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When the columnists ran Hollywood

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My Lai, four years afterward

Cover-Up

By Seymour M. Hersh.
Random House. 320 pp. \$6.95

Reviewed by ROBERT SHERRILL

Lest we forget, March 16 was the fourth anniversary of the most highly publicized and perhaps the worst war crime ever committed by U.S. troops, that being the day in 1968 when elements of the Americal Division descended on a cluster of hamlets in the Songmy area of South Vietnam and, without provocation, butchered several hundred unarmed civilians.

The army still refuses to say how many Vietnamese were killed that day by Company C, First Battalion, 20th Infantry, 11th Brigade when it destroyed the hamlet of My Lai 4. Seymour Hersh says the secret documents from which he developed this book show that at least 347 women, children, and old men died there.

This is twice as many as the highest previous estimate, and it is very close to the death count made at the time by the Viet Cong and circulated in propaganda leaflets, which, of course, our officials gave no credence to. Since the Viet Cong have been more accurate than the Pentagon about the whole matter, there is no reason not to take their word also that "there were twenty-six families killed completely—no survivors."

Their work done, the men of Charlie Company sat down among the bodies and ate lunch.

Meanwhile, in another hamlet nearby, this one known as My Khe 4, Bravo Company was getting in some practice. "We were out there having a good time," one of the participating GIs told Hersh. "It was sort of like being in a shooting gallery." Estimates of the dead at My Khe 4 range up to 155. Hersh's account of this episode is the first that has been made public, just as he was the first to report the My Lai 4 murders in 1969.

For the slaughter at My Lai 4, the army (after intense public pressures) eventually brought charges of murder or assault with intent to murder against 12 officers and men; but charges were dismissed against six, and of the others only Lieutenant William

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Robert Sherrill's most recent book is *Military Justice Is to Justice as Military Music Is to Music*.



My Lai, 4 years afterward

(Continued from page 1) Calley was convicted.

For the murders at My Khe 4, nobody has been court-martialed, and apparently nobody ever will be.

So the evidence is all in now, and already becoming vintage history, that even where there are many witnesses, the military's system of justice is incapable of coping with war crimes.

But that brings us to the even more important question, the question of why officers of the highest rank failed to investigate and prosecute the guilty immediately after the offenses occurred, at which time even the creaking court-martial system might have been expected to produce a reasonable quantum of justice.

Cover-Up, another of Hersh's awesome reporting achievements, is the best answer we are likely to get. It may be futile to argue about whether the murders at My Lai and My Khe prove that most young soldiers in moments of convulsive emotions can become war criminals; but certainly little doubt can remain, after reading the evidence here, that in moments of stress—as when they feel their careers imperiled—high field officers in the United States Army are quite willing to boil their code of honor down to the old practical barracks motto, "Cover Your Ass."

By the evening of the day it happened, nasty jokes about the My Lai "battle" were being made at division headquarters. It was the chief topic at the cocktail hour in Colonel Oran Henderson's mess hall. Henderson commanded the brigade. Many helicopter pilots in the 123rd

Aviation Battalion knew about the killings. South Vietnamese district officials knew about the mass murder within three days. So did Lieutenant Colonel William D. Guinn, the deputy province adviser, but he dismissed the report passed on to him by the native officials as invalid because—now get this—because "it was so poorly translated and the handwriting was so poor I could hardly read it."

Official reports of the assault stated that 128 "Viet

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Cong" had been killed after a heavy fight. But only three weapons were taken in the village and no Americans were injured by rifle fire. There were no requests for gunship support. For these reasons no alert officer would have let the battle report go unchallenged.

Some of the gossip quickly reached the ears of Major General Samuel W. Koster, commanding general of the Americal Division, and although he preferred that nothing

create shock waves that might disturb his style of life (Koster's mess was noted for steak, lobster, engraved china, the best of hard liquors and wines, GI waiters dressed in white flunky coats, and the pleasant company of Red Cross nurses), still, he did tell Colonel Henderson that maybe he ought to investigate.

Henderson's idea of getting to the bottom of things was to stop a group of the soldiers who had been at My Lai 4—just stop them out in the open in a bunch, so that anybody who answered would be observed by all the others—and ask, "Hey, do you know of anybody killing civilians during this operation?" You're right: Nobody confessed.

When Hersh broke the My Lai massacre story on November 13, 1969, and it was followed by numerous articles from a battalion of reporters, the Pentagon realized that the second public reaction, after shock, would be the suspicion that high army officers had known about the crime and had helped cover it up.

To subdue this suspicion, the Pentagon appointed a board of inquiry headed by Lieutenant General William Peers. Not everyone on the Peers Panel could be called a perfect gentle knight. In response to one witness's recollections about the shooting of a woman who ignored an order to halt, panelist Colonel J. Ross Franklin said brusquely, "Well, can you think of a better way to stop people that are running than doing that?"

The Peers Panel was hardly a smashing success. In fact, it added to the crust of secrecy. (*Continued on page 9*)