

Media Coverage of the My Lai Massacre

On March 16, 1968, the men of Charlie Company entered the village of My Lai under the command of First Lieutenant William L. Calley with the objective to “search and destroy” the North Vietnamese troops believed to reside there. The village was instead populated by unarmed South Vietnamese civilians, mostly women and children, who were then massacred by Charlie Company. The incident was kept under wraps by the military for a year until an independent investigative journalist - Seymour M. Hersh - uncovered the story in 1969.

Once surfaced, *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *Life* magazines featured the story, including the gruesome images of slaughtered villagers. News coverage of My Lai was cautious enough, mainly focusing on the trial of Lieutenant Calley rather than the atrocities performed by American soldiers. Portrayal of the latter remained relatively positive (changing, however, from the image of the reluctant soldier fighting to survive to that of the fierce warrior eager to enter combat), and often, reports on My Lai pointed out that events such as this were a regular on “the other side”, thereby downplaying the extremity.

“It took twenty months for the American public to learn what Charlie Company had done in a few hours at My Lai 4. [...] 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.” – Seymour M. Hersh, *My Lai 4*, p. 103

Timeline of My Lai news coverage

Sept. 5, 1969: The first public hint of the My Lai massacre is given in an unspecific press release by the public information office on Ft. Benning regarding charges against Lt. Calley

Sept. 10: NBC’s The Huntley-Brinkley Report informs that Calley is accused of “premeditated murder of a number of South Vietnamese civilians”. After this, the news media remain silent for several weeks.

March/April: Ex-GI Ronald Ridenhour sends letters with information he gathered in South Vietnam on the massacre to Congress and President Nixon. Investigation ensues.

June: Lt. Calley is pulled from Vietnam with special orders to report to Washington.

Oct. 13: Ridenhour receives a letter from the Army, informing him that the hearing on Calley’s murder charges would proceed that month, and urging him to keep quiet: “It is not appropriate to report details of the allegations to news media. Your continued cooperation in this matter is acknowledged.”

Journalists hardly respond to Ridenhour’s attempts to publish his information.

Oct. 22: A source tips off independent investigator Seymour M. Hersh, who begins to investigate and interviews Calley in November.

Nov. 13: Over 30 newspapers, among them the nation’s leading, run Hersh’s report.

Nov. 17: A report from Song My village with eyewitness accounts by *The New York Times'* reporter Henry Kamm is published on the paper's front page.

Nov. 18: Ex-GI Ron Haerberle offers photographs of the massacre to *Cleveland Plain Dealer* reporter Joseph Eszterhas, who seeks confirmation from the Pentagon. Captain Aubrey Daniels of Fort Benning phones Haerberle to pressure him into withholding the images, an open admission of the pictures' authenticity.

Nov. 20: The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* publishes an interview with Ron Haerberle along with photographs of massacred men, women, and children.

Hersh's interviews (eyewitness accounts) with Michael Terry and Michael Bernhardt of Charlie Company are made available.

Nov. 25: The Army formally acknowledges the charges brought against Calley – premeditated murder of 109 civilians.

Vietnam veteran Paul Meadlo is interviewed on the CBS nightly news with Walter Cronkite. This eyewitness account changed the media treatment of the massacre, sparked more investigation and editorial comments.

GIs Call Viet Killings 'Point-Blank Murder'

By SEYMOUR M. HERSH

WASHINGTON — Three American GIs who participated in the March 1969 attack on "Point-Blank" said in interviews released yesterday that their army comrades mistreated, in the words of one, "Point-Blank Murder" on the residents of the village.

"The whole thing was so deliberate. It was point-blank murder and I was standing there watching it," said Sgt. Michael Bernhardt, 21, now consoling his Army tour as an East Coast base.

Bernhardt was a member of one of three platoons of the 11th Infantry Brigade, company, under command of Capt. Ernest Medina, that "ran" the Congdon-Quang My attack on March 16, 1969, with an estimated 100 American soldiers and 100 South Vietnamese troops on Song My village, about 40 miles northwest of Quang My in northern South Vietnam.

THE ARMY HAS CHARGED Lt. William L. Calley Jr., 26, a platoon leader, with the murder of 109 South Vietnamese civilians in the attack. A squad leader in Calley's platoon, Sgt. Charles Bernhardt, 26, is charged with assisting with intent to murder.

At least four other men, including Medina, are known to be under investigation. Calley and his lawyer, George L. Latham, contend that Calley was under orders to "clear the area."

Bernhardt, interviewed at his duty station, said he had been ordered and led slightly behind the company. Calley's platoon, as entered the village area, "waited up and saw these guys going straight through... setting fire to the houses and built and waiting for people to come out and then shooting them... firing into the houses and shooting them up... getting people in groups and shooting them."

as I WALKED IN YOU COULD SEE piles of people

all through the village... all over. They were gathered up into large groups.

"I saw them about an M16 (grenade launcher) into a group of people who were still alive. But it was mostly done with a machine gun. They were shooting women and children and the elderly also."

"We met no resistance and I only saw three captured women. We had no casualties. It was just like any other Vietnamese village—old people, women and kids. As a matter of fact, I don't remember seeing one military-age man in the entire place, dead or alive."

An Army communique reporting on the operation said Medina's company received "two M1 rifles, a radio, a shortwave radio, and enemy documents" in the attack. The Congdon was reported killed, along with the remainder of the platoon.

Calley, a former member of Medina's C platoon, and one of a platoon of British Young Lions, said he "came upon the scene moments after the company began shooting and shooting through everybody."

"They just marched through shooting everybody. Some like us, we just said anything. They just started putting people out and shooting them."

At one point, he said, about 50 to 70 villagers were lined up in front of a ditch and that "they had been in a line and they were ordered a lot to machine gun everybody down. I don't know if it is true or not. I saw the machine gun down and the soldier pointed it up."

"I NEVER REMEMBER HEARING any men in the ditch," Terry said. "Mostly women and kids." Later Terry said he noticed "some of them were still breathing... they were pretty badly shot up. They weren't going to get anything, help, and so we shot them. That was the way of them."

Why did it happen? "I think that probably the officers did not really know if they were ordered to kill the villagers or not... a lot of guys felt that they had been

Vietnamese civilians aren't human beings... we just treated them like animals."

What happened at Point-Blank, Terry said, "never happened in a building. They just happened outside."

Only one officer, not from Medina's company, tried to halt the shooting. Terry and Bernhardt both reported that this man was a helicopter pilot from an aviation support unit who landed in the middle of the incident. The officer warned he would report the shootings. Next day, he was killed in action and the subsequent investigation launched by officials of the 11th Brigade was dropped after 10 days because of "insufficient evidence."

THE THIRD WITNESS TO THE shootings cannot be named. But an officer on the West Coast, who expressed in detail the Bernhardt and Terry descriptions, "I was shooting rifle and a machine gun while others were shooting people," he said. "It isn't just a nightmare. I'm completely aware of how real this was."

Bernhardt, Terry and many others contributed information contained in a three-page letter that a former GI, Ronald Bernhardt, sent to Sen. Birch Bayh in the Army and to other officials, including many senators, last month. It was Bernhardt's persistence that prompted the Army to begin its highest investigation in April.

Bernhardt, now a student at Claremont (CALIF.), said he was not in Medina's company and did not participate in the shootings.

Calley's lawyer, declined comment on the new charges brought out in the interviews. But another source, discussing Calley's position said "today's got the finger yet on the man who started it." The source also said he understood that Calley and other officers in the company initially resisted the orders, but eventually did their job.

BERNHARDT SAID HE HAD NO IDEA probably how many villagers were shot that day, but an official

body count "was about 300 or something." He had heard of other death counts ranging from 170 to more than 700. Bernhardt has said 300 were slain.

Why did the name "Point-Blank" come about? "It's my belief," the sergeant said, "that the company was ordered to do this. The treatment was heavy... we were ordered to do this. I think they were expecting us to run into resistance at Point-Blank and some expected there that the Cong to use the people as hostages."

A few days before the shooting Medina had received word from Calley that he had been ordered to "clear the area" and killing of at least one member of the company.

WHY DIDN'T HE REPORT THE ATROCITY at the time?

"After it was all over, some colonel came down to see me and we were ordered and asked about it, but we heard no further. Later they (Medina and some other officers) just went to the command post and asked me not to write any communique."

Bernhardt said roughly 90% of the 10 to 15 men in the short-barbed company were involved in the shooting. He took no part, he said. "I only shot at people who stood at me."

"The Army ordered me not to talk," Bernhardt said, "and there are some orders that I have to personally decide whether to obey—I have my own conscience to consider."

"When I testified during Calley's hearing on Article 25 proceedings at Fort Benning, Calley asked me if I thought the deaths could have been caused by artillery or grenades. I asked them if they had ever seen artillery or grenades leave the dead really stacked up in piles."

BERNHARDT SAID THE ARMY case has been at high levels just what did happen at Point-Blank, "They got pictures." He said the photographs were shown him during the Article 25 proceedings which concluded that the charges against Calley were justified.

Source: *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 20 Nov. 1969

References and further reading

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