. He even had a theory that the wrong village was attacked because of the inaccuracy of Army maps—and saw in that yet another example of American disrespect for things Vietnamese.

Mr. Hammer did not attempt to blame individuals. He saw the massacre as a tragedy, just as his subtitle hinted. The tragedy he saw lay in America's presence in Vietnam. Without absolving "the Vietcong, the North Vietnamese Army and others for war crimes," he concluded that "what happened in extremis at Songmy is only symbolic of what has happened all over Vietnam since the massive enlargement of the American commitment. . . . For the war has led to the brutalization of young men who become soldiers, who can hail the massacre as a victory. It has led to the place where the majority of Americans can look at such horror and shrug and say, 'It's only war,' and to condemn not those who committed the atrocity, those who were responsible for it, but those who revealed it."

Both Seymour Hersh and Richard Hammer wrote solid journalistic reports, morally sensitive yet calm in tenor. Unfortunately, what they described is beyond the uses of art and journalism. To read these books is to invite stomach cramps and helpless rage. And it becomes impossible to see the words on the page.