

Questions Need Answering

(This is the 12th 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 1970 Pulitzer Prize for his distinguished reporting on the My Lai tragedy.)

By Seymour M. Hersh

IT TOOK 20 months for the American public to learn what Charlie Company had done in a few hours at My Lai 4.

Why, and how, the deliberate murder of hundreds of civilians remained a secret so long is difficult to understand, especially because so many knew about it.

GIs talk, and brag; the 250 men in the other two companies of Task Force Barker learned within days about what had happened in My Lai 4. A number of officers in the brigade had listened with fascination to a tape-recording on the events at My Lai 4.



RONALD RIDENHOUR
His letter did it

At least 60 Army men in a dozen helicopters—gunships assigned by the Americal Division to help Charlie Company overcome the expected Viet Cong resistance — saw first-hand. And there were the survivors, unknown in number, of My Lai 4 itself.

By the early summer of 1968, Paul Meadlo was home in Terre Haute, Ind., his right foot gone, along with his self-respect. And by early 1969 most of Charlie Company was gone from Vietnam, back on the job or at school in cities across the Nation.

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RON HAEBERLE was busy in Ohio showing slide photographs of the My Lai 4 massacre to Rotary Club luncheons and the like; no one in his audience apparently cared, or believed, enough to find out how he had managed to take such pictures. But no one else seemed to consider his experiences worth telling about publicly.

But at that time a 22-year-old ex-GI in Phoenix, Ariz., was in the midst of preparing a letter that would eventually prompt an Army investigation of the massacre.

Ronald Ridenhour had flown over My Lai 4 a few days after the shootings. He noticed the complete desolation — "not even a bird was singing" — but did not find out what caused it until he joined a long-range reconnaissance unit operating out of Duc Pho, where he heard accounts of the massacre from five eyewitnesses.

Ridenhour drove to the Americal Division headquarters in Chu Lai and confirmed that Charlie Company had indeed been at My Lai 4 on March 16. Ridenhour was cautious as he gathered information in Vietnam; he did not even make written notes, for fear of his own safety if they were found.

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RIDENHOUR was discharged and returned to Phoenix in early December 1968, intent on doing something about the shootings at My Lai 4.

He had served well in Vietnam, both as a helicopter door gunner and as a team leader of long-range patrol groups. He earned the usual medals, and did nothing that would mark him as an antiwar protester. He kept his outrage to himself. But "I wanted to get those people," Ridenhour said. "I wanted to reveal what they did. My God, when I first came home, I would tell my friends about this and cry — literally cry. As far as I was concerned, it was a reflection on me, on every American."

Those to whom he talked urged him not to report it, not to turn in his buddies, not to help the enemy. "Forget about it," one friend said, "If you know what's good for you and America."

But the next spring the young ex-GI turned to Arthur A. Orman, one of his former high school teachers who had also taught him creative writing during the one year he attended PHOENIX College before getting drafted.

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ALONG WITH HIS moral indignation, Ridenhour had another motivation: he'd always wanted to be a writer, and he knew he would never find a better story with which to begin.

Orman, however, convinced the ex-GI not to try to sell his story to a magazine. Instead, he argued, Ridenhour should give his information to those Government agencies that were equipped to investigate such matters.

Then came the critical decision to approach Congress. The two men agreed that letters should be sent to leading members of the House and Senate, and not just to the White House, Pentagon and State Department.

The letter described in detail what Ridenhour had learned about My Lai 4, but he was careful to make clear he was reporting what he heard, and not what he saw.

Only two men, Representatives Morris Udall, a liberal from Arizona, and L. Mendel Rivers, a conservative from South Carolina, took a personal interest in the letter. In both cases, their concern was the result of alert staff work.

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WHEN RIDENHOUR'S letter arrived at the office of the Armed Services Committee, it was read by Frank Slatinshek, a staff lawyer, who took it to his superior, Chief Counsel John R. Blandford. "We couldn't brush it off," Blandford recalled later. "It had too many facts. There was too much of a germ of truth in it." A letter was drafted for Rivers' signature, urging the Department of the Army to investigate the matter, and Rivers signed it April 7, only three days after it was received by the Committee.

There was additional pressure on the Army — from Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, who later told newsmen he read Ridenhour's letter on April 4, three days before Rivers' request for an investigation was mailed out.

On April 23 General William Westmoreland officially turned over the case to the office of the Inspector General, the Army's main investigatory agency for administrative and procedural complaints, and directed it to make a full-scale inquiry.

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Tomorrow: The investigation.
