

My Lai 4

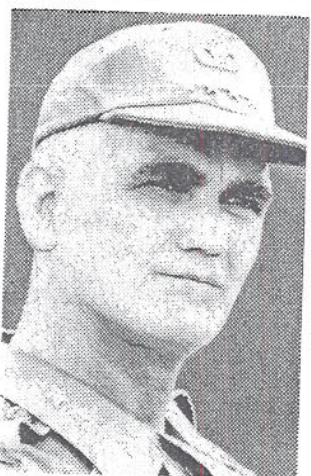
Army Version Of Massacre

(This is the eighth 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 M. Hersh, has received a Pulitzer Prize for his distinguished reporting on the My Lai tragedy.)

By Seymour M. Hersh

SPECIALIST 5 Jay Roberts carried his reporter's notepad and a pencil with him when he took the helicopter from 11th Brigade headquarters at Duc Pho early that morning. But whatever he wrote could not be used. The Army had decided the night before that the Viet Cong were in My Lai 4; nothing that happened in the next 24 hours officially changed that view.

A Saigon report of Charlie Company's battle sent to the Pentagon the night of March 16 noted that initial "contact with the enemy force" occurred at 7:50 a.m., about



GEN. WESTMORELAND
'Congratulations'

the time Lieutenant Calley and his platoon had secured the landing zone and shot an unarmed old man.

The military message added that a second combat company had been airlifted into the area by 9:10 a.m. and that both units reported "sporadic contact" with the enemy as they moved toward a rendezvous. The companies had support from "Army artillery and helicopter gunships."

Roberts — who had been out of My Lai 4 since 11 a.m.—learned from Colonel Barker in the early afternoon that the final body

count for Task Force Barker that day was 128, with three enemy weapons captured. He had no idea how, or why, that total was reached.

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THERE WAS great excitement at LZ Dotti: the 128 body count was the largest for the Task Force since it had begun operations 40 days earlier. The correspondent knew most of the dead were civilians; he personally had seen at least 25 persons killed and 50 bodies: "I was pretty upset. And then I had to write a story about it. How do you write a story when you have 128 bodies and only three captured weapons?"

He thought briefly of reporting what had happened, but his ambition vanished when he walked into the Tactical Operations Center at LZ Dotti. He was promptly kicked out of the area by Major Charles Calhoun, the Task Force's operations officer who was monitoring the radios.

Colonel Barker also returned to his headquarters at LZ Dotti early in the afternoon, and Roberts sought him out. Roberts asked him "about the high body count and the low number of weapons discovered. He just kind of overlooked it and said something to the effect that I could make a good story without that fact."

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ROBERTS WROTE the story based on the official statistics and gave it to his superior officer. "I just figured it'd look real bad, and it wasn't my problem."

The brigade press officer, Second Lieutenant Arthur Dunn of Forest Park, Illinois, also thought the story looked bad.

Dunn particularly noticed the claim that high numbers of Viet Cong were killed and the fact that artillery had been called in before the ground assault. "Well, they did it again," he said to himself, thinking that an artillery round had landed amidst civilians.

Task Force Barker's assault on My Lai 4 was the biggest thing going on March 16, and Dunn used the same official statistics that were available to Roberts. As he wrote his report that evening he knew it "was fishy."

Roberts hadn't discussed the mission with him, Dunn recalled, but it wouldn't have made any difference if he had. "If I had known there was a massacre and let somebody write about it, I would have lost my job."

The young officer's two-page action report was dictated that night by telephone to the Americal Division press office at Chu Lai. "They copied it down word for word," Dunn said.

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THE OFFICIAL brigade account of the Task Force operation, as written by Roberts, gave Charlie Company direct credit for only 15 of the 128 enemy kills, and also said that none of the company's victims was inside My Lai 4 at the time.

"The infantry company led by Captain Medina engaged and killed 14 VC and captured three M-1 rifles, a radio and enemy documents while moving toward the village," the report said, adding that one Vietnamese had been killed earlier at the landing zone. It said firefights in the surrounding areas were responsible for most of the enemy deaths. Six victims were killed by the helicopter gunships from the 123rd Aviation Battalion and 174th Aviation Company, which were flying support for the mission.

Those six, according to Roberts' version, were the only Vietnamese who were killed inside My Lai 4.

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HAEBERLE had returned with Roberts to Duc Pho. He developed some — but not all — of the photographs taken at My Lai 4 that day.

A few black-and-white photographs were printed and sent up to division headquarters, but only a few.

Roberts obviously thought that there was no sense in sending up photographs of carnage, because the press people at headquarters would never have approved them for release.

Charlie Company's apparent victory did not go unnoticed. A few days after the battle, General William C. Westmoreland, then commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, sent the following message: "Operation Muscatine (the code name for the My Lai 4 assault) contact northeast of Quang Ngai City on 16 March dealt enemy heavy blow. Congratulations to officers and men of C-1-20 (Charlie Company, 4th Battalion, 20th Infantry) for outstanding action."

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Tomorrow: Aftermath.