

My Lai 4

Medina Said, 'Kill Every One'

(This is the fifth 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 distinguished reporting on the My Lai tragedy.)

By Seymour M. Hersh

BY THIS TIME (about 8:15 a.m.), there was shooting everywhere.

Dennis I. Conti, a GI from Providence, R.I., later explained to C.I.D. investigators what he thought had happened. "We were all psyched up, and as a result, when we got there the shooting started, almost as a chain reaction. Everybody was just firing. After they got in the village, I guess you could say that the men were out of control."

Lieutenant Stephen Brooks and his men in the second platoon to the north had begun to systematically ransack the hamlet and slaughter the people, livestock and destroy the crops.

Men poured rifle and machinegun fire into huts without knowing — or seemingly caring — who was inside.

Captain Ernest L. Medina — as any combat officer would do during his unit's first major engagement — decided to move his CP (Command Post) from the rice paddy.

John Paul of Cherry Hills, N.J., one of Medina's radiomen, figured that the time was about 8:15 a.m. Another radioman remembered that "Medina was right behind us" as his platoon moved inside the hamlet.



My Lai's dead

There are serious contradictions about what happened next. Medina later said that he did not enter the hamlet proper until well after 10 a.m. and did not see anyone kill a civilian. John Paul didn't think that Medina ever entered the hamlet.

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BUT HERBERT CARTER of Palo Alto, Calif., told the C.I.D. that Medina did much of the shooting of civilians as he moved into My Lai 4.

Carter testified that soon after the third platoon moved in, a woman was sighted. Somebody knocked her down, and then, Carter said, "Medina shot her with his M16 rifle. I was 50 or 60 feet away and saw this. There was no reason to shoot this girl."

The men continued on, making sure no one was escaping. "We came to where the soldiers had collected 15 or more Vietnamese men, women and children in a group.

"Medina said, 'Kill every one. Leave no one standing.'"

A machine gunner began firing into the group. Moments later one of Medina's radio operators slowly "passed among them and finished them off."

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REPORTER Jay Roberts and Photographer Ronald L. Haerberle also moved in just behind the third platoon. Haerberle watched a group of 10 to 15 GIs methodically pump bullets into a cow until it keeled over. A woman then poked her head out from behind some brush; she may have been hiding in a bunker. The GIs turned their fire from the cow to the woman.

Haerberle noticed a man and two small children walking toward a group of GIs: "They just kept walking toward us . . . you could hear the little girl saying, 'No, no . . .'" All of a sudden the GIs opened up and cut them down."

As Haerberle and Roberts walked further into the hamlet, Medina came up to them. Eighty-five Viet Cong had been killed in action thus far, the captain told them, and 20 suspects had been captured. Roberts carefully jotted down the captain's comment in his notepad.

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THE COMPANY'S other Vietnamese interpreter, Sergeant Duong Minh, saw Medina for the first time about then. Minh had arrived on a later helicopter assault, along with Lieutenant Dennis H. Johnson, Charlie Company's intelligence officer. When he saw the bodies of civilians, he asked Medina what happened. Medina, obviously angry at Minh for asking the question, stalked away.

Now it was nearly 9 o'clock and all of Charlie Company was in My Lai 4. Most families were being shot inside their homes, or just outside the doorways. Those who had tried to flee were crammed by GIs into the many bunkers built throughout the hamlet for protection — once the bunkers became filled, hand grenades were lobbed in.

Not far away, invisible in the brush and trees, the second and third platoons were continuing their search-and-destroy operations in the northern half of My Lai 4.

Ron Grzesik and his fire team had completed a swing through the hamlet and were getting ready to turn around and walk back to see what was going on. And just south of the plaza, Michael Bernhardt had attached himself to Medina and his command post. Shots were still being fired, the helicopters were still whirring overhead, and the enemy was still nowhere in sight.

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ONE OF THE helicopters was piloted by Chief Warrant Officer Hugh C. Thompson of Decatur, Ga. He and his two-man crew, in a small observation helicopter from the 123rd Aviation Battalion, had arrived at the area around 9 a.m. and immediately reported what appeared to be a Viet Cong soldier armed with a weapon.

Although his mission was simply reconnaissance, Thompson directed his men to fire at and attempt to kill the Viet Cong as he wheeled the helicopter after him. They missed.

Thompson flew back to My Lai 4, and it was then, as he told the Army Inspector General's office in June, 1969, that he began seeing wounded and dead Vietnamese civilians all over the hamlet, with no sign of an enemy force.

The pilot thought that the best thing he could do would be to mark the location of wounded civilians with smoke so that the GIs on the ground could move over and begin treating some of them.

"The first one that I marked was a girl that was wounded," Thompson testified, "and they came over and walked up to her, and put their weapon on automatic and let her have it." The man who did the shooting was a captain, Thompson said. Later he identified the officer as Medina.

Hugh Thompson's nightmare had only begun.

Tomorrow: What Thompson saw.

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