

# Unwanted General

In 1969, when the nation was still in a state of shock over the wanton killing of women and children by American soldiers in Mylai, a major note of hope was the appointment of Lieut. Gen. William R. Peers to head an inquiry into the tragic affair. General Peers carried out a vigorous and unsparing investigation, and in 1970 established that "a tragedy of major proportions" had indeed occurred in the ill-fated Vietnamese hamlet.

It now appears that General Peers is to be quietly retired from active service at the age of 58. The Army insists that the general's exit is routine. But the departure of this officer who stood for fair but unsparing efforts to expose the Mylai atrocities and prevent their recurrence seems of a piece with the Pentagon's almost totally negative response to the Peers panel's findings.

Only one of fourteen high-ranking officers charged by the inquiry with complicity in a cover-up of the massacre was brought to trial, and he was acquitted. Charges against the others were dropped for alleged lack of evidence, but the 260-page report which contains the charges in question is still classified "secret."

Two civilian lawyers, who served as special counsel to the Peers panel, have long been critical of the Pentagon's peculiar apathy. Robert MacCrate characterized the quick dismissal of charges as a "failure to recognize the Army's responsibility to the public at large." Now, Jerome K. Walsh Jr. has charged that General Peers' retirement will add to "the impression that the Army was not really serious about punishing those responsible" for the Mylai cover-up. It most certainly will.

General Peers, an officer with a distinguished command record that included action in Vietnam, probably never fitted into the military establishment's concept of an investigator. When he accepted the assignment, he said he "deliberately avoided selecting a group of senior colonels and general officers" because he wanted "young combat-experienced officers who had seen war and who knew the trials, the pressures and the tribulations of combat first-hand."

The general's tough, unorthodox approach to an unpleasant task raised the hopes of many Americans that exposure of a terrible wrong committed by the military would be a first step toward full accountability by the responsible echelons of command. Yet, except for the conviction of Lieut. William Calley and administrative censure of some officers, little has been done to use the Peers report for the only purpose that matters—to determine what went wrong and to give assurance that the Army can discipline itself properly in the future. This purpose has not been accomplished.

Gen. Peers' premature retirement indicates that the Pentagon has managed to rid itself of the unwelcome presence of anyone who might remind America's conscience of this still shamefully unfinished business.