And then we start all over again? Can this be the climax to all the tragic bloodshed, the anguished deaths, the carnage? We start all over again? When the flag went up at Iwo Jima, it *stayed* up. But in 1968, the course of fighting in Vietnam was different—as even Wayne and his coproducers recognized. American armed forces did not try to capture territory instead they attempted to kill as many enemy as possible, in a war of attrition. When American search-and-destroy missions cleared an area, they usually either moved on in another sweep or returned to their base, leaving the territory once again to the enemy. In Vietnam, the victories never quite stayed won.

Suddenly, the reason for the awkward second plot becomes clearer. In 1968 the real war in Vietnam could provide no prospect of a definitive victory. Yet unlike history, an action-adventure film demands a climax that will satisfy audiences that the hardships and deaths of its heros have not been in vain. The only finale Wayne's writers could devise was a second, wholly implausible victory. *The Green Berets* clings valiantly to the cinematic myths of World War II and the wild West, but only by abandoning even tenuous links with reality.

Son My: At Ground Level

The realities of the war, however, were becoming harder to evade. John Wayne's film demonstrated that although movies 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 had 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 to 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 would 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. The more he heard, the more outraged he became.

When he returned home to Phoenix, Arizona, Ridenhour could not let the matter rest. In March 1969, he summarized what he had 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 Division had interviewed more than seventy-five witnesses. Many of Charlie Company's members had already finished their tours of duty and were technically beyond reach 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 with 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 what happened that March morning as 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 bunkers.

Below ground, a bunker. Pham Phon hears the artillery stop. When he 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 boothes. 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."

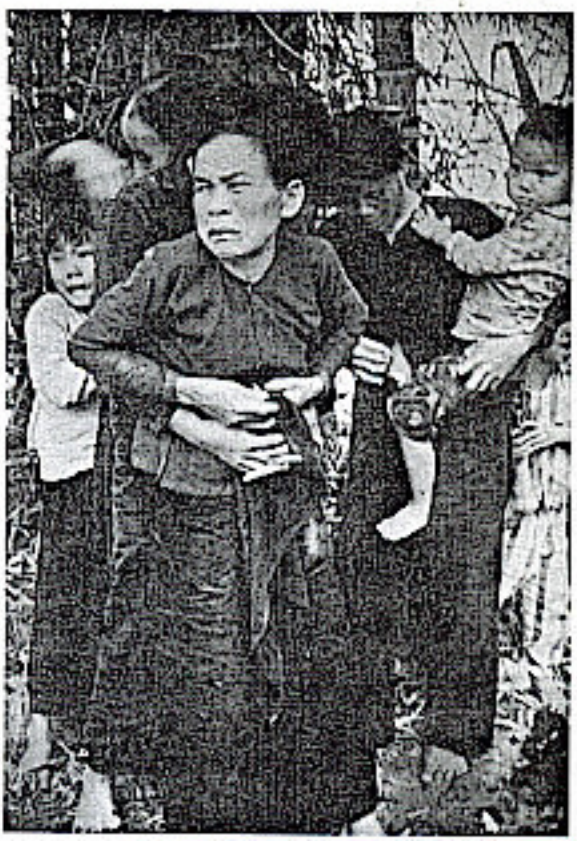
At the center of the hamlet, about forty-five Vietnamese are herded together. It's about 8:15 a.m. Lieutenant Calley appears and walks over to Paul Meadlo. "You know what to do with them, don't you?" Meadlo says yes. He assumes Calley wants the prisoners guarded. About fifteen minutes later Calley returns. "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 stoops 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



Army photographer Ron Haeberle's searing photographs of the events at My Lai, published in Life magazine in December 1969, provided shocking counterimages to those in The Green Berets. The older woman is being restrained by other villagers after she attacked soldiers who had been molesting a younger woman (right rear, buttoning her blouse). "Guys were about to shoot these people," Haeberle recalled. "I yelled, 'Hold it,' and shot my picture. As I walked away, I heard M16s open up. From the corner of my eye I saw bodies falling but I didn't turn to look." (Ron Haeberle, Life Magazine © 1969 Time Warner.)

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 west 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 maps is labeled "My Lai (4)." Actually, the map gives the name My Lai to six different locations in the area. To outsiders, Vietnamese place names 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 15, 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*.[8]

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 many of our boys being killed over there are just kids, too." At the end of a 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 courts-martialed, but none 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, later facts 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 other GIs that on many occasions, civilians or suspected Viet Cong had been treated harshly, shot 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 Hamburger). Similarly, Ron Haeberle's searing photographs, reproduced in *Life* magazine, served as countermages 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 would no longer be used unchanged.

For nearly a decade, Vietnam remained a subject too hot to handle in feature films. Hollywood cared approach the war only indirectly, as in the irreverent comedy *M*A*S*H* (1970), set during the Korean War. By 1978 however, attitudes were changing. A new wave of Vietnam movies were scheduled for release, encouraged by reports of Francis Ford Coppola's epic under way, *Apocalypse Now*. "When I started," Coppola recalled, "basically people said, 'Are

monitoring the operation, Calley ordered his men to round up all the civilians. Tensions ran high. The troops were frustrated with their inability to distinguish civilians from the Vietcong. Calley suddenly opened fire and ordered his men to shoot as well. They plowed through the village shooting anything that moved. When it was over, nearly 500 people were dead. Not one of them appeared to be a Vietcong. They even killed the babies. Calley's men spent the day in an orgy of sexual violence—sodomy, rape, and rape-murder.

Such high-ranking officers as Major General Samuel Koster, commander of the Americal Division, apparently knew of the killings but made no report and attempted no investigation. For more than a year the cover-up was successful until Ronald Ridenhour, a former infantryman with the Americal Division, wrote a letter to President Nixon describing the massacre. "I do not know for certain," he wrote Nixon, "but I am convinced that it was something very black indeed." The army convened a board of inquiry and decided that war crimes had occurred. The board reduced Major General Koster in rank to brigadier general; censured his assistant, Brigadier General George Young; and charged Colonel Oran K. Henderson, commander of the Eleventh Infantry Brigade, along with thirteen other officers and enlisted men, with war crimes.

On March 29, 1971, a military tribunal convicted William Calley of the premeditated murder of at least twenty-two civilians. Two days later he was sentenced to life in prison at hard labor. The army dropped charges against all the other defendants. The conviction provoked an intense debate throughout the country. Many Americans felt Calley was being made a scapegoat for the army. Governors Jimmy Carter of Georgia and George Wallace of Alabama insisted that Calley was the tip of the iceberg and should not be singled out for punishment. Richard Nixon reviewed the case personally before the sentence was carried out. He had Calley released from a military stockade and placed under house arrest in an apartment. In August 1971 Nixon reduced the sentence to twenty years, and then to ten years. William Calley was paroled in March 1974. General William Peers, who headed the army investigation of My Lai, summed up the absurdity of the event: "To think that out of all those men, only one, Lt. William Calley, was brought to justice. And now, he's practically a hero. It's a tragedy."