

is less clear what it does for the nation's.

Yet there are still things to be learned from his aching experience. The ambiguity at the heart of the raid—did Kerrey's squad accidentally kill civilians or deliberately massacre them?—mirrors the very nature of the war. For all his talk, Kerrey does not resolve the discrepancies: "Klann's got a memory of what happened. I've got a memory of what happened. They're both vivid. They're both awful." It's not a satisfying answer, especially from a politician revered for his candor. While much of the public has sympathized with Kerrey, this week he has to weather the hard charges being broadcast on *60 Minutes II*, and his heroism is likely to be forever tainted by the doubts they raise. Kerrey professes not to care, since he never wore the hero's mantle well, or to fear the impact on a political career he says he has renounced.

The message here, Kerrey told *TIME*, is as simple as it is sobering: "I have not been able to justify what we did militarily or morally. But it's one of the things that went on in the war." His shame is the shame of the entire war: what he did was part and parcel of how America fought Vietnam. "In a free-fire zone we had permission to do it," Kerrey says. "And we had very aggressive instructions from our commanding officer in 1969 for how to deal with people there. And anybody that wasn't aware that this was going on, in my view, is lying." Was that policy a license for atrocities? Kerrey says the few rules of war "we'd been taught were a violation of the rules of war" that he finally read for the first time last week. He knows that he could be open to court-martial if the Pentagon pursues an investigation.

Vietnam has come to define the way we ought not to fight our wars. The main lesson is to take no American casualties, to fight only if victory is assured. But Kerrey's story reminds us that there is another lesson, one far harder to follow. Nations have no business sending their young into battle without lasting moral justification, not only because it is hard to die for your country but because it is equally hard to kill for your country.

To know and understand what Kerrey's Raiders did that night in Thanh Phong can be cathartic. To condemn it is something else, requiring a clarity that was almost never available to young men shooting in the dark. It is a clarity our nation likewise never had at the time. When we judge Bob Kerrey, we judge our nation as well. —With reporting by

Viveca Novak/Washington

## SCENE OF THE KILLINGS

## When Hell Visited the Village

**W**hen the Navy SEAL squad known as Kerrey's Raiders went into Thanh Phong in 1969, the men were dropped off by speedboat and crept in by cover of night. Today visitors to the remote coastal village come by daylight, by road and ferry, past lush coconut groves and over the countless fingers of the Mekong River as it branches across the delta. Of late, those traveling the one-lane clay road to Thanh Phong—now home to about 380 families who fish and grow rice—include foreign journalists trying to corroborate an atrocity and Vietnamese government officials accompanying them.

What isn't yet clear is whether villager Pham Thi Lanh is an honest witness, a propagandist or just an old woman with hazy memories. In interviews

But first, she says, she glimpsed seven shadowy figures moving toward another nearby shelter. Later, she heard gunfire. It was an hour before Lanh worked up the courage to go outside. When she did, she found 16 more bodies, some piled on top of one another, some fallen in a row. She believes her neighbors had been lined up and shot at close range "because they were all gathered in a group outside." In the piles of the dead were Lanh's three sisters, a sister-in-law and four of her nieces and nephews.

The next day, Lanh and four other villagers dug a mass grave and buried the 21 bodies, including, she says, three pregnant women. She was outraged to find out that the man who led the raid was given a Bronze Star for it. "They come here and they kill unarmed women and children and he got a medal?"

Lanh is one of the few witnesses to that night 32 years ago. Most of the others who were in the village at the time have either died or moved away. Kerrey admits an atrocity took place but swears it was accidental. He and his supporters argue that Lanh's account shouldn't be believed, because she was a communist revolutionary married to a Viet Cong soldier, and because her stories have been offered to journalists while Vietnamese government officials sat nearby. Lanh evidently told CBS her husband was Viet Cong, but, again, changed her story and denied to *TIME* that he was. Government officials' presence at interviews conducted by foreign journalists is standard procedure in Vietnam.

In past decades, relatives of those killed by the Americans in Thanh Phong have exhumed their remains and reburied them. Ten years ago, that's what Bui Thi Nhi did for her parents and three nieces and nephews. Nhi was in the district capital of Thanh Phu on the night Kerrey's Raiders moved in. She says she heard of her father's death from a survivor who told her that the Americans had called those hiding inside to come out, and then shot them. "At that time, I hated the Americans so much," says Nhi, 73.

In Thanh Phong, as elsewhere in Vietnam, life has gone on. Children go to school. Parents fish, plant rice or plan shrimp farms. "People just want to make a living," Nhi says. "Even I have to move on." Still, she's not sure if she would accept an apology from Kerrey today. "If I met him, I don't know if I would try to kill him or curse him," she says. "I don't think I'd want to say anything to him at all." —By Kay Johnson/Thanh Phong



**PHAM THI LANH** lives with horrible memories, but her story keeps changing.

with *60 Minutes II*, she emerged as the key eyewitness corroborating the worst charges against Kerrey and his squad—she claimed to have seen them use knives and guns to murder women, children and an old man. But when interviewed last week by *TIME*, she first repeated her story, then changed it, saying she hadn't actually seen the killings, but had only heard the screams and later seen the bodies. "I heard screams, 'Help! They're killing us!'" Lanh, now 62, recalls. "So I crept quietly outside, and I saw them there, lying dead with their heads nearly cut off."

The first body she saw, she says, was her 65-year-old neighbor, Bui Van Vat. Lying near him were his 62-year-old wife Canh and the couple's three grandchildren, all under 12 and all stabbed to death. Terrified, Lanh says she ran back inside her hut, a makeshift sleeping shelter with a low ditch dug in the floor to shield from incoming bullets.