

## My Lai 4

# '... Just Killing, Killing, Killing'

(This is the first of several articles excerpted from "My Lai 4," a book on the atrocity that occurred on March 16, 1968, in a South Vietnamese hamlet. The author, Seymour Hersh, has received a Pulitzer Prize, for his reporting on the My Lai tragedy.)

By Seymour M. Hersh

THIS BOOK is based primarily on interviews with the men of Charlie Company who participated in the attack on My Lai 4 on March 16, 1968.

These interviews inevitably produced a maze of conflicting stories: many of the men were unable to agree on details, especially when asked to discuss an event that took place nearly two years earlier and one in which they may have committed pre-meditated murder.

I tried to balance that disadvantage three ways:

First, I interviewed as many members of the company as possible to find those facts and incidents that were generally agreed upon. More than 50 interviews were conducted with ex-GIs between November, 1969, and February, 1970. Many Charlie Company members were personally interviewed two or more times.

Second, I was provided access to a limited number of transcripts of interrogations by key witnesses that were



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conducted by the Criminal Investigating Division (CID) and the office of Inspector General, the two Army agencies which did the bulk of the investigation into My Lai 4.

Third, simply trying to insure that my statements were accurately reported was not enough, and I decided to censor some statements either because they were obviously contradictory or could not be verified by other witnesses.

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IT MUST HAVE BEEN a beautiful area — Quang Ngai Province before the war. Situated on the northeast coast of South Vietnam, its green rice paddies and fertile farmlands stretch in a plain from the rolling foothills of the Ammanese Mountains east to the smooth white sand beaches of the South China Sea.

But the mountains also provided a perfect haven for revolutionaries. The people of Quang Ngai have a history of rebellion dating back to the Sixteenth Century; and it was there that Vietminh troops led revolts against the French in the 1930s and after World War II; it was there that the Viet Cong fought the Saigon government in the 1950s and 1960s.

It was also considered the toughest Viet Cong stronghold in the country.

Quang Ngai, not unnaturally, became the target for the first American major combat operation of the Vietnam war. The mission conducted by the U.S. Marines in 1965, was called "Operation Starlight" and more than 700 Viet Cong were reported killed.

The Marines were given the job of freeing Quang Ngai and its people from Communist control. In order to effect this, a new concept of pacification was devised.

As explained by a senior officer in early 1966: "We've been told by our superiors that in many areas there isn't any chance of pacifying the people, so instead we've got to sanitize our region — kill the Viet Cong and move the civilians out. We are not going to be able to make the people loyal to our side. So we are going to sterilize the area until we can win it back."

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BY THIS TIME much of Quang Ngai — as well as many other provinces — had been declared a "free fire zone," in which all civilians were automatically suspected of being Viet Cong or Viet Cong sympathizers. The U.S. forces did not need to get approval from Saigon or local officials before staging bombing missions and artillery attacks. Tens of thousands of tons of bombs, rockets, napalm and cannon fire were poured into the free-fire zones periodically during 1965, '66, '67.

Yet the Viet Cong continued their hold on Quang Ngai.

In the spring of 1967 a new task force was assembled under command of the Marines and ordered anew to sanitize the Communists in the area.

In four months of military operations, Task Force Oregon claimed a kill of 3300 Viet Cong, and said it had captured 800 weapons and arrested 5000 suspects in the area.

By then, as a side effect of the two years of U.S. operations in Quang Ngai, at least 138,000 civilians had been made homeless and brought into refugee camps, and about 70 per cent of the dwellings in the province had been destroyed by bombs, shells or fire.

In September combat operations in Quang Ngai were handed over to a newly formed unit known as the Americal Division, which was composed of three brigades — the 196th, which had served as part of Task Force Oregon, and two new fighting units, the 11th Brigade from Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, and the 198th Brigade from Fort Hood, Texas.

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THERE WERE MANY rag-tag aspects to the new division. It was not an elite fighting force, and thus did not warrant having the helicopters and armored equipment of an airborne division or calvary brigade.

The majority of troops in the front-line combat units were draftees. They knew little about Vietnam and usually cared less.

The average GI's ignorance of Vietnamese customs was appalling, but even more appalling was the fact that the Army's efforts to give the men some kind of understanding of what they would be faced with were minimal.

Vietnamese were provided with new names when they entered a U.S. military hospital so the staff would have less trouble identifying them. Thus a civilian who lost an eye was called, for example, "Bubbles," "Ohio," or "Cyclops."

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YOUNG GIs soon learned that there were Army names for Vietnamese too: gook, dink and slope. One battalion commander in Vietnam named his helicopter the "Gookmobile."

One brigade commander ran a contest to celebrate his unit's 10,000th enemy kill. The winning GI received a week's pass to stay in the colonel's luxurious — by Vietnam standards — personal quarters. Many battalions staged contests among their rifle companies for the highest score in enemy kills, with the winning unit getting additional time for passes.

Not every officer liked what he was doing. "I am sickened by the numbers of people we have killed and kept killing all year," one troop commander, after completing a tour of Vietnam in 1968, told a reporter. "This is not my concept of a soldier's career, just killing, killing, killing." But he did it nonetheless.

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Tomorrow: Medina, Calley and Charlie Company