

My Lai 4

Medina's Stake In Vietnam War

(This is the second 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

CHARLIE COMPANY, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry, came to Vietnam in December, 1967. Its men, like GIs in all combat units, considered themselves to be part of the best and toughest outfit in the newly formed 11th Brigade, which since December, 1966, had been readying itself for Vietnam at the Schofield Barracks, Hawaii.

Captain Ernest L. Medina, the 33-year-old former enlistee man who was the company's commanding officer, was proud of his men.

Medina's hustle had earned him the nickname "Mad Dog," a term that many of his company used when complaining about the captain's love of marching and field duty.



CAPTAIN MEDINA
'Fair but tough'

Originally the nickname was meant as a compliment; Medina's men were wiping out a mock Communist aggressor unit during exercises in Hawaii when one officer broke in on the radio to proclaim, as he thought a Viet Cong might, "Hey, Mad Dog Medina."

After that Medina would walk into the officers' club and people would say, "Hey, Mad Dog, how are you?" Medina took it as a joke.

The captain was enthusiastic about killing Viet Cong, even in mock battles. He was anxious to go to Vietnam to help win a war he believed in. But there was a personal reason, too — his career. A

Mexican-American, he was born into poverty at Springer, N.M., in 1936.

When he was 16 he lied about his age to enlist in the National Guard, and then the Army; from the very first he wanted to make the military a career. In 1964, after eight years in the infantry, he became an officer, graduating with honors from the Officers' Candidate School at Fort Benning, Ga., and staying on for two years to serve as an instructor. In 1966 he was promoted to captain and made a company commander. By all accounts he was an excellent officer.

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MEDINA'S PROMOTION to captain had been quick and easy, but rising to major would be more difficult because, as he said, he "didn't have enough education." Vietnam offered him his best chance, and he wanted to make the most of it.

Most of the men in Charlie Company had volunteered for the draft; only a few had gone to college for even one year. Nearly half were black, with a few Mexican-Americans. Most were 18 to 22 years old.

There was a decided advantage for Medina in not having a group of college graduates under his command: Charlie Company understood it was to take orders, not question them.

In Hawaii, Medina had been fair but tough. Charlie Company respected and admired its captain.

Nobody in the unit admired Medina as much as William L. Calley Jr., then a 24-year-old second lieutenant from Miami who was serving as a platoon leader. Calley and Medina had this in common: they both wanted to make the military a career. Calley had flunked out of Palm Beach Junior College in 1963 after earning four F's. By his own admission, he came from an emotionally cold family, one that had never been close.

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AFTER LEAVING COLLEGE, Calley worked as a bellhop and then briefly as a restaurant dishwasher before becoming a switchman for the then strike-bound East Coast Railway.

He made the local newspapers in 1964 when police in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., arrested him for allowing a 47-car freight train to block traffic for nearly 30 minutes during rush hour at several downtown intersections. He was later exonerated.

Facing a bleak future, Calley saved some money, bought a car, and in 1965 left Florida, heading west. His friends didn't hear from him again for nearly three years; some thought he was dead. He wandered around for a year before enlisting in the Army in July, 1966, while in Albuquerque, N.M. He quickly found roots as an enlisted man, and was pleased when the Army decided he would make a good officer.

If there was any reason for what began to happen to Charlie Company, it was not too much combat — but too little. The company had conducted some search-and-destroy missions around 11th Brigade headquarters at Duc Pho shortly after arriving in Vietnam, with no real enemy contact.

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ITS EXPECTATIONS rose when the brigade, with more units arriving every day from Hawaii, took over responsibility from the South Korean Marines for monitoring an area 40 miles to the north. The 150-square-mile area included parts of the embattled Quang Ngai Province east of Highway One to the South China Sea coast.

To continue search-and-destroy operations in the zone, the brigade set up Task Force Barker, a tiny ad hoc unit composed of one company from each of the three battalions in the brigade. The parent unit of this force, headed by and named after Lieutenant Colonel Frank A. Barker Jr., was the Americal Division operating out of Chu Lai to the south.

Medina's company was assigned to the Task Force, and relocated on January 26, 1968, at Landing Zone Dotti. One of the Task Force's main objectives would be keeping pressure on an area a few miles northeast of Quang Ngai known as "Pinkville," the name deriving from the fact that its higher population density caused it to appear in red on Army maps. The operation was given the code name "Muscatine."

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"WE WERE INFORMED that the Viet Cong had been in the area for 20 to 25 years," Medina said. "The inhabitants in the outlying villages had all been moved at one time or another. The area was a permanent free-fire zone." The captain maintained that he routinely explained to his troops that if they received fire from a hamlet, they could return it, taking care not to fire at unarmed citizens who posed no seeming threat.

His troops recalled other advice. Gary Garfalo said that "Medina used to always tell us about the grenade bit. If you shoot a gook and check him out and find he's got an ID (identification card indicating he is not a Viet Cong) — plant a grenade on him."

But still nothing happened.

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Tomorrow: Charlie company suffers a bad day.
