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Son My: At Ground Level

The realities of the war, however, were becoming harder to evade. John Wayne's film demonstrated that although myths might distort history, they could not ignore it entirely if they hoped to speak to audiences in lasting and satisfying ways. The tension between the ideal and the real, between *what should have been* and *what was*, made *The Green Berets* an unconvincing film for many Americans. And already in the summer, of 1968, the seemingly routine search-and-destroy mission at Son My was beginning to catch up with the myths in which Wayne sought to clothe American involvement in Vietnam.

Several days after Charlie Company returned from Son My in March, another helicopter from the 11th Brigade swept low over the area. Ronald Ridenhour, a door gunner, was struck by the desolation. Nobody seemed to be around. When Ridenhour spotted a body, pilot Gilbert Honda dropped down to investigate. It was a dead woman, spread-eagled on the ground. As Ridenhour recalled later

She has an 11th Brigade patch between her legs, as if it were some type of display, some badge of honor. We just looked; it was obviously there so people would know the 11th Brigade had been there. We just thought, "What in the hell's wrong with these guys? What's going on?"

As the chopper continued its sweep, several Vietnamese caught sight of it and ran to a bunker. Ridenhour wanted to flush the men out with a phosphorus grenade, but the pilot refused to come in low enough. Ridenhour was angry. Why hadn't Honda pursued? The pilot was evasive; all he say was, "These people around here have had a pretty rough time the last few days."

At first Ridenhour forgot the incident. Then a friend mentioned Charlie Company's operation. According to the word going around, Charlie Company had eliminated the entire village. Astonished, Ridenhour talked over the next few months with a number of soldiers who had been at Son My. They more he heard, the more outrages he became.

When he returned home to Phoenix, Arizona, Ridenhour could not let the matter rest. In March 1969, he summarized what he has learned in a letter and sent copies to the White House, the Pentagon, the State Department, and members of Congress. Prodded by several members of Congress, the Army began an inquiry. By the end of August 1969 the Criminal Investigation Decision had interviewed more than seventy-five witnesses. Many of Charlie Company's members had already finished their tours of duty and were technically beyond each of Army discipline. But the investigators' attention centered increasingly on the leader of the first platoon, Second Lieutenant William Calley. On September 5 the Army charged Calley with the premeditated murder of 109 "Oriental

human beings . . . whose names and sexes are unknown, by means of shooting them with a rifle." Because of regulations, the charges had to be filed by the commanding officer where Calley was currently stationed. That was Fort Benning, Georgia, a location used two years earlier by John Wayne to film much of *The Green Berets*.

To the surprise of some Pentagon officials, newspapers did not feature the story. But one or two reporters became interested. Following a tip, journalist Seymour Hersh interviewed first Calley and then other Charlie Company veterans in Utah, California, New Jersey, and Indiana. One, Paul Meadlo, agreed to tell his story to CBS Evening News on November 21. His revelation sent reporters scrambling. Both *Time* and *Newsweek* ran cover stories. These new accounts referred less often to Son My, the name of the village used in the newspaper accounts of 1968. Instead they used the name of the smaller hamlet within the boundaries of Son My. On the army's map, that was labeled My Lai.

Inevitably, the memories that surfaced were fragmentary, imperfect. Some members of Charlie Company preferred not to talk to anyone. Others felt an aching need to speak out. In the end, there were only partial points of view: wrenching, disjointed perspectives from which to piece together that what happened that March morning was the men disembarked from their helicopters.

POV, on the ground, at hamlet's edge: The soldiers high strung, advancing nervously. They expect return fire at any minute—or the concussion of a booby trap exploding underfoot. A sergeant turns, sees a man near a well. "The gook was standing up shaking and waving his arms and then he was shot," recalls Paul Meadlo. Another soldier: "There was a VC. We thought it was a VC." As the platoons reach the first houses, they split up and begin pulling people out of the hamlet's red brick houses and its hootches.

Below ground' a bunker: Pham Phon hears the artillery stop. When the pokes his head out, several American soldiers are about 200 feet away. Telling his wife and three children to follow, he crawls out. Phon knows how to act when the Americans come. Above all, one must never make a sudden movement, running away from the soldiers, or toward them—they will become suspicious and shoot. One must walk slowly gather in small groups, and wait quietly. As Phon approaches the Americans, his children smile and call out a few words of English, "Hello! Hello! Okay! Okay!"

The Americans are not smiling. The soldiers point their rifles and order the five to walk toward a canal ditch just outside the hamlet.

A group of infantry: There is noise, suddenly, from behind. One of the men whirls, fires. It's only a water buffalo. But something in the group seems to snap, and everyone begins firing, round after round, until the buffalo collapses in a hail of bullets. One of the soldiers: "Once the shooting started, I guess it affected everyone. From then on it was like nobody could stop. Everyone was just shooting at everything and anything, like the ammo wouldn't ever give out."

Soldiers began dynamiting the brick houses and setting fire to the thatched hootches. Private Michael Bernhardt: "I saw these guys doing strange things. . . . They were setting fire to the hootches and huts and waiting for the people to come out and then shooting them. They were going into the hootches and shooting them up. They were gathering people in groups and shooting them."

At the center of the hamlet, about forty-five Vietnamese are herded together. It's about 8:15 a.m. Lieutenant Calley appears and walks over to Paul Meadlo. "You know

what to do with them, don't you?" Meadlo says yes. He assumes Calley wants the prisoners guarded. About fifteen minutes later Calley returns. "How come you ain't killed them yet?" he asks. "I want them dead." He steps back about fifteen feet and begins shooting. Meadlo is surprised, but follows orders. "I used more than a whole clip—used four or five clips."

Ronald Haeberle follows the operation into the hamlet. Haeberle is a photographer from the Public Information Detachment. Since the Army anticipates this will be a major action, he is there to cover the engagement. He comes upon some infantry surrounding a group of women, children, and a young teenage girl. Two of the soldiers are trying to pull off the top of the girl's black pajamas, the traditional Vietnamese peasant garb. "Let's see what she's made of," says one. "Jesus I'm horny," says another. An old woman throws herself on the men, trying to protect the girl. The men punch and kick her aside. One hits her with his rifle butt.

Suddenly they look up: Haeberle is standing there with his camera. They stop bothering the girl and continue about their business. "What should we do with 'em?" one soldier asks. "Kill 'em," says another. Haeberle turns away as an M-60, a light machine gun, is fired. The women and children collapse on the ground, dead.

As he makes his way through the hamlet, Ronald Grzesik comes upon Paul Meadlo, crouched on the ground, head in his hands. Meadlo is sobbing like a child. Grzesik stops and asks what's the matter. Calley made me shoot some people, Meadlo replies.

Pham Phon and his family wait nervously at the top of the canal ditch. BY now perhaps 100 villagers have been herded together. At first they stand, but soon the Americans make them sit, to prevent them from running away. Phon hears gunfire in the distance and has a horrible premonition. He tells his wife and children to slip down the bank into the ditch when the soldiers are not looking.

Lieutenant Calley orders some of the men to "push all those people in the ditch." Calley begins shooting and orders Meadlo to follow his lead. Meadlo": "And so I began shooting them all. . . . I guess I shot maybe twenty-five or twenty people in the ditch . . . men, women and children. And babies." Another GI, Robert Maples, refuses to use his machine gun on the crowd. But other soldiers fire, reload, and fire again, until the villagers in the ditch lay still.

Underneath the mass of bodies, Phon and his family lie terrified. They are unhurt, except for one daughter, wounded in the shoulder. As the hours pass, Phon says nothing, praying his daughter will not moan too loudly from the pain; praying the soldiers will move on.

By 11:00 the guns have fallen quiet. At his command post went of the hamlet, Captain Medina has lunch with his crew and several platoon leaders, including Lieutenant Calley. Two girls, about ten and eleven, appear from out of nowhere. Apparently they have waited out the siege in one of the rice paddies. The men give the girls cookies and crackers. After lunch, Charlie Company blows up a few underground tunnels they have discovered, demolish the remaining houses, and move out of My Lai.

Or more precisely, they move out of what on army map is labeled "My Lai (4)." Actually, the map gives the name My Lai to six different locations in the area. The outsiders, Vietnamese place name can be confusing. "Villages" such as Son My are really more like American counties or townships. Many hamlets exist within each village; and

even these are divided into subhamlets, each with its own name. The Army has not successfully transferred all the names onto their maps. Thus when friendly Vietnamese informants tell Army Intelligence that the Viet Cong's 48th Battalion is based, say, at "My Lai" they do not realize that the Army shows six My Lais on their maps. On this morning of March 16, Americans have attacked the wrong hamlet, one approximately two miles away from the reported stronghold of the 48th Battalion.

The people who live in this settlement do not call it My Lai. Its official name is Xom Lang—merely, *the hamlet*. For years, though, residents have also referred to their home by a more poetic name, Thuan Yen. A rough English translation is *Peace*, or *The Place Where Trouble Does Not Come*.

Denial

By the time the facts about My Lai became known, the wider debate over the war had forced Lyndon Johnson from office. Richard Nixon began a lurching, four-year course of scaling back the conflict. Antiwar protests flared when Nixon sent American troops into neighboring Cambodia, but they tapered off again as the president carried out his policy of "Vietnamization," steadily withdrawing American troops, leaving South Vietnamese forces to absorb the brunt of the fighting. By 1973, American and north Vietnamese negotiators had hammered out a treaty allowing Nixon to claim "peace with honor." But this was largely a face-saving gesture. Despite all pretenses, the war's outcome was a defeat for the United States. Few knowledgeable observers were surprised to see the North Vietnamese complete their conquest of South Vietnam two years later.

As the war wound down by fits and starts, so did the controversy over My Lai. The details of the attack had been so repellent, many Americans at first found them hard to accept. A poll taken by the *Minneapolis Tribune* revealed that nearly half of the 600 persons interviewed believed that the reports of mass murder were false. Other citizens angrily defended the accused. "It sounds terrible to say we ought to kill kids," said a woman in Cleveland, "but none of our boys being killed over there are just kids, too." At the end of the lengthy military trial, Lieutenant Calley was found guilty of "at least twenty-two murders" and sentenced in 1971 to life imprisonment. Following appeals and a forty-month stay in federal custody, Calley was paroled in 1976. Four other soldiers were court-martialed, but not convicted.

Supporters of the war resented the publicity given My Lai. They pointed out that only months before, Communist forces had massacred several thousand civilians at the provincial capital of Hue. Then too, they noted that since the late 1950s, the Viet Cong had engaged in a campaign of political terror, assassinating village officials appointed by the American-backed South Vietnamese regimes. In contrast, they portrayed My Lai as an aberration in American policy: "the actions of a pitiful few," in the words of General William Westmoreland. President Nixon admitted that there "was certainly a massacre," but believed it to be "an isolated incident."

In one sense, historians have confirmed that judgment. The available records for the war reveal no other mass executions of similar magnitude. At the same time, congressional hearings as well as conferences sponsored by Vietnam Veterans Against the War produced testimony of the GIs that on many occasions, civilians or suspected

Viet Cong had been treated harshly, show indiscriminately, or tortured to extract information. Those opposing the war pointed out that even in the case of My Lai, where misconduct had occurred on a large scale, the story had not come to light until a soldier entirely outside the Army's chain of command had prodded high officials to push for an investigation. How many other, lesser incidents went routinely unreported? Historians themselves have not yet undertaken any systematic investigation of such incidents, in part because the task would be so daunting.

Although the ultimate significance of My Lai remained unclear, one thing was certain. The encounter became a defining moment in the public's perception of the war. It did so, a historian might suggest, because it left shaken the long-cherished myth of American exceptionalism. As defenders of a democratic culture, Americans were supposed to behave differently from the rest of the corrupt world. They were not the sort, *The Green Berets* suggested, who would rape young girls or execute innocent civilians. Furthermore, My Lai attracted so much attention because it made the issue concrete and personal, in just the way that film dramas strived to do. John Wayne had reduced complex political and economic issues to visual, intensely personal images ("You're what this war's all about," Kirby tells little Hamchunk). Similarly, Ron Haeberle's searing photographs, reproduced in *Life* magazine, served as counterimages that shattered the mythic stereotypes of *The Green Berets*. Henceforth it would be impossible to take the plot and themes of a western or a World War II epic and merely recreate them in Vietnam. The old myths could no longer be used unchanged.