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My Lai 4

A Bad Day for Col. Henderson

(This is the 10th 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

THE ARMY defines the shooting of unarmed civilians as a "grave breach" of the Geneva Convention of August 12, 1949, for the protection of war victims.

A 1968 directive published by the United States command in Saigon is explicit about what to do: "It is the responsibility of all military personnel having knowledge or receiving a report of an incident or of an act thought to be a war crime to make such incident known to his commanding officer as soon as possible. . . . Persons discovering war crimes will take all reasonable action under the circumstances to preserve physical evidence, to note identity of witnesses present, and to record the circumstances and surroundings."

In addition, the directive requires that all such information should be made known "as soon as practical" to officials in the Saigon command.

March 16, 1968, was Colonel Oran Henderson's first day on his new job. He had been promoted from executive officer to commanding officer of the 11th Brigade.

It should have been a happy day. But things began going wrong for Henderson right from the start. Shortly after nine that morning the colonel, cruising above the battle in My



A GI in action

Lai 4, noticed two men fleeing the hamlet. He thought they might be Viet Cong, and ordered Warrant Officer Thompson, below him in a small observation helicopter, to stop them.

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AFTER THIS was done, Henderson landed and personally interrogated the suspects. They turned out to be, Thompson later told the IG, not Viet Cong but two members of the Saigon government's local militia, who had apparently been held captive in My Lai 4.

Sometime in the same hour Thompson filed his complaint to brigade headquarters about the "wild shooting by men on the ground and by helicopters in the area." He specifically cited the shooting of a woman by a captain.

Upon learning of the complaint, Henderson said later, "I reported it to division headquarters (at Chu Lai) right away." He told them he would make an inquiry. Henderson already had had some hints of wild shooting at My Lai 4 before he heard from Thompson.

In the fall of 1969 Henderson told a reporter that on an earlier helicopter fly-by, he had seen the bodies of "five or six" civilians, two of which appeared to be men. He said nothing then; after all, he explained, "I know sometimes civilians get killed accidentally in war."

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BUT THE COLONEL, testifying in the spring of '69 in private at the Pentagon about the incident, had had a different recollection: he had observed the bodies of only one woman and two children, both killed — he believed — by artillery.

The IG subsequently asked Thompson about that statement, and the warrant officer — who had landed his helicopter in the same area at the same time — disagreed. "There was more," Thompson testified in June, 1969. "I would say on this stretch of road there was eight or ten (bodies) and that is probably putting it mildly because there were probably that many buffalo or oxen."

Henderson gave a third version of what he saw. He told a group of radio and television newsmen in November, 1969, that he had flown over My Lai 4 and had seen no evidence of a massacre.

By the end of the next day, March 17, Henderson had questioned the men of Charlie Company and they proclaimed their innocence.

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THERE IS YET ANOTHER version of Henderson's involvement. Larry Colburn decided to tell somebody what he had witnessed in My Lai 4. After returning in the afternoon to brigade headquarters at Duc Pho, he walked over to Henderson's office. "I told him what happened that day," Colburn said. "He took a few notes and then I just never heard anything about it."

The colonel seemed "nonchalant" about the whole affair. Colburn wasn't surprised. "I never thought anything would come of it anyway. I'd seen it happen before, but just not with that many people."

Thompson accompanied his young crew member to the colonel's quarters. Colburn recalled that the pilot also spoke to Henderson that day.

This was only the beginning of many contradictions in the subsequent accounts by Henderson and others of how the colonel learned about and investigated the charges of wild shooting and unnecessary killing in My Lai 4.

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LIEUTENANT COLONEL BARKER, the Task Force commander, and Major Charles Calhoun, its executive officer at LZ Dotti, were immediately informed of Thompson's report. It is not known if anyone else immediately knew of it. Barker contacted Medina who then radioed Calley to ask what was going on and to conserve ammunition.

Thompson's report could not be ignored. Army Secretary Stanley R. Resor later said that Henderson was immediately "directed to conduct an investigation of the incident."

It is unclear who actually gave Henderson the order. The colonel, in his subsequent description of his actions to newsmen, indicated that he himself had initiated the brief field investigation on March 17, and went on to say that he had interrogated a suspect that day in connection with a shooting at My Lai 4. In his first public discussions of the case, however, Henderson did not identify Captain Ernest Medina as the man who was being investigated for the murder, nor did he say the victim was a woman.

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Tomorrow: The cover-up continued.