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. 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 chargers 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 Haeberle 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 Haeberle 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 Haeberle 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.

References and further reading


