

MY LAI

My Lai Villages Burned by Reds

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Near the green, overgrown ruins of My Lai 4 stand two new mounds of blackened ashes — all that remains of the two villages rebuilt last year by the survivors of the 1968 massacre.

The villages were burned to the ground last week,

along with 21 neighboring villages, reportedly by the Viet Cong.

About 30,000 people have been listed as homeless and 23 civilians reported killed, so far, as a consequence of the Viet Cong's swift, violent and largely unopposed sweep through this area, the

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Batangan peninsula about 50 miles south of Da Nang.

HIDING

An inspection of the Sandy coastal plain and Green Rice paddies around My Lai by helicopter revealed one charred village after another.

Most of the inhabitants are hiding in the fields, American officials here believe, while others have fled to government refugee centers on highway 1, five miles to the west. But no one was in sight.

"It's a two - to - three - year effort at pacification, at trying to convince the people that the government can protect them, down the drain," one American remarked as he surveyed the desolation, reportedly the work of the Viet Cong 48th Battalion.

CALLEY

It was the 48th Battalion that Lieutenant William L. Calley and his platoon was seeking on that morning four years ago when they reportedly shot several hundred villagers and burned My Lai 4—the military designation for the hamlets.

The enemy troops reportedly waited to begin their attack here until the Saigon command had transferred nine battalions of rangers and regular army troops of the Second Division to the northern front in Quang Tri. These units ordinarily provide a protective screen for the Batangan peninsula.

Almost all the villages that were burned were built in the last year or two under the government's "return to the village program" by peasants who had been uprooted from their villages by the Americal Division to which Calley's unit had belonged.

PROGRAM

Under the "return to the village" program, considered a key part of pacification, the government pro-

vides the refugees with ten sheets of tin roofing, 7500 piasters (about \$20) and several months' supply of rice to help them move back their home areas.

American and South Vietnamese officials were particularly proud of the newly rebuilt villages in the Batangan peninsula, for the inhabitants had been strong supporters of the Communists since the early days of Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh in the late 1940s. Their return to government sponsored settlements was taken as a sign for switch in allegiance.

"The people there had been getting fat and happy since they returned," said one local official. "So the Viet Cong decided to rupture the pacification program where it would hurt most."

KIDNAPS

In addition to burning the 23 villages, the Communists blew up several newly constructed bridges linking the settlements and kidnaped an unknown number of residents.

The government's territorial militia, known as the regional and Popular Forces, is still slowly trying to push its way back into the devastated area.

Some allied officials in Quang Ngai insist that the Viet Cong's action around My Lai was a sharply limited success and a sign of weakness rather than strength.

"Certainly, we admit that we suffered a serious short term setback in the Batangan," said a senior officer. "But that only affected 5 percent of the province's 700,000 people. Compared to their Tet 1968 offensive here when they overran Quang Ngai city and several district towns, they haven't been able to mount much of anything. If I were the local VC commander, I'd be embarrassed by how little I was able to accomplish."