

My Lai 4

Human Ears Tied to Antenna

(This is the third of several articles excerpted from 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

OCCASIONALLY Charlie Company, still new to Vietnam, was stunned by the evidence of the almost barbarous attitude veterans displayed toward the Vietnamese.

Gregory Olsen, of Portland, Ore., remembered that soon after they were in Vietnam they saw an American troop carrier drive by with "about 20 human ears tied to the antenna. It was kind of hard to believe."

Impatient for action, Charlie Company began to make a little of its own. Daniel Zeigler of Santa Barbara, Calif. said that at first there was very little manhandling of civilian suspects: "It started off easy, then it got rough."

Both Captain Ernest L. Medina and Lieutenant William



LIEUT. WILLIAM CALLEY
Prisoners beaten

L. Calley Jr. began trying to convince the company that most of the suspects in the area were Viet Cong. "Once Grzesik (a fellow GI) gave a prisoner something to eat, and they got mad." Zeigler never understood why Medina or Calley would beat a prisoner to try to get information in a language they couldn't understand anyway.

After many weeks of no combat, the company began to systematically beat its prisoners.

Charlie Company got its first ear early in January near Duc Pho. While on patrol, a GI had seen four Viet Cong in a valley below. Medi-

na called in artillery, and sent a squad in after the bombardment to search for the dead.

Harry Stanley of Gulfport, Miss. saw them come back "with an ear. Medina was happy; it was his first kill."

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CHARLIE COMPANY had an isolated life, staying either in the field or at one of the artillery fire bases. The men saw only whores, beggars and thieves.

During these weeks, Medina said, the company was learning that "this was a dangerous area" — mines and booby traps, often placed by women and children, were everywhere.

This was a prevalent belief among GI's in Vietnam, including Charlie Company, yet not one member of Charlie Company was ever able to cite a specific act of terror by either a woman or a child.

The men had been living in the field for nearly three weeks without relief; they were tired, confused, and morale was low.

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ON FEBRUARY 25 Charlie Company suffered its worst day. Six men were killed and 12 seriously wounded when it ran into a well-laid mine field north of Pinkville. Medina earned the Silver Star, the Army's third highest medal for valor, for his role in rescuing the wounded.

About this time at least two members of Charlie Company had begun to assault and abuse Vietnamese women. Some of the younger members of the company were troubled by this, but no punishment was ever meted out. On one occasion a few GIs accosted a woman working in a rice field in a friendly area. According to Michael Bernhardt of Franklin Square, N.Y., they took away her baby and then "they raped her and killed her . . . I guess they killed her baby, too."

On March 14, two days before the mission to My Lai 4, a small squad from the third platoon ran into a booby trap. Gary Garfalo of Stockton, Calif., watched Sergeant George Cox lead a patrol into a cluster of trees. Suddenly he heard Cox call over the radio that he'd found something. "Next thing — kaBOOM — big mushroom cloud, everybody hits the ground. We went over there — this big ruin of a place — and found everybody tore up."

Moments after leaving the hamlet, a GI shouted, "Something's moving in the bushes." Lieutenant Jeffrey La Crosse of the third platoon ordered them to find out what it was. Someone yelled, "He's got a weapon. He's got a weapon," and the squad opened up with M16 rifle fire. The suspect fell.

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WILLIAM DOHEERTY saw what happened next: "I ran there. I was the first to get there. I kicked her, and then I saw she was a woman, so I stopped. But some of the other guys kept on." Michael Terry of Orem, Utah, yelled in protest as he came up to the group. The woman was still alive. Someone suggested calling in a helicopter to evacuate her to a hospital. "She don't need no medivac," one GI suddenly exclaimed, and shot her in the chest.

The murder and the theft of the radio and ring angered the residents of the hamlet, a secure area near LZ Dotti. They called in the Vietnamese national police. No charges were filed.

Medina later had a much different version of what had happened. He told a reporter that the booby trap was detonated by remote control and that his company found a 15-year-old girl hidden nearby with her hand still on the trigger. His men then killed her, Medina said.

On the day after the mine incident Charlie Company held a brief funeral service for Sergeant George Cox. By all accounts, it was a moving occasion. "The men were hurt real bad, real bad," Henry Pedrick of Alameda, Calif. said.

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AFTER THE CHAPLAIN'S service Medina got up to speak. He began to tell his men about the next day's mission. As Medina described it later, he and Colonel Barker had begun planning the mission early in the day. At one point they flew from LZ Dotti in a helicopter for a peek at My Lai.

Barker told Medina that elements of the 48th Viet Cong Battalion, one of the enemy's best units, with a strength of 250 to 280 men, was in My Lai 4.

Charlie Company's mission was to destroy the 48th Battalion as well as My Lai 4.

Medina's objective in the pep talk was to "fire them up to get them ready to go in there. I did not give any instructions as to what to do with women and children in the village."

There were sharply conflicting opinions among the company over what Medina did order.

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Tomorrow: The events at My Lai 4.