

## **Into the Dark: The My Lai Massacre**

**By Mark Gado**

There will never be another year in America like 1968. Why that year became one of the most tumultuous periods in our history will probably never be known. It began on an ominous note when one of America's most fervent enemies, North Korea, seized a U.S. Navy intelligence ship, named the U. S. S. Pueblo, in the Sea of Japan on January 23. They held the ship and its crew for many months and nearly started a full-scale war. In Vietnam, the massive Tet Offensive, launched by the Viet Cong against almost every major city in the south, caused massive casualties on all sides.

The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King touched off numerous riots in dozens of American cities. Two months later, the brother of a murdered President, Senator Robert Kennedy, was assassinated in Los Angeles at the hands of an Arab fanatic. Colleges across the country were enveloped in a wave of protest and violence over the Vietnam War, which was killing hundreds of young Americans every week.

In August, the Democratic Presidential Convention in Chicago was wrecked by thousands of young people who fought the Chicago police on live TV, symbolizing the anguish of a divided nation. Richard Nixon was elected President in November and man made his first tenuous step into eternity as Apollo 10 astronauts said Christmas prayers from the dark side of the Moon. It seemed as if anything could happen that year.

And then, there was My Lai.

### **Quang Ngai Province, Vietnam**

Quang Ngai province is a stunning, exotic mixture of mountains, jungle, rice paddies and beaches along a vastly unblemished shoreline. To the west, toward the Laotian border, beyond more mountains and hills than can be imagined, as far as the eye can see, the ancient lands of Vietnam stretch into the horizon. Jungles so thick and treacherous, an American soldier couldn't move a half-mile a day. The heat was like a vise -- it could sap the will of the strongest man and put a brave soldier on his knees. Rusted shells of French military vehicles, armored carriers and tanks lay hidden in the bush, overgrown with two decades of weeds and vegetation, dim reminders of the Indochina War during the 1950s and the ultimate defeat of European colonialism.

The village of Chu Lai was in the province of Quang Ngai, a highly contested area whose control shifted almost daily between the Viet Cong and South Vietnamese forces during the 1960s. It is located on QL-1, the one and only national highway of South Vietnam, which hugs the coast along the South China Sea. It was, and still is, a highway that is mostly unpaved and littered with potholes. A traveler was just as likely to come across a water buffalo as speeding motorcycles, a column of military vehicles, ARVN soldiers (South Vietnamese), farmers, civilians, school children, U.S. soldiers, Korean ROCs and even the VC who also used QL-1 to get around Vietnam.

The 11th Brigade built a base camp in the town of Duc Pho, a small village in the southern part of Quang Ngai province. This was an area that was dominated by the Viet Cong for many years prior to 1967. Sympathy for Ho Chi Minh and his "holy cause" ran deep. So much so that the only way to defeat the Viet Cong in the Duc Pho-Mo Duc district was to wipe out the villages. By the time the 11th Infantry Brigade arrived in the town of Duc Pho, it was estimated that 70% of the homes in the province were already destroyed. And this was months before the massive Tet Offensive of February, 1968 when North Vietnam launched a nationwide coordinated attack on hundreds of towns and villages in South Vietnam. Total destruction was the military's solution on how to deal with an enemy that could not be understood and often could not be seen. Villages across Vietnam were bombed, burned, bulldozed and buried.

General William Westmoreland, Commander of American Forces in Vietnam, once wrote: "So sympathetic were some of the people to the VC that the only way to establish control...among the people was to remove the people and destroy the village." The civilian population, caught between the Viet Cong who ruled the night and the Americans who took over during the day, suffered at the hands of both. In the rural areas, where electricity was mostly unknown and families lived on the same plot of land for centuries, political loyalties were often subject to the whim of whoever was holding a rifle. Water buffalo was the main source of power and farmers knew little else except the methods, tradition and culture of growing rice. To many young American soldiers, Vietnam was a land of primitive technology and so alien to their own experiences, so different than what they were accustomed to seeing, it was like going back in time to a pre-historic era.

In Quang Ngai Province during 1967 and 1968, the Viet Cong remained in control in almost all of the rural areas. Despite continuous bombardment by American artillery and thousands of strategic bombing missions by U.S. Navy jets, enemy forces were still strong and ruled the countryside. In November, 1967, U.S. forces and North Vietnamese Regulars (NVA) engaged in a fearsome battle to the death in the hills of Dak To on Thanksgiving Day. The terrifying story of that battle on Hill 875 was still fresh in the minds of American soldiers and spoke volumes of the amazing persistence of the Viet Cong (Page and Pimlott, p. 289). A few miles to the east of QL-1, the hamlets of Son My and My Lai were the scene of continued fighting where the area was frequently covered with mines and booby traps. These deadly traps took a heavy toll, both physically and psychologically, on the American soldier.

In February and March of 1968, Charlie Company, of the 1st Battalion, 11th Brigade, suffered severe losses as a result of these traps. In one instance, while patrolling near Son My, the company stumbled upon a heavily laid minefield. As the explosions went off among them, the men tried to push forward. It was the worst thing they could have done. More explosions ripped through the helpless soldiers. Broken and severed limbs were everywhere. When it was over, 15 men were killed and wounded. By the time early March rolled around, Charlie Company had suffered 28 casualties and had yet to actually see any Viet Cong. They were seething with an anger and hatred for an enemy that, to them, was mostly invisible.

### **Dawn at the LZ**

The early morning of March 16, 1968 in Southern Quang Ngai was calm and cool. For one brief moment at 5:30 a.m., the incessant chatter of the birds and monkeys was at rest. A light breeze rolled in from the China Sea and rustled through the swaying palms outside LZ Dottie.

The men of Charlie Company began to assemble. As the Huey transport choppers from the 174th Helicopter Assault Company began to crank up their turbines, a vivid and luminous moon could still be seen in the twilight sky. The stars pulsed brilliantly above and to the drifting mind of a young soldier, it was easy to imagine a vacation in some distant tropical land, for despite the chaos that ripped the country apart, Vietnam could have that magic. All in all, a beautiful dawn it was.

At approximately 7:20 a.m., Lt. Calley walked over to the Huey chopper called a "slick" and with his right hand, pulled himself into the rear compartment where a door gunner was busy strapping himself in. The men of the 1st Platoon made their final check on ammunition and supplies. They quickly boarded the waiting aircraft, filled with the expectation that the company may be "getting even" with an enemy that was mostly unseen, mysterious and hated.

Also on board one of these nine choppers, frantically securing his own camera equipment, was Army photographer Ron Haerberle, assigned to record the event for *Stars and Stripes*, the Army newspaper. Less than 15 miles away to the southwest, the people of My Lai 4 slept, unafraid, unsuspecting; their dreams were filled with visions of a peaceful future, unaware of the sword of vengeance that was about to fall upon them, a nightmare for which nothing could have prepared them. The choppers gently lifted off the tarmac and banked south into a neat, tight "V" formation.

Other gunships from Chu Lai met up with the 174th a short distance from the western edge of My Lai. At approximately 7:45 a.m., artillery preparation of the landing zone began. On the ground, the residents of My Lai became aware of the pending attack. They were accustomed to running from the assaults of both the VC and the Americans. Villagers constructed bunkers and tunnels deep into the ground for many years, back to the time of the French when they ran from another enemy. Fleeing from the rice paddies, where they were already hard at work for hours, the inhabitants herded their children to safety until the attack was over. Even though no enemy personnel had been observed from the air, "Shark" gunships from the 174th descended on the scene and laid down a terrifying barrage of rockets and M-60 machine gun fire.

### **Into the Dark**

*"There were so many people killed that day it is hard for me to recall exactly how some of the people died,"* U.S. Army Pvt. Harry Stanley said to C.I.D. investigators (as reported by Seymour M. Hersh).

When Capt. Medina's chopper hit the ground, he reported over the radio that the LZ was "cold," no incoming enemy fire. But that assessment quickly changed when Medina subsequently reported that elements of the attacking force were receiving enemy fire. Some of the attacking gunships reported suspected VC on the ground and fired upon the enemy as

they raced for cover.

Meanwhile, the 1st Platoon, commanded by Lt. Calley moved from the southeast into My Lai. "The first killing was an old man in a field outside the village who said some kind of greeting in Vietnamese and waved his arms at us... This was the first murder," Herbert L. Carter, a tunnel rat for Calley's 1st Platoon, later testified. As the platoon sought out secure positions, some of the local villagers began to emerge. They knew full well that if they ran, the Americans would consider them Viet Cong. Unknown to them, for this day, everyone was considered VC.

Soldiers from the 1st Platoon opened up on the Vietnamese farmers; at least 5-9 were immediately killed. Soon, the platoon broke down into small groups or squads and moved throughout the village, shooting into suspected enemy positions at random. All around the men gunfire continued to erupt as the advancing soldiers began to fire at anything that moved. Cows, pigs, chickens, water buffalo, birds and gravestones were blown apart by machine gun fire and M-79 grenade launchers.

Some villagers were accidentally hit by gunfire and went to the soldiers for help. The men of the 1st Platoon cut them down. "She came out of the hut with her baby and Widmer shot her with an M16 and she fell. When she fell, she dropped the baby and then Widmer opened up on the baby with his M16 and killed the baby too," said Carter in additional testimony to the Army C.I.D.

Another soldier, Pfc. Varnado Simpson, shot a woman, a baby. Afterwards, he went into a kind of shock. "The baby's face was half gone, my mind just went... and I just started killing. Old men, women, children, water buffaloes, everything... I just killed... That day in My Lai, I was personally responsible for killing about 25 people," said Simpson.

The platoon advanced further into My Lai without receiving any enemy fire at all. As they did, some of the men began to shoot inside the straw huts of the hamlet into what they considered "suspected enemy positions." As the villagers attempted to flee, they were pushed back into the huts and the soldiers tossed in grenades. The frenzy of killing picked up speed and each violent event began to build on the last. An old Vietnamese farmer was captured by the 1st Platoon and, for no apparent reason, was bayoneted in the chest and thrown into a well. Another farmer suffered the same fate and after the second man was thrown into the well, a grenade was tossed in afterwards. This incident was witnessed by several of Calley's men who later reported it to the C.I.D.

"In at least three instances inside the village, Vietnamese of all ages were rounded up in groups of 5-10 and were shot down... Women and children, many of whom were small babies, were killed sitting or hiding in their homes," later wrote Lt. General William Peers, who performed the Army's investigation into My Lai in 1970. Numerous rapes were committed against the young girls of the village, sometimes while their families were forced to watch. Everywhere, dead bodies of women and children littered the roads and fields of the burning hamlet. Captain Brian Livingston, a helicopter pilot and commander, wrote in a letter back home on that very day: "I've never seen so many people dead in one spot. Ninety-five percent were women and kids."

Around 9:00 a.m., while the killing was at full throttle, members of the 1st and 2nd platoon rounded up some Vietnamese civilians. The soldiers brought them to the center of the village. This group consisted mostly of women, children, babies and old men who were too terrified to run away. They were eventually herded together in the middle of My Lai where they sat on the ground. Two soldiers from the 1st Platoon, Pfc. Dennis Conti and Pfc. Paul Meadlo, guarded the Vietnamese until Lt. Calley came along.

watching over them."

"No, I want them killed!" Calley said. Then, as the terrified villagers cowered in fear deep inside the ditch, Calley lowered his M16 from approximately ten feet away and began to fire his weapon. Meadlo was ordered to do the same.

Later, he explained his actions to the Peers Commission in this way: "It's not your right to refuse that order, and you go

out there and do it because you're ordered to." For several minutes Calley fired into the panic-stricken crowd as babies and old people were torn to shreds. Meadlo finally broke into a crying fit and could not continue. But Calley pressed on. One by one he killed each survivor who tried to stand including mothers who attempted to shield their children. Months later, the Army's investigative report summed up this event in very simple terms: "The villagers were herded into a ditch with the larger group of 60-70...At approximately 0900-0915 hours, Vietnamese personnel who had been herded into the ditch were shot down by members of the 1st Platoon."

### **A Bloodbath Down There**

While the killings and the rapes continued unabated on the ground, Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson, 25, piloted an H-23 bubble helicopter a few hundred feet above the burning hamlet. As he orbited the area, Thompson and his two-man crew saw a wounded female in a rice paddy. As he maneuvered the chopper closer, Thompson saw an Army captain kick the woman and shoot her in the head. A few minutes later, the crew saw dozens of bodies in a ditch near a dirt road. The chopper set down several times to investigate. The crew saw American soldiers taking a smoke break and it was apparent there was no ongoing firefight with the Viet Cong.

The chopper took off again. A few hundreds yards away, the crew saw U.S. soldiers firing into another ditch filled with Vietnamese. Thompson became enraged. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. As he swept over the village, he saw about a dozen civilians splashing through the rice paddies. They were running for their lives from Charlie Company. Thompson landed his chopper between the civilians and the Americans. Calley showed up a minute later and had heated words with Thompson who was consumed with rage. He ordered his crew to turn their machine guns on the Americans and if the soldiers intervened, to fire on the young lieutenant. Thompson herded the terrified Vietnamese onto other gunships that offered assistance and flew them to safety to Quang Ngai City.

As W. O. Thompson's choppers took off with the rescued civilians, Calley and his men moved to the eastern end of the village. On the way, he encountered other villagers being held by members of the 1st Platoon. They were near the edge of a small bridge that crossed an irrigation ditch. There were approximately forty to fifty Vietnamese women and children, including an elderly Buddhist monk.

Upon questioning, the monk managed to convey that there were no weapons or VC in the village. It was not the answer Calley wanted to hear. Just at that moment, a small child crawled away from its mother out of the ditch. According to later testimony, Calley tossed the baby back into the hole and shot the child. He then pushed the monk into the ditch and shot him without provocation.

Within moments, the firing started. Machine guns poured a lethal wave of death into the pit as pieces of bone and flesh flew into the air. Some of the soldiers, like Pfc. Robert Maples, refused the order to fire. He later told investigators: "I do now remember that Meadlo was one of those firing and he was crying at the same time. I know that he or the others did not want to kill those persons. This is not true of Calley because he seemed to want to kill."

A short time later, the 3rd Platoon was sent into My Lai to clean up any "resistance" that remained. They immediately began to slaughter every human and animal they could find. One soldier jumped on the back of a water buffalo and stabbed the helpless animal with his bayonet. Any Vietnamese who survived the initial sweep by the 1st and 2nd platoons and emerged out from their hiding places were shot down immediately.

They "swept through the south side of My Lai 4 shooting anyone who tried to escape, bayoneting others, raping women, shooting livestock" and more. The entire village of My Lai was littered with corpses and dead animals. From the air, it looked like a huge killing field. Someone in a helicopter overhead shouted into the radio: "It looks like a bloodbath down there! What the hell is going on?"

But as far as anyone could tell, Charlie Company had not received even one round of enemy fire. The entire hamlet of My Lai 4, known as Tu Cung to the Vietnamese, had been wiped out. Families that had lived on this same ground for generations were eradicated. The village, except for the noise of the soldiers setting fire to the huts or farm animals thrashing about in the final throes of death, was quiet. Or as Pfc. Maples later told U.S. Army C.I.D. investigators: "I did not see anyone alive when we left the village."