

ABSTRACT

Uncovered: The Cover-Up of the My Lai Massacre

Timothy Sisson, M.A.

Mentor: Patricia D. Wallace, Ph.D.

In the midst of a war that was being fought not on open battlefields but in dense jungles, an atrocious event occurred in the presence of soldiers of the United States military. Over five hundred Vietnamese civilians, the majority of whom were women and children, died at the hands of U.S. soldiers on March 16, 1968, in the hamlet of My Lai.

The United States Army conducted its own investigation of the events within days. American troops, ranging from privates up through corporals and captains, knew of the event and what had occurred. For nearly a year the events were kept secret under a U.S. Army cover-up.

Using the Peers Commission report, this study will show that the United States military intentionally covered-up the events at the My Lai hamlet of March 16, 1968, and how it was possible for an event of this magnitude to be kept secret.

Uncovered: The Cover-Up of the My Lai Massacre

by

Timothy Sisson, B.A.

A Thesis

Approved by the Department of History

Jeffrey S. Hamilton, Ph.D., Chairperson

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Approved by the Thesis Committee

Patricia D. Wallace, Ph.D., Chairperson

James M. SoRelle, Ph.D.

Richard B. Riley, Ph.D.

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J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

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Dedication

For Lizzie and Harry Jackson

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

During the Vietnam War, two months after the North Vietnamese Army launched the Tet Offensive, the United States began its own ground offensive with the intention of demoralizing the North Vietnamese. In the midst of a war that was being fought not on open battlefields but in dense jungles, an atrocious event occurred in the presence of soldiers of the United States military and innocent Southern Vietnamese civilians, that led one witness to say that he “did not see anyone alive when we left the village.”¹ Over five hundred Vietnamese civilians, the majority of whom were women and children, died at the hands of U.S. soldiers on March 16, 1968, in the hamlet of My Lai.² The slaughter lasted only a few hours, but the My Lai Massacre would be present in American news circles for years and would be a reminder of the horrors of war for generations to follow.

The question of how America and the world responded to these events within the following days is a reasonable question to ask. The answer to that question is simple because the world, not even the American public, knew of the atrocities at My Lai for another year. The United States Army conducted its own investigation of the events within days of March 16, 1968, but the research conducted was brief and non-questioning. American troops, ranging from privates up through corporals and captains, knew of the event and what had occurred but they did not disclose the entire truth. For

¹ Testimony given to the U.S. Army by Robert E. Maples, 1969, in James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 1998), 85.

² George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 4th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002), 260.

nearly a year the events at My Lai were kept secret under a U.S. Army cover-up and were not brought forth until one man finally wrote a letter to the secretary of defense describing the stories he had heard over and over again.

After receiving the letter, officials in the Department of Defense ordered a thorough investigation of the morning of March 16, 1968, and the days which led up to it, as well as the days following the massacre. The investigation lasted six weeks and included trips to Vietnam for interviews with local survivors and a study of the My Lai hamlet. The investigation also included testimony and trials for those who were involved in the events and those who were believed to have given the orders.

During the investigation and trial of the My Lai cover-up, stories and photographs from the morning of March 16, 1968, began to circulate throughout the American, and world, press. For the first time, in the spring of 1969, the American public saw the horrors of the massacre at My Lai. Detailed and disturbing pictures of women and children shot in the streets of the village, bodies piled up in the center of the village, and agony and fear and anger in the face of one woman who stands in one of the most unforgettable images of the Vietnam War.

At the conclusion of the trial only one individual was convicted of any wrongdoing, while three officers received demotions. Some welcomed the conviction of the officer, wished others had received the same fate, and argued that My Lai was another example of the need to stop the war in Vietnam. At the same time others were disturbed by the conviction. Supporters of the convicted officer believed he was only doing his job and respecting orders which were given to him by a superior. Some individuals, during the height of the anti-war protests and Cold War, thought the conviction was a victory

handed over to the Communists, and anything that deprived America and aided the Communists was an unimaginable affair.

The Americans involved in My Lai, the 1st Platoon of Charlie Company of the United States Army, were led by Lieutenant William L. Calley, born in 1943 in Miami, Florida. While living in San Francisco, Calley heard from his draft board in Miami in July 1966. He quickly loaded up his car with the few items he owned and began the cross country drive from California to Miami. Just a few days into the trip, Calley's Buick broke down in Albuquerque, New Mexico. With no money and a draft board calling his name, Calley located the local army recruiting station and explained his current situation. A few minutes later Calley left the office as a recruit to become a clerk in the United States Army.

Calley was sent to basic training at Fort Bliss, Texas, and to clerical school at Fort Lewis, Washington. Six months later Calley applied to attend Officer Candidate School (OCS), and after being accepted he began his OCS training in the spring of 1967 at Fort Benning, Georgia. While at OCS Calley became known as an inept leader who had difficulties leading his men and taking the lead in situations. Due in large part to the shortage of officers in Vietnam, Calley was given command of the 1st Platoon, and in the middle of December 1967 Charlie Company, based in Hawaii, was ordered to deploy to the Quang Ngai province in Vietnam.

The day before Charlie Company was set to leave Hawaii Calley was instructed to give a short presentation to his platoon. The presentation was a video created by the U.S. Army entitled *Vietnam: Our Host*, which presented, from the American viewpoint, the culture of Vietnam and what the men should, and should not, do while serving overseas.

The video instructed the troops to respect women, children, and local customs. Calley insisted that this training was a waste of time; “what a farce this was. Items like . . . ‘Do not insult the women. Do not assault the women. Be polite.’”³ Calley had a difficult time earning the attention of his men during the presentation and spent an equal amount of time yelling at his men as he did giving the presentation. The presentation which Calley gave was also not one of his best, and he remembered, “I had only three minutes for *Vietnam: Our Host*. I did a very very poor job of it. I realize that now.”⁴

The commander of Charlie Company, Ernest Medina, was a tough and able soldier who had been serving in the army for over ten years and was known to be an exceptional leader. Medina, a captain in the U.S. Army who was born in 1936 in New Mexico, joined the army at the age of eighteen and quickly climbed the military ranks. As Calley did, Medina attended OCS, but unlike Calley, Medina succeeded at OCS. Medina graduated fourth in his OCS class and became known as an officer who had full command of his troops while creating a tough and strict atmosphere. Medina’s tough policies made it difficult to be under his command while in training, but his men quickly came to respect and trust him, honors that Calley did not receive.

During their first days in Southeast Asia, the men of Charlie Company received training that the army believed prepared them for the war in Vietnam. Many men in Charlie Company believed the training was outdated and prepared the company for warfare that had existed in the open fields of Europe during World War II and not the dense jungles of Vietnam.

³ William Calley quoted in Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 54.

⁴ William Calley quoted in John Sack, *Lieutenant Calley: His Own Story* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 29.

During their first month in Vietnam, the men of Charlie Company saw limited combat, but a number of men were lost to land mines and Vietnamese booby-traps. As was the case at OCS, Calley was becoming known among his men as an incompetent leader and was quickly losing the trust of his men. The situation encountered in the Vietnam countryside, including land mines and booby-traps, had changed the attitude of the American soldiers. Their inability to trust innocent civilians was becoming an issue among the soldiers and Calley was unable to control their emotions.

Medina often ordered Calley to lead 1st Platoon on missions to secure areas and villages around the site of their secure base. Calley and his men conducted daily raids on villages and hamlets searching for any sign of Vietcong, Vietnamese Communists. Some of the raids were mostly peaceful and required little combat. Other missions resulted in fierce firefights with enemies who were hidden in trees and protected by the security of the villages. When Calley and his men would enter these villages, their frustration levels with the locals increased because of the language barrier and lack of cooperation by the Vietnamese. Calley and the men of the platoon were losing their patience and were quickly reaching their breaking point. “What am I pulling ambushes for?,” Calley asked, “I hadn’t met any VC in the daylight either. What am I running patrols for? Or looking for? What did I have sixteen months of training for? Now, Charlie was made for killing! Charlie was made for war! Charlie was combat infantry: *We want to kill!*”⁵

In addition to the combat frustration which was gripping the men, the relationship between the local Vietnamese and the men of Charlie Company was deteriorating on another front. During their first three months in the area, Calley and his men were often

⁵ Sack, 46.

fraternizing with the local women. On numerous occasions Medina and Calley were forced to discipline the men for hiring prostitutes and leaving camp after hours. Calley himself met a local woman, around the age of twenty, who became a nearly constant companion for him. What began as a relationship between an American officer and a Vietnamese prostitute became a situation of two individuals who could not stand to be away from each other. While disciplining his men for their actions, Calley was forced to hide his relationship and live in his hypocritical world.

As the frustration on the battlefield increased, the local women began to take the brunt of the American frustration. The men of Charlie Company began to demand sex with the prostitutes without paying, which led to fierce arguments. Calley and Medina disciplined the men for not only their fraternization, but also their lack of decency and not paying. As these situations became more frequent the men of 1st Platoon spoke of raping these women. The men had reached their breaking point on yet another level, and Calley was unable to control them. Calley not only lost the support and respect of his platoon, he also lost his relationship with the local woman. The time had come for Charlie Company to become that combat infantry which Calley believed it was, and the local Vietnamese would suffer greatly.

On March 15, 1968, Charlie Company was given the orders to sweep through the My Lai 4 hamlet, where two hundred fifty to three hundred North Vietnamese soldiers were believed to be camped. The village was home to a large number of civilians, many of whom were believed by the U.S. Army to be sympathizers with the Vietcong. The orders given to the officers of Charlie Company included destroying the village and clearing the area of Vietcong. There was confusion about what was to be done when

U.S. troops encountered civilians; some understood the orders to mean completely destroy the village, while others assumed civilians were never to be fired upon. What became apparent from the officers was that those who stayed behind in the villages prior to March 15, 1968, were the enemy and should be treated as such.

The morning of March 16, 1968, brought four platoons of Charlie Company into the My Lai area, and 1st Platoon under the command of Lt. Calley was responsible for securing a landing area outside My Lai 4. Calley and his men found a landing area free of Vietcong soldiers and yet launched an attack on the village firing on anything they saw move, including rabbits, chickens, and cows. Soon, the constant sound of gunfire began to sound like a fiery battle to soldiers of the platoon who became separated. Firing on civilians continued, including the murder of a woman holding her baby in the street. The baby was later killed by American soldiers as well.⁶

Eventually Calley ordered his troops to gather the civilians into one area in the village. What happened next can only be described as a tragedy as the men were ordered by Lt. Calley to kill the mass of people. Within four hours, those civilians who were rounded up in the street were murdered in mass by American soldiers.

What occurred over the following days, weeks, and ultimately a year was a cover-up undertaken by the United States Army. Beginning with press releases and field reports in the days immediately following the massacre and continuing until a letter was written concerning rumors, the citizens of the United States and the world were kept in the dark about March 16, 1968.

⁶ Olson, 21.

For nearly nine months, and an additional three months after his discharge from the army, one soldier heard stories from fellow soldiers and pondered what he had been told. Ronald Ridenhour, who served in the aviation section of the 11th Infantry Brigade in Vietnam, decided to tell someone what he knew about that “dark and bloody” morning at My Lai.⁷ On March 29, 1969, Ridenhour sent a handwritten letter to Melvin Laird, secretary of defense from 1969 to 1973, outlining what he had been told concerning what had occurred in “Pinkville,” the name the men of Charlie Company gave to the area around My Lai due to the fact that it was labeled pink on all of their maps.

Ridenhour detailed conversations with those who were at the massacre who stated that the mission was to destroy the village and its inhabitants. The letter included an appalling story of a young boy, four or five years old, standing in the street holding his arm after being shot. After standing in the street for a few moments a member of Charlie Company killed the boy with his M-16. One witness told Ridenhour that the village had between three hundred and four hundred civilians, and “very few, if any, escaped.”⁸ Ridenhour included other accounts from soldiers who described the Americans as chasing down and killing the civilians; tales of shooting wounded civilians rather than giving them medical aid; and incidents of pure slaughter through the village throughout the day.

Ronald Ridenhour was not completely convinced that the events that he was describing actually happened at My Lai, but he knew something had occurred.

⁷ Letter from Mr. Ronald L. Ridenhour to Secretary of Defense, March 29, 1969, in Joseph Goldstein, Burke Marshall and Jack Schwartz, eds., *The My Lai Massacre and its Cover-up: Beyond the Reach of the Law? The Peers Commission Report with a Supplement and Introductory Essay on the Limits of Law* (New York: The Free Press, 1976), 34; (hereafter referred to as Peers).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

Ridenhour points out that he heard the story, told much the same way, from multiple sources over a nine-month span. Ridenhour listened to his conscience and wrote the letter in hope that an investigation would occur into the massacre at My Lai. His letter did not fall on deaf ears; rather his letter brought about a cover-up.

The events at My Lai, the investigation, and the Vietnam War have been concluded for over thirty years, but the trials and tribulations of those years continue to play a role in American society in the early twenty-first century. The 1960s are remembered as the decade of protest as America saw years of protests, demonstrations, and internal strife that led to division within the nation. The most visible demonstrations of the late 1960s concerning the Vietnam War were staged by young people who were intent on bringing the Vietnam War to a conclusion. During the early years of America's involvement in Vietnam the majority of Americans did not generally agree with the protestors, and continued to stay loyal to the U.S. government and its decisions.

Much of that sentiment began to change following the aforementioned Tet Offensive in 1968, which was a victory for the U.S. but showed the American people that the war was not as close to being over as they were led to believe. The summer of 1968 saw an increase in protests and revolts, some of which included violence and mass arrests throughout the nation. The defining moment of the summer of 1968, on the home front, was the clash between Chicago police and demonstrators during the Democratic National Convention. The press coverage, which included vivid film and photographs of police and demonstrators squaring off in the streets of Chicago, violence between the two groups, and the eventual arrest of many of the demonstration's leaders, gave national attention to the movement and the eclectic leaders who were in the forefront. Although

the majority of Americans did not agree with the tactics used by the radical demonstrators, the majority of Americans were against the war in Vietnam as the fall of 1968 arrived.

With a new president, Richard Nixon, and the events of My Lai becoming public, anti-war demonstrations continued throughout the nation, in 1969. 1969 was not as volatile as the summer of 1968, but the demonstrations continued to occur. With the news of My Lai and the rising toll of American dead in Vietnam, those against the war were not in any hurry to stop telling their story.

The anti-war movement began to divide the nation even further as President Nixon called on the nation to ignore the radicals who were leading the demonstrations. Although events in Vietnam, such as My Lai, caused the majority of Americans to believe that U.S. troops needed to come home as soon as possible, Nixon was able to convince America that the radicals were tearing apart the nation. Nixon argued that the demonstrators were helping the communists while damaging the hope and morale of all America, including the troops. Could the events of My Lai and the massacre of hundreds of innocent women and children be pushed aside politically because there was a division in the country concerning the leaders of demonstrations? If the military could cover-up a massacre, it was entirely possible that a president could cover-up the trial and the press coverage.

On November 26, 1969, William Westmoreland, a general and the chief of staff of the U.S. Army, sent a memo with the orders to begin an investigation into the events at My Lai. The memo included the desired outcomes and focal points of the investigation. The investigation was to determine the events of March 16, 1968, at My Lai, study the

reports and inquiries which followed the events, and determine if the chain of command suppressed information from the incident. The investigation also focused around events which occurred during the time period between the incident at My Lai and the date of Ridenhour's letter, which was March 29, 1969. Westmoreland's memo was co-signed by Stanley R. Resor, secretary of the army, and was sent to William R. Peers, a lieutenant general in the U.S. Army.⁹

Over the next two months Peers amassed a team of investigators and began investigating the events of March 16, 1968, at My Lai. Peers and his team visited Vietnam a number of times and toured the area with those who were at My Lai or who had direct knowledge of the events.

After touring Vietnam and researching the area and information relating to the incident, Peers and his team began conducting interviews in Washington, D.C. In less than two months Peers and his investigative team, including two lawyers, brought nearly four hundred individuals in for testimony in order to determine what had happened at My Lai. Peers was not only looking for information relating to the events of the evening of March 15, 1968 and the morning of March 16, 1968, but also what occurred following the assault. Peers and his team looked for any signs of a cover-up or failures within the U.S. Army chain of command. Peers was an individual who had risen through the ranks and whose leadership was respected by all who knew him. Those characteristics led William R. Peers through one of the most difficult tasks of his military career.

The Peers Committee acquired testimony from nearly four hundred individuals. The testimonies ranged from a few minutes with only a few questions to testimonies which took days to complete. The Peers Committee printed the text of the testimonies in

⁹ Peers, "Memorandum For Lieutenant General William R. Peers, November 26, 1969, 33.

its final report and devoted the second volume of his final report entirely to testimony. Volume 2 of the Peers Committee Report consists of twenty-seven books and thousands of pages. As of the writing of this thesis, the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., is known to be the only depository in the United States of a copy of Volume 2 and Volume 3, which contains the exhibits presented during testimony.¹⁰

Over the past year the Library of Congress has launched a project to bring the entire three-volume Peers Report online in an electronic format which is free to the general public. As of the writing of this thesis, the Library of Congress has made significant progress in this project but has yet to complete the second volume. The testimonies which have not yet been brought into electronic format include key witness testimony, including that of Charles Gruver and Larry La Croix. The testimonies of three highly influential individuals, William Calley, Ernest Medina, and Oran Henderson, are not yet in an electronic format. Although this small amount of information is not yet available, the Library of Congress has given the public access to nearly twenty books of testimony, including thousands of pages and hundreds of witnesses.

Using the Peers Commission report, this study will show that the United States military intentionally covered-up the events at the My Lai hamlet of March 16, 1968, and how it was possible for an event of this magnitude to be kept secret for such a lengthy period of time.

¹⁰ The author conducted extensive research to locate the text of Volume 2 of the Peers Committee Report. The author had the opportunity to discuss the matter with representatives of the Library of Congress, archivists at the Vietnam Center at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, and numerous Vietnam scholars and professors throughout the country. Each source with whom the author was able to communicate was also interested in finding the answer, and the answer appeared to always lead back to the Library of Congress.

History is full of events and names and individuals which are remembered for generations and are given lasting fame within the pages of academic publications. The My Lai massacre and the ensuing cover-up and investigation, are no different. The event is synonymous with the horrors and torture of warfare. The individuals who became household names during the trial will be remembered for the morning of March 16, 1968, and their successes and failures following that day will pale in comparison. For those who lived through the decade of protest and the Vietnam War, the following study of the My Lai massacre and the names and actions will bring back vivid memories of the initial display of the photos and stories from My Lai. For the generations that followed, including the current generation which is living through the second Iraq War, My Lai provides an event which can be used as a comparison when dealing with war atrocities in the early twenty-first century.

CHAPTER TWO

Investigation of Events at My Lai

Ronald Ridenhour was a paratrooper who had 20/20 vision and was selected to be among a group of new infantrymen who were to live in the jungles of Vietnam beginning in the fall of 1967. These men, including Ridenhour, were among the elite in the U.S. Army. They were known for their superior vision, their high intelligence, their sharp shooting skills, and they were better than most at swimming. The first task the U.S. Army handed them was the mission of landing behind enemy lines, becoming one with the jungle, and launching reconnaissance patrols behind enemy lines. Ridenhour and his fellow paratroopers were good soldiers and were a group of men who were instantly respected by others fighting in Vietnam.

The group was disbanded in November 1967, and many of the men were re-assigned to Charlie Company. Ridenhour was assigned to the brigade's aviation section where he served as a door gunner. During his time with the aviation section, Ridenhour lost contact with the soldiers who he had befriended during their original mission into Vietnam. That sense of being alone would change near the end of April 1968 as would the rest of his life.

Near the end of April 1968 Ridenhour found one of his old friends, Charles Gruver, a paratrooper who had been assigned to Charlie Company in November 1967, and the two had the opportunity to have a beer. Just a few minutes into the conversation Gruver casually, and quietly, asked for Ridenhour's thoughts on the events at Pinkville. Ridenhour had not heard of Pinkville or any other event worth mentioning and responded

by asking Gruver what he was talking about. Gruver went on to explain that Charlie Company had gone into the area and “killed everybody. We shot ‘em. Lined ‘em up and shot ‘em down. Three hundred, four hundred, I don’t know how many.”¹ Unable to comprehend what Gruver told him, Ridenhour began to ask more questions, and Gruver responded with long and honest answers. Gruver included in his account of Pinkville that when killing everybody, that meant women and children.

Ridenhour was disgusted by what he heard from Gruver and told himself that the men of the U.S. Army would not be involved in acts of violence such as what Gruver had told him. But Ridenhour personally knew and easily trusted Gruver and resolved from that moment to find out more about Pinkville and attempt to do something about it.

Over the following weeks Ridenhour talked with men who were in Charlie Company and had been present at My Lai, or Pinkville. Ridenhour was intelligent enough to understand he could not show interest in events at My Lai and that he could not be suspected of investigating the men. Ridenhour would allow the other soldiers to mention Pinkville and then he would begin to assault them with questions. Ridenhour learned that what Gruver had told him was true. Ridenhour heard stories which matched those told by Gruver and which gave him more horrid details and furthered his sense of disappointment in the men of the U.S. Army.

This way of life lasted for several months for Ridenhour. He continued to serve in Vietnam and when given the opportunity would discuss the events at My Lai at length with those who were there. One of those conversations was with Larry La Croix, a sergeant in the U.S. Army who was assigned to Charlie Company and was involved at

¹ Charles Gruver quoted in Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 215.

My Lai. He told Ridenhour that the morning of March 16, 1968, was one that could not be forgotten. La Croix relayed to Ridenhour that the men of Charlie Company had destroyed the village and its inhabitants. La Croix added that a machine gunner had refused to continue shooting and that William Calley, lieutenant in the 1st Platoon of Charlie Company, pushed the man aside, took over the M-60 machine gun, and completed the mass murder. Ridenhour was shocked when La Croix told him that Charlie Company had slaughtered the “villagers like so many sheep.”²

With just a few weeks left on his tour of duty in Vietnam, Ridenhour visited a close friend, Michael Bernhardt, a rifleman in the second squadron, in the hospital and heard more about My Lai. Bernhardt told Ridenhour that he had chosen not to participate at My Lai and was repulsed that men of honor within his group were involved. Bernhardt told Ridenhour that the men had been on edge before the invasion of My Lai, and that speeches given by Ernest Medina, commander of Charlie Company, and Calley had brought the men to a level that was, in Bernhardt’s opinion, dangerous. The details offered from Bernhardt pushed Ridenhour over the edge. The two men decided that something had to be done, and Bernhardt told Ridenhour that he would do anything, including testifying, to support whatever decision Ridenhour made.

After returning home, discussing what he had heard with his family, and struggling with the weight of the information he had known for months, Ridenhour decided to tell people about My Lai. Ridenhour was an intelligent man who wanted to become a journalist following his enlistment. He understood that in order to gain the attention of anyone of importance concerning My Lai, he had to write one hell of a story. For six weeks Ridenhour wrote and re-wrote a letter detailing what he knew and

² Larry La Croix quoted in Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, 216.

suggesting an investigation be launched to determine how a massacre occurred under the watchful eyes of the U.S. Army.

On April 2, 1969, Ridenhour finished his letter and sent it to over thirty officials within the United States government. The men on the list included Morris Udall, U.S. representative from Arizona, Richard Nixon, president of the United States, Melvin Laird, secretary of defense, and senators Barry Goldwater and Edward Kennedy. In order to have the assistants of these men take the letter seriously, Ridenhour paid to have each letter sent by registered mail.

Within the first paragraph Ridenhour clearly stated the purpose of his letter and quickly displayed the anger and uneasiness which had taken him over.

It was in late April 1968 that I first heard of “Pinkville” and what allegedly happened there. I received that first report with some skepticism but in the following months I was to hear similar stories from such a variety of people that it became impossible for me to disbelieve that something rather dark and bloody did indeed occur sometime in March 1968 in a village called “Pinkville” in the Republic of Vietnam.³

Ridenhour had used his fresh and untrained journalism skills to draft a letter which was difficult to put down by those who had signed and received that small envelope which had been sent by registered mail.

Ronald Ridenhour’s call for justice did not fall on deaf ears, and it quickly moved through the ranks of the U.S. Army and eventually landed on the desk of William Childs Westmoreland, a general and the chief of staff of the U.S. Army. Westmoreland was born in South Carolina in 1914 and graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1936 at the age of twenty-two. Westmoreland quickly earned promotions and moved

³ Letter from Mr. Ronald L. Ridenhour to Secretary of Defense, March 29, 1969, in Joseph Goldstein, Burke Marshall and Jack Schwartz, eds., *The My Lai Massacre and its Cover-up: Beyond the Reach of the Law? The Peers Commission Report with a Supplement and Introductory Essay on the Limits of Law* (New York: The Free Press, 1976), 34. (hereafter referred to as Peers).

through the army chain of command. He was commissioned second lieutenant after graduation and was a lieutenant colonel by 1942. During World War II Westmoreland was the battalion commander of the 9th Infantry Division in northern Africa and Sicily from 1942-1944. For the next two decades Westmoreland continued to serve and move to higher positions within the U.S. Army. During the peak years of the Vietnam War, 1964-1968, Westmoreland was commander of the United States Military Assistance Command. Westmoreland had been chief of staff for just over one year when he read Ridenhour's letter and ordered an investigation.

On November 26, 1969, Westmoreland sent a memo with the orders to begin an investigation into the events at My Lai. The memo included the desired outcomes and focal points of the investigation. The investigation was to determine the events of March 16, 1968, at My Lai, study the reports and inquiries which followed the events, and determine if the chain of command suppressed information from the incident. The investigation also focused around events which occurred during the time period between the incident at My Lai and the date of Ridenhour's letter, which was March 29, 1969. Westmoreland's memo was co-signed by Stanley R. Resor, secretary of the army, and was sent to William R. Peers, a lieutenant general in the U.S. Army.⁴

William Peers was born in the heart of the United States in Iowa in 1914. During the Depression his parents moved the family to California, and, following their divorce, William lived with his mother near Los Angeles. Peers was an all-around athlete and student during high school, and in 1937 he graduated from the College of Education at the University of California at Los Angeles. Upon graduation Peers joined the Army reserves, and in one short year, he received a full commission in the U.S. Army.

⁴ Peers, "Memorandum For Lieutenant General William R. Peers", November 26, 1969, 33.

When World War II began Peers entered into the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) of the U.S. Army and was sent to Burma. His initial mission in Burma was as an operation and training officer, where he planned guerilla missions and missions of espionage. Peers also trained with a group which had spies and networks within the Japanese military. Near the end of the war in July 1945, Peers was given full command of OSS in China and organized missions which freed American POW's from Japanese camps throughout China and Japan.

Following World War II Peers first served with the Central Intelligence Agency, then again during the Korean War, and also taught at the Army War College for nearly ten years. When the Vietnam War began, Peers was stationed at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., as the assistant deputy chief of staff for special operations. By the end of the first year of the war, Peers was promoted to the Office of the Joint Chiefs where he was the special assistant for counterinsurgency and special activities. Peers' rise through the U.S. Army continued in January 1967 when he was named a two-star general and given command of the 4th Infantry Division in Vietnam. In the spring of 1968 Peers was promoted to command over five hundred thousand U.S. combat troops, four Vietnamese divisions, and two Korean divisions, and was given his third-star. After numerous successes in Vietnam under his leadership, Peers was instructed in November 1969 to investigate what had happened in a small village nearly two years earlier.

As this chapter will show, the testimony brought forth during the investigation by William Peers and his team tells the story of the morning of March 16, 1968, the days immediately following the event, and the months that followed before news of the atrocities was brought forth.

A central figure in the story telling of the events at My Lai is Hugh Thompson, Jr. Thompson was a first lieutenant and a helicopter pilot for the 123rd Aviation Battalion. Prior to My Lai Thompson had over six hundred hours of flying experience and had been in Vietnam for over three months. During the assault on My Lai, Thompson was a hero to many civilians on the ground as he saw what was occurring from his helicopter and attempted to save innocent women and children. Thompson is known for his courage to land his helicopter, stand against his fellow American soldiers, and defend the innocent civilians of the hamlet. Before Ridenhour's letter became a must-read throughout the army, it was Hugh Thompson who not only stood up on March 16 to do what he could to stop the assault, but he continued to stand up as he brought news of the events of that fateful morning to those who he believed could get something done to right a terrible wrong.

Peers and his team interviewed Thompson a number of times from December 1969 through January 1970. Thompson testified under oath twice in front of Peers in Vietnam while Peers was conducting his fact-finding mission. Thompson then returned to Washington, D.C., in January and appeared multiple times in front of the commission.

In order to get Thompson's story as straight as possible, the investigators of the Peers Commission grilled Thompson on every occasion of testimony on maps and location of certain places and individuals. Thompson was continually describing maps, labeling roads, and identifying photographs of My Lai. Throughout his testimony Thompson rarely had any difficulties in these exercises and over the nearly two months of testimony, his answers hardly varied. In addition to identifying roads and huts within My Lai, Thompson was often asked to identify individuals who may or may not have

been at My Lai. He was also asked, repeatedly, to mark the exact location of these individuals in the hamlet. More than any other witness, Thompson was asked the same question a number of times as the investigators wanted to learn if he would be consistent in his story.

Thompson testified that the first event he remembered from the morning of March 16, 1968, was seeing a Vietnamese man running away from the hamlet with a weapon. He ordered his gunner on his helicopter to fire, and the shots initially missed. Thompson testified that he then flew over some trees in order to search for the man, but they never found him. When returning from their futile search Thompson testified that he saw and heard an extensive amount of mortar action coming from the center of the village, and he decided to fly over to provide cover.

Thompson testified that when he arrived over the center of the village he and his men were able to see a large number of wounded lying in the streets. Thompson testified that he called for medical aid to be brought to the individuals, who were Vietnamese, and he then dropped a smoke marker near the wounded to help the medical personnel find the injured. Thompson continued his reconnaissance work over the village and then he saw a ditch with dozens of people lying within it. Thompson continued to hover over the ditch and noticed that the people were moving and alive. Thompson testified that he now believed he had to do something, so he landed and confronted a fellow American on the ground.

Thompson's testimony, which consists of hundreds of pages, contains many portions which provide a gripping account of what he saw at My Lai. In relating his first

account of seeing the people in the ditch, Thompson provided gripping details of what occurred. Thompson landed and spoke to a sergeant who

told them there was women and kids over there that were wounded – could he help them or could they help them? And he made some remark to the effect that the only way he could help them was to kill them. And I thought he was joking. I didn't take him seriously. I said, 'Why don't you see if you can help them,' and I took off again. And as I took off my crew chief said that the guy was shooting into the ditch. As I turned around I could see a guy holding weapon pointing into the ditch.⁵

Thompson's eyewitness account of what occurred differs greatly from Ridenhour.

Although Ridenhour heard the same story multiple times, he never saw it. Thompson not only saw it, but he attempted to stop it, as he picked up and helped sixteen Vietnamese civilians escape to hospitals and safety throughout the morning.

At the time of the incident Thompson did not know the soldier to whom he spoke near the ditch. He saw the man shooting into the ditch and killing innocent women and children, but he did not know him or his name. But he did remember the face forever after that. Upon his initial meeting with Peers, Thompson identified the sergeant from a lineup of photographs. The soldier that Thompson identified was Lieutenant Calley.

Thompson testified that he went to his superior the next day, March 17, 1968, and told him what he had seen. Thompson testified that he told his superior that he had seen an officer shoot a Vietnamese girl on the side of the road and another officer shooting into a ditch full of people. In that meeting, according to Thompson, no notes were taken, no one was put under oath, and his superior did not bring anyone else into the room.

Thompson testified he went into detail about what he saw and did but left the meeting

⁵ Hugh C. Thompson. *Summary of Testimony: Hugh C. Thompson, Jr., January 6, 1970*. From Library of Congress, *Peers Inquiry: Report of the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the My Lai Incident, Vol II, Book 8, p. 10*. http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/Peers_inquiry.html. (Hereafter referred to as Library of Congress: Peers).

unsure of what would occur. After what he did on the battlefield the day before, Thompson had to have left that meeting with a feeling of uneasiness.

When asked by Peers to recount what he remembered from that meeting and the hours following it, Thompson testified that he believed that a massacre had occurred. Thompson remembered being asked by his superior how the bodies got into the ditch. This was the moment, according to Thompson, that the word massacre entered his mind. Thompson testified that he told his superior that he did not know how the bodies got into the ditch and did not think

the Americans are going to take a bunch of dead bodies and throw them into a ditch, or they might even do that, but they're not going to put live bodies in a ditch with dead ones, and the Vietnamese are not all going to huddle in the ditch. And that's the part that did not make sense to me: how the bodies got into the ditch.⁶

Thompson also testified that when Oran Henderson, colonel in Americal Division, which was organized in 1967 and consisted of three brigades, conducted his own investigation of My Lai in the spring of 1968, Henderson asked him to repeat his story for him. Thompson testified that he gave the colonel the same information and was under the assumption that something was going to be done about the events since Henderson was conducting the investigation. Thompson stated that he went into detail for Henderson but that Henderson did not ask for much of his time.

In relation to Captain Medina's role at My Lai, Thompson testified that he did not have any interaction with Medina the day of the attack, but he did recall seeing Medina a few times that morning. Thompson testified that he saw Medina shoot an injured, but alive, woman who was lying in the street. Thompson stated that he saw Medina walk up to the woman and then take a few steps away, only to turn around and shoot the woman a

⁶ Ibid., *Vol II, Book 8, pg. 20.*

number of times. Thompson testified that when he saw this occur he was too far away to do anything or to say anything.

Thompson also testified that he spoke with Carl Creswell, a chaplain in Americal, concerning what he saw at My Lai. Thompson told Creswell what had happened and was assured by Creswell that Creswell would take this information to his superior to see if he could get something done.

Thompson's testimony brought forth the horror of the attack at My Lai. Thompson's testimony focused, because of the questions, on maps and locations of people and events. Thompson brought to the attention of the Peers Commission what had occurred at My Lai. Through the years Thompson continued to tell the same story. His story highlighted the difference between what is right and what is courageous and what is wrong and what is cowardice.

On January 29, 1970, Ronald Ridenhour testified in front of the Peers Commission. Since sending his letter, Ridenhour had become well acquainted with the members of the commission. Ridenhour had met and been interviewed by Peers and others on the commission a number of times before his testimony. Ridenhour's five hours under oath were primarily focused on Ridenhour's military experience and his familiarity with maps and locations throughout My Lai area. Peers stated a number of times during the testimony that the commission knew nearly all of the details that Ridenhour could tell them, but they needed to get some final answers. Although Ridenhour's testimony did not provide the members of the commission with any surprising information, it did provide further accounts of the horrors of My Lai.

When recalling his first interaction with a soldier who was present at My Lai, Ridenhour presented a detailed account of what he had been told. Although Ridenhour had given details in his original letter, he provided more graphic details during his testimony. When testifying about his first knowledge of My Lai Ridenhour testified that he

didn't believe that they had done something like this. He told me of seeing the captain's RTO shoot down a boy who was 3,4, or 5 years old; a very young boy who was standing by the trail who was wounded and just sort of in shock and didn't know what was going on. He said the captain's RTO just looked at him and blew him away.⁷

Ridenhour added that he had been told that one soldier shot himself in the foot in order to escape the massacre.

Ridenhour testified that he had heard during his conversations with fellow soldiers stories about Calley and Medina. He had been told Calley was seen on the ground at My Lai shooting innocent civilians and that on March 15, 1968, Medina gathered Charlie Company and told them not to forget their fellow soldiers who had been killed. According to Ridenhour Medina said that the people who had killed their friends and had placed the deadly booby-traps would pay for what they had done. Ridenhour testified that he had been told by others that Medina promised his men that "tomorrow morning you'll get your chance to make up for these things."⁸

Ridenhour went on to say that a number of soldiers related to him that Medina's orders the following morning, March 16, were not completely clear but anyone could understand what the orders meant. According to Ridenhour's testimony, Medina wantd

⁷ Ronald Ridenhour. *Summary of Testimony: Ronald L. Ridenhour., January 29, 1970.* From Library of Congress: Peers, *Vol II, Book 14, p. 17.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

his men to go into the village and completely destroy it and everything in it. Ridenhour said that a number of individuals present took this as an order to wipe the village and its people off of the map.

After providing the commission with his recollection of his initial conversations, Ridenhour was asked his own opinion on the ranking officers. Ridenhour testified that from his own opinion, and from what he gathered from his conversations with others, that the officers did not take much interest in stories of massacres or war crimes. Ridenhour stated that the

impression that I got from the people I talked to is that the officers looked away if they could. Unless the act was so flagrant and committed almost before their eyes, or even before their eyes, where they couldn't ignore it, they chose to ignore it.⁹

Ridenhour and others had the belief that unless something was seen, no punishment or any other consequences would come of it.

On January 12, 1970, Brian Livingston, a captain in the U.S. Army, appeared before the Peers Commission to offer his testimony of the events at My Lai. Livingston was a pilot in the aero-scout company of the 123rd Aviation Battalion and appeared in front of the commission suspected of committing no crimes.

During his two hours of testimony Livingston could not recall with which soldiers or pilots he flew on the day of the assault on My Lai. Livingston testified that his mission that day was to monitor people who were attempting to leave the village to the south, and he was ordered to pick up any military-age males and any other Vietnamese with weapons. Captain Livingston testified that Hugh Thompson had told him following the morning of March 16, that there were bodies lying everywhere and U.S. soldiers

⁹ Ibid., 52.

“took their miniguns and just did a job on it.”¹⁰ Upon further investigation of the village, Livingston saw a trench built within the center of the village. Livingston testified that he and the other soldiers flying with him all remarked that the trench was filled with water which had been stained the color of red. Livingston was then told by Thompson that Thompson saw the same ditch and had spoken with a captain on the ground. Livingston recalled that Thompson had said that he “saw an officer come up, and there was a little girl over here lying next to her parents, I believe it was her parents, and he said he saw the officer empty a clip off into her.”¹¹ Livingston continued his testimony by stating that Thompson continued to argue with the captain before running off towards another small female child. As Thompson arrived at the little girl, American ground forces were closing in on the child. Thompson, according to Livingston, ordered the soldiers to leave the child alone and radioed to his helicopter for his fellow pilots to aim their guns at the ground troops. Thompson was then able to pick up the child and safely carry her to his helicopter.

Livingston’s testimony of Thompson’s heroic actions highlights the confusion and terror which encompassed the hamlet that morning. Thompson and Livingston, from their perch in the sky, had been able to see actions that would lead to the word ‘massacre’ being used. The sights they saw were terrible enough to force Thompson to land his helicopter and run into the village, rescue a small Vietnamese child, vocally threaten his fellow army soldiers, and even order his helicopter to aim its guns on U.S. forces.

¹⁰ Brian Livingston. *Summary of Testimony: Brian W. Livingston, January 12, 1970*. From Library of Congress: Peers, *Vol II, Book 6, pg. 4*.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

Peers and his fellow investigators continued to ask Livingston for more details from his recollection of the events at My Lai. Livingston recalled that he saw anywhere from thirty-to-fifty women and children lying dead on the roads which led out of the center of the village. The shock of the morning was continuing for Livingston. Peers questioned Livingston on his estimate of the number of Vietnamese he saw lying on that road, and Livingston could only admit that he was guessing on the numbers because at “the time I was in too much shock to really pick out numbers. It may have been only ten people.”¹²

Nearing the end of this testimony Livingston was asked to recall a letter which he had written to his wife the night of March 16, 1968. Livingston was highly emotional in the letter and quickly told his wife the horrors which he had seen earlier that day. Livingston told his wife, Betz, that he had never seen so many dead people at one time, and nearly all of them were helpless women or children. Livingston, in the letter, began questioning why he and his fellow Americans were even in Vietnam if all they were going to do was fight in jungles and brutally murder innocent citizens.¹³

Peers questioned Livingston on the final sentence of his letter which stated that Livingston and Thompson were going to make sure that those in command would hear about the events of the day. Livingston testified that they believed that something had to be done and he recalled that Thompson took the news to the commanding officer of the division. Livingston testified he did not go with Thompson, but he had been told by

¹² Ibid., 12.

¹³ *Extract of Exhibit M-21: CPT Livingston's Letter to his Wife, March 16, 1968.* Library of Congress: Peers, Vol III, Book 4, 110.

Thompson that those in high command were now aware of the incident and something was going to happen, so Livingston let Thompson take it from there.

In the days following the events at My Lai, Livingston testified that within the company the word ‘massacre’ was often being used and that it was common knowledge that something happened the morning of March 16. Livingston believed that those in command of the division knew something had occurred because the men did not shy away from discussing the topic around camp.

Livingston thought an investigation would occur, but three days after the events at My Lai, Livingston wrote his wife again on March 19. He had just been told that the official battle report was going to list only 128 Vietcong killed. Livingston angrily wrote his wife and told her “that’s a bunch of bull. . . It made me sick to watch it.”¹⁴

Also appearing before the committee on January 12, 1970, was Carl Creswell, a chaplain for the artillery division of the Americal Division. Creswell had met with Hugh Thompson on either the afternoon of March 16, 1968, or the morning of March 17, 1968. Creswell’s testimony included his account of his meeting with Thompson and what actions he decided to take following the meeting, including taking the information to his superior.

As company chaplain Creswell was not present in meetings or briefings with the division. Creswell testified that the first time he had heard of either My Lai or Pinkville was the day following the events at My Lai, March 17. Creswell testified that he walked into a briefing with Colonel Barker and heard the other officers angrily discussing the actions at Pinkville. Creswell testified that the mood within the meeting was hostile and

¹⁴ *Extract of Exhibit M-22: CPT Livingston’s Letter to his Wife, March 19, 1968.* Library of Congress: Peers, Vol III, Book 4, 111.

that officers reported that they were taking severe sniper fire and they decided to “clean it out.”¹⁵

The heart of Creswell’s testimony focused on his communication with Thompson and his own superior, Chaplain Francis Lewis. Creswell recalled meeting with Thompson and noticed that Thompson was upset and looking for guidance for any future decisions or discussions Thompson should have. Creswell testified that he told Thompson to discuss the matter with his superior and that he would take the matter to Chaplain Lewis. Creswell took the discussion to Lewis and discussed the allegations that Thompson had brought forth. Creswell testified that he told Lewis that he “had an awful lot of confidence in Mr. Thompson. I said that if there was not going to be an examination into these charges, I was going to resign my commission. I felt that strong.”¹⁶ Creswell claimed that upon meeting with Lewis again three days later he was assured that an investigation was under way. Creswell then immediately heard about the official report, which had sent Captain Livingston into a rage, which noted the deaths of only 128 Vietnamese. Creswell testified that he and Thompson had a good laugh while reading the official report.

Through direct questioning from Peers, Creswell recounted the details of his conversations with Thompson and his testimony of the events which Thompson described match the testimonies of other individuals. Creswell recounted the story of Thompson saving the female child and threatening U.S. soldiers if they made another move towards the girl.

¹⁵ Carl E. Creswell *Summary of Testimony: Carl E. Creswell, January 12, 1970*. From Library of Congress: Peers, *Vol II, Book 1, pg. 4*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, *Vol II, Book 1, pg. 5-6*.

Creswell testified that each time Thompson told the story about the little girl, Thompson would become visibly upset. Creswell told Peers during his testimony that he easily believed Thompson because events like this do not happen in normal everyday actions. What Creswell said next symbolizes the confusion and horror of My Lai, and the tragedy of the Vietnam War. Creswell noted that he believed Thompson because events like My Lai theoretically do not happen, “but theory and reality are two different things in Vietnam.”¹⁷ Did the confusion between theory and reality cause the mental lapses during the morning of March 16, 1968? Did that potential confusion make it possible for the atrocities of that day to remain hidden for so long?

As the days following March 16 passed Creswell began to inquire with Chaplain Lewis further concerning the investigation. Creswell testified that he had confidence in Lewis doing his job in order to pass along the information. This confidence allowed Creswell to decide not to file his report in writing. He testified that his only reporting of his conversations with Thompson was done verbally through Lewis. Creswell testified that Lewis continued to assure him that an investigation would be happening. This assurance from Lewis brought Creswell to the decision that he should drop the report and allow Lewis and his superiors to do their job. Creswell made another comment during his testimony that highly defines the problems within the U.S. Army following the events at My Lai. Creswell testified that he told Thompson that he was “glad to support him, but I couldn’t carry the ball myself. It was really up to division to do something about it.”¹⁸ Creswell made the decision to stop doing something about the events of March 16 and trusted those above him. He also kept quiet during this time. Both of these decisions

¹⁷ Ibid., 6.

¹⁸ Ibid., 10.

made by Creswell, and many others, led to the delay in determining what went wrong at My Lai 4.

Creswell completed his testimony by stating that he was just one man in a large company and that he could not do it all himself. Creswell testified that among officers and others of higher command that he would see during his daily duties, he rarely, if ever, heard anyone discuss My Lai. Creswell testified that he asked someone, three or four days following the events, if there was going to be a press release of what occurred. He was told this time, and a few other times following his original question, that no press release would be given. Why would the U.S. Army not issue a press release describing what they would describe as a victory, which also resulted in no U.S. casualties?

The testimonies of Carl Creswell and Hugh Thompson include the name Francis Lewis on a number of occasions. Francis Lewis was the division chaplain of the Americal Division from August 1967 through August 1968. On January 12, 1970, Lewis appeared at the Pentagon to offer his testimony to Peers and his team.

Chaplain Lewis testified that his first knowledge of the events at My Lai was at the nightly briefing on March 16, 1968. Lewis said that at the briefing the officers handed out the news sheet of the morning assault and it stated that 128 Vietcong were killed. Lewis heard Charles Anistranski, a lieutenant colonel in the Americal Division, comment on the news of 128 Vietcong killed. Lewis testified that Anistranski said “Ha ha, they were all women and children.”¹⁹ Lewis testified the room was full of excitement and the men appeared to be enjoying the excitement. Lewis then asked another officer if

¹⁹ Francis Lewis. *Summary of Testimony: Francis Lewis, January 12, 1970*. From Library of Congress: Peers, *Vol II, Book 3, pg. 4*.

someone was going to look into the events of the morning, and he was assured, according to testimony, that an investigation would take place.

Lewis continued his testimony by stating that the next day, March 17, Chaplain Creswell made a visit to his office. According to Lewis, Creswell immediately brought forth information concerning a conversation Creswell had had with Hugh Thompson, which included details which matched what Lewis heard the night before at the nightly briefing. Lewis testified that following his conversation with Creswell he took the information to Nels Parson, a colonel and chief of staff of Americal Division, and left under the impression that Parson would see to it that an investigation took place.

According to Lewis' testimony, Creswell continued to hound him about the investigation. Lewis testified that he was not involved with any investigation, but his numerous conversations with Parsons, and others in Parsons' office, made him feel "assured that the investigation was proper and it was going forward as they said it was. This is why I didn't personally make any further overtures as far as taking it upon my shoulders to see the CID or IG or anybody else."²⁰ Lewis' statements are another example of an individual who believed he was doing his part, and he was just part of a very structured chain of command that was to be followed, no matter the situation. Lewis initially did not see any progress of an investigation, but he allowed those above him to convince him something was happening, and Lewis accepted this information and quickly, and often, passed it onto others such as Chaplain Creswell.

Lewis continued his testimony by giving credit to Creswell for bringing the information to him. As seen in the testimony of Chaplain Creswell, Lewis testified that Creswell was angry and relentless in his quest to have something done. Lewis included

²⁰ Ibid., *Vol II, Book 3, pg. 5.*

in his recollection of his conversation with Creswell the number of 128. Lewis testified that he heard this number on a number of occasions, beginning at the nightly briefing. According to Lewis, Creswell obtained the number from his conversation with Thompson, and Creswell included that the 128 were women and children. As in the case of Ronald Ridenhour, if one continues to hear the same story over and over again, something must have happened. In the case of Chaplain Lewis, he took the information to his superiors and stood aside and did not take the initiative upon himself to ensure the investigation was moving forward.

Lewis also testified that about two weeks after the assault on My Lai, he met Hugh Thompson while having a drink at camp. According to Lewis, Thompson was still upset about what he had seen at My Lai and continued to question Lewis about the status of an investigation. Lewis testified that he only offered the information to Thompson which he had acquired from Creswell, and he told Thompson that an investigation was taking place at that time.

Lewis was asked if he had gone into detail concerning My Lai with Thompson during their informal visit. Lewis responded that he believed that he had all the relevant information from Creswell, and he “didn’t feel it was necessary” to ask Thompson any further questions.²¹ Lewis was asked if he had suggested to Thompson to put his account of 16 March 1968 onto paper in order to get his story in a file which could be used in an investigation. Lewis testified that believed that too was unnecessary, and he believed that if those in command who were conducting the investigation wanted Thompson to write something down, they would ask him for it. Again, Lewis appeared to be content with doing only what he deemed to be necessary concerning the investigation.

²¹ *Vol II, Book 1, pg. 11-12.*

Near the end of his testimony Lewis was asked if he believed a war crime had been committed at My Lai and if he believed that the U.S. Army had attempted to cover-up the events at My Lai. Lewis testified that not only as a chaplain, but as a human being he believed that the killing of innocent civilians was a war crime. Lewis did testify that throughout the war he was aware of numerous instances where women and children were killed, but not in the large numbers which occurred at My Lai. Although Lewis was not at My Lai and had only heard from others what happened, he did believe that what happened at My Lai constituted a war crime.

Lewis was also confused about the investigation and the question of a cover-up. He stated that he did not have trouble gathering information from officers when the discussion turned towards an investigation. Lewis testified that at the time he believed that he was just one man in the chain of command, and he only knew what he needed to know.

Lewis' testimony adds to the story of a highly effective military machine that revolved around a strict organizational chart that was to be followed at all times and not questioned. Lewis testified that he could only believe what he was hearing and since he did not have any first hand accounts of the morning of March 16, 1968, his hands were tied. But Lewis also testified that he had heard the same stories over and over again, including a number of soldiers referring to the casualty number of 128. Individuals such as Ronald Ridenhour took the opportunity, and the risk, to go against that organizational chart and go outside the lines and tell their story. Chaplain Lewis, a good man and soldier who was dedicated to his mission and who felt remorse about what had occurred

at My Lai, never fully questioned those above him because he took their words as fact and pushed the other words of massacre and atrocity to the side.

On January 15, 1970, Orban F. Qualls, a lieutenant colonel in Americal, testified before the Peers Commission. The commission asked Qualls to testify because of his personal relationship with some of the individuals who were in charge and involved in the events of 16 March 1968 and the days that followed. For the period of March 1968, around the events at My Lai, Qualls served as the assistant chief of staff for the Americal Division.

Qualls testified that during his stint as the assistant chief of staff his primary duties were focused on gathering reports on casualties and the issue of replacing those soldiers who were lost. Qualls testified that his job was paper-shuffling and that he saw many reports arrive and quickly leave his desk. The casualty numbers were rising and the number of replacements who were arriving had to be placed. Qualls also testified that some discussions at the time, including some draft reports, dealt with the issue of how to define a civilian war casualty and how to handle those situations in the battlefield and hospitals.

When asked to recall his memories of My Lai, Qualls testified that at the time he was not aware of any specific details concerning battles in the My Lai area. Although Qualls had never been to the My Lai area, he did briefly recall the briefing of March 16, 1968. When asked about the nightly briefing of March 16, 1968, Qualls testified that he did not remember any details, but that the enemy casualty count which was being discussed was a “larger than usual count.”²² Qualls testified that his office would study

²² Orban Qualls. *Summary of Testimony: Orban Qualls, January 15, 1970*. From Library of Congress: Peers, *Vol II, Book 4, pg. 7*.

the ratio between weapons used and casualties to determine failures and successes, but he did not recall any instance of 128 enemy killed with such little U.S. force. He continued to testify that he never heard the number of 128 or rumors that the vast majority of those killed at My Lai were women and children.

Qualls also testified that he knew Chaplain Lewis and had frequent conversations with him, but the issue of My Lai never came up in specific terms. Qualls recalled that he and Lewis briefly discussed some internal investigations which were occurring, but never went into detail. Peers read testimony from Chaplain Lewis in which Lewis testified that he had conversations with Qualls. According to Lewis' testimony, Qualls made sure the conversation ended when My Lai was brought up and that Qualls commented that the two of them should not discuss My Lai.

Qualls responded to Lewis' testimony by stating that he "did not like to contradict the chaplain; but I did not indeed discuss My Lai nor be secretive about the My Lai incident with Chaplain Lewis or anyone else."²³ Qualls testified that there were protocols in the division not to hide, or keep secret, investigations or allegations, unless it involved an officer, and that rumors could harm the case or the accused. Qualls' statement about having procedures, unless it involves people of high rank, infers that the procedures and protocols were not adhered to at all times. If that was the case, did anyone within the ranks know what the difference was between protecting someone from harmful rumors and protecting a cover-up? Qualls' testimony shows that there was a fine line, which could be crossed, that was used when determining what information to share and with whom it should be shared.

²³ *Ibid.*, Vol II, Book 4, pg. 10.

Lewis Tixier, a colonel in Americal who served as the acting chief of staff of the division during the fall of 1968, testified in front of the Peers Commission on February 2, 1970. The first question to which Tixier responded concerned the issue of whether he had spoken to anyone concerning the investigation of My Lai and his testimony. Tixier testified he did have one conversation with a fellow soldier and a long-time friend. Tixier stated, quickly setting the foundation for the rest of his testimony, that “the only substantial thing, he told me was that there had been an investigation, which I was unaware of during the entire six months that I was in the Americal Division.”²⁴

Tixier continued his testimony by stating that as the acting chief of staff he rarely saw papers or documents on his desk. When asked if he had a file of classified documents or a pile of recent battle reports, Tixier testified that papers did not make it to his office and that he was unaware of any classified information.

Tixier continued in his testimony to state to Peers and other members of the commission that he had no knowledge of My Lai until the U.S. press became aware of the incident in 1969. Tixier testified that “the My Lai incident was a complete surprise to me, because I neither saw anything nor did I hear any talk.”²⁵

Tixier also testified that he never heard the men around camp discussing any incident at My Lai or Pinkville or any discussion about an investigation occurring at the time, and he never heard any discussion of Calley or Medina or the death of innocent women and children.

²⁴ Lewis Tixier. *Summary of Testimony: Lewis Tixier, February 2, 1970*. From Library of Congress: Peers, *Vol II, Book 4, pg. 2*.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, *Vol II, Book 4, pg. 8*.

Tixier's testimony brings forth the image of a top ranking officer who is detached from the men in his division. Others who testified in front of the Peers Commission, even if their levels of belief in the stories of My Lai differed, stated that rumors and gossip was everywhere. Other testimonies referred to hearing rumors of investigations, the continued relaying of the death toll of 128, and the killing of innocent women and children. In six months within the division, the acting chief of staff stated that he never heard one word.

Following Tixier's turn as the acting chief of staff, Jack Treadwell, a colonel in the U.S. Army, took over the role as full chief of staff for Americal. Treadwell testified in front of the Peers Commission on January 30, 1970, and many times during the questioning, his testimony sounded much like the testimony that Lewis Tixier gave three days later.

Treadwell testified that a few weeks after he took over as chief of staff, he met with Oran Henderson and the topic of an investigation of Pinkville was brought up. Treadwell testified that the conversation was short, and he did not gather any information from Henderson concerning the allegations or the investigation. Treadwell continued by stating that Pinkville was hardly mentioned, and if it had been mentioned it disappeared from the conversation rather quickly.

When asked if he had ever heard talk concerning unnecessary killing of women and children, the death of 128 enemy at My Lai or Pinkville, or Calley or Medina shooting unarmed women, Treadwell testified that he "never heard one thing about any of the three things you have just mentioned to me."²⁶

²⁶ Jack Treadwell. *Summary of Testimony: Jack Treadwell, January 30, 1970*. From Library of Congress: Peers, *Vol II, Book 4, pg. 17*.

The hundreds of witnesses who testified for Peers and his team had different interpretations of certain topics, their own view point of some questioning, and different memories of what had occurred on March 16, 1968, and the days and months following. As difficult as it is completely to study and research the thousands of pages of testimony from the trial, it is important to read a large amount of it. This study of the My Lai massacre, its cover-up, and its resulting investigation allows the reader to see what individuals thought of My Lai.

Ronald Ridenhour concluded his testimony by answering one final question from Peers. Peers asked him this question a number of times in previous meetings and decided to ask Ridenhour one more time after a long five hours of testimony. Peers wanted to know why Ridenhour wrote his letter, why he cared about what happened at My Lai, and why Ridenhour had been so interested in the investigation and its outcome. Ridenhour stated that what was going on Vietnam was not right and that the war was not being staged in the appropriate way. Ridenhour testified that

all of the things that we're raised with, all the Boy Scout virtues that every American kid is raised with, as if I was one of the very few, who ever believed it, who ever really believed it. I think I took this action because I believe in this country. I believe in everything that it stands for to me; and this is not, in any way, consistent with this.²⁷

Ridenhour understood that people were cynical of what he was saying and that a number of people who received his letter tore it up. The fact that people did not believe his letter and that people destroyed the letter showed him that something was not right in the U.S. Army and government.

²⁷ Ridenhour. *Vol II, 2Book 14, pg. 70.*

The testimony of many of those individuals who were involved in the assumed cover-up is unavailable to the general public at this time. In order to determine how the cover-up took place is difficult when the testimony available only provides information from those at lower levels. But what is available greatly compensates for the lack of high ranking official testimony with gripping details of the massacre at My Lai and what low-ranking soldiers in the field saw and did. To write this chapter, the author analyzed dozens of complete testimonies from the Peers Commission and brought forth analysis of individuals whose testimony provided a telling account of March 16, 1968, and the days that followed. This study also analyzed and provided the testimony of those individuals, whose names were repeated often throughout the commission's investigation, providing this study with testimony of central figures.

From the testimony analyzed in this study and the testimonies presented in this chapter, it is evident that something atrocious happened at My Lai. American soldiers should not have to confront fellow soldiers on the battlefield to argue over what to do with innocent civilians. Helicopter pilots should not have to land, rescue injured women and children, and have their fellow soldiers turn their weapons on fellow American's to protect the rescuer and the injured. Individuals who brought forth information to their superiors, as they followed the official chain of command, should have the certainty that something would be done. When a respected soldier notified an officer that he witnessed hundreds of civilians alive in a ditch one minute and then they were all dead the next, the ranking officer should attempt to stop the world and right the wrong. The soldiers not only expected this to occur, but so do those who are on the outside of the war looking in.

CHAPTER THREE

Research Findings of the Peers Commission

On November 26, 1969, Stanley R. Resor, Secretary of the Army, and W.C. Westmoreland, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, issued a joint memorandum which announced that William R. Peers, lieutenant general in the U.S. Army, would lead a committee to investigate the events surrounding at My Lai on March 16, 1968. In addition to investigating what occurred at My Lai, Resor and Westmoreland ordered that the committee would also analyze the investigations which the army had conducted following the battle at My Lai. According to the memo, Peers and his committee had two objectives. The first was to determine the “adequacy of such investigations or inquiries and subsequent reviews and reports within the chain of command.” Second, Peers was to determine if “any suppression or withholding of information by persons involved in the incident had taken place.”¹

During its investigation, the Peers Committee realized that in order to fulfill the purpose of the inquiry, they had to expand the scope of their investigation. Peers came to the conclusion that in order to evaluate the army investigations thoroughly, the committee had to have a better understanding of all of the events which related to My Lai. Peers revised the scope to study the events of March 16-19, 1968, including all operation training, guidelines, and combat zone orders. Through this knowledge, and the testimony

¹ Memorandum for Lieutenant General William R. Peers, in Joseph Goldstein, Burke Marshall and Jack Schwartz, eds., *The My Lai Massacre and its Cover-up: Beyond the Reach of the Law? The Peers Commission Report with a Supplement and Introductory Essay on the Limits of Law* (New York: The Free Press, 1976), 33. (Hereafter referred to as Peers).

seen in Chapter 2, the Peers Committee attempted to come to a better understanding of what happened at My Lai.

The initial phase of the inquiry began in December 1969 with testimony by thirty-nine individuals who had direct knowledge of the events at My Lai, some of which was analyzed in Chapter 2 of this study. During this testimony phase, members of the committee were also gathering maps, field reports, photographs, and other evidence which related to the investigation.²

From December 28, 1969, through January 8, 1970, Peers and other members of the committee were in Vietnam to continue their investigation. While in Vietnam they conducted more interviews, gathered additional documents, and made on-site visits to My Lai to see the battle zone first-hand. Upon returning to Washington, D.C., in January 1970 Peers and his committee took on the task of editing and analyzing volumes of testimony, studied field reports and photographs, and completed their review and prepared a report in March 1970.

The Peers Committee offered a summary report of its findings before the release of the complete review. Peers concluded that a tactical operation was planned between March 16-19, 1968, in the My Lai village by three battalions of the Americal Division. According to Peers, plans for the operation were never put in writing, but it was understood that the goal of the mission was “destroying the 48th VC (Vietcong) Local Force Battalion,”³ in the My Lai village. Members of the battalions were under the impression that the villages would be empty of civilians by 0700 hours.

² Peers, 31.

³ Ibid., 44.

On March 15, 1968, a briefing occurred detailing the desired outcomes of the mission at My Lai. During the briefing, Frank Barker, commanding officer of Task Force Barker, ordered his commanders to instruct their men to “burn the houses, kill the livestock, destroy foodstuffs,”⁴ while in the My Lai village. The next day the village of My Lai was assaulted, and by the end of the day nearly four hundred men, women, and children were killed. According to the Peers report only a handful of those killed were armed soldiers of the Vietcong.⁵

Over the following days and months casualty numbers from My Lai grew and conflicting reports surfaced concerning what had happened on March 16, 1968. Internal investigations within Charlie Company and the Americal Division were conducted, but the investigations and reports were incomplete and often hidden from higher-ranking officials.

Nearly a year later William Peers was given the command of a complete investigation of the events at My Lai. The Peers Commission thoroughly investigated what happened on March 16, 1968, through testimony, research, and hands-on investigations. This chapter will analyze the detailed findings of the Peers Commission in relation to the events at My Lai of March 16, 1968, and the days and months which followed to the point that the Peers Committee would conclude that a cover-up occurred at My Lai.

The first finding of what happened at My Lai on March 16, 1968, the Peers Commission gathered background information of the situation in South Vietnam and the My Lai area for March 1968. The commission estimated that the enemy strength in

⁴ Ibid., 45.

⁵ Ibid., 46.

South Vietnam was approximately 263,000 men, with ten thousand to fourteen thousand of those within the My Lai area. Peers dissected those numbers further by associating two thousand to four thousand to regular forces, three thousand to five thousand to guerilla units, and an estimated five thousand who were assigned to administrative duties. Peers suggested that the only major battalion force of the Vietcong which was in the My Lai area on the date of the event was the 48th Local Force (LF) Battalion. Due to losses during the Tet Offensive, the 48th LF had dwindled down to what Peers estimated as two hundred men.⁶

In addition to the trained soldiers in the area, those involved in guerilla tactics were influential and ever present in the region surrounding My Lai. According to the commission the covert guerilla cells “performed assassinations, acts of terrorism, and conducted sabotage and limited clandestine military operations with the objective of gradually bringing more and more villages under Vietcong control.”⁷

With this assistance from the guerilla cells, the Vietcong moved into the My Lai region as the war continued. The Vietcong, according to Peers, would move into new regions, study the local area and its inhabitants, and then recruit from those areas in order to function at a superior level within the region. Peers also found that these forces would live with the people of the region for concealment and support, and would launch their attacks from these safe harbors.

This sense of safety allowed the Vietcong the choice of the time and location of their next attack. The local support also allowed them to delay their attacks until the situation and the battlefield were completely in their favor. In addition to the normal

⁶ Ibid., 58.

⁷ Ibid., 60.

attacks led by rockets, mortar fire, and rifles, the Vietcong's operations were often defined by actions of stealth, surprise, and shock.

The Peers Commission found that at the local level the Vietcong would often make

extensive use of mines and boobytraps, especially at the hamlet and village level. In addition to the men in their combat units, children, women, and old men were used to construct homemade boobytraps and mines which they normally emplaced at night under the cover of darkness.⁸

The Vietcong used the traps as defensive measures to protect their roads, pathways, and entrances to their controlled areas. The Peers Commission suggested that this use of boobytraps is one of the causes of the hatred and frustration seen in U.S. troops.

In addition to studying the situation in the region prior to the events of March 16, the Peers Commission invested time and research into the organization, operations, and training of the U.S. military units which were involved at My Lai. The commission found that Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry was the principal unit involved at My Lai and it was attached to the Americal Division, which was organized in September 1967.⁹ At the initial organization of Americal, only one of the three assigned brigades was stationed in Vietnam. The other two brigades, including Charlie Company, were still in training in Texas and Hawaii.

The commission noted that by the time Americal was completely in Vietnam, the division was having serious issues with rotating personnel. The infusion program, a rotation system within brigades that transferred personnel from brigade to brigade, and the influx of replacement soldiers caused problems within the division. Peers reported

⁸ Ibid., 61-62.

⁹ Ibid., 75.

that “shortages and the infusion process tended to further reduce the effectiveness of their training and operational readiness.”¹⁰ The soldiers and officers of Americal were fighting battles off the conventional battlefield which would lead to harm in the near future.

After a short amount of time in Vietnam, the Americal Division formed additional task forces to allow the division to cover a larger area of the region. The task force commander and much of its staff was taken from the 11th Brigade, which left the brigade in search of new officers while still struggling with infusion and other shortages.

Task Force Barker (TF Barker) was named after its commander Frank A. Barker, Jr., lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army. Barker oversaw three companies, one of which included Charlie Company. According to the commission the three companies were all regarded as the best company in its battalion.¹¹ During its first two months of combat operations TF Barker suffered over one hundred casualties, while estimating that three hundred enemy combatants were killed and fifty were captured.¹²

Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry had an allocation of five officers and 158 men in March 1968 and was organized as a standard rifle company. The field strength of the company was limited because approximately twenty members of Charlie were required to remain at the base for administrative and logistical duties. By the time of the events of March 16, 1968, eleven soldiers from other Americal units helped boost the numbers of Charlie.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid., 77.

¹¹ Ibid., 80.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 81.

Ernest Medina, captain of Charlie Company, was the commander of the company for over one year before the events at My Lai. Medina had led the company during its training in Hawaii where they participated in jungle warfare, as well as exercises in amphibious landings. During their training, according to testimony given to the Peers Commission, routine instruction on the protocol in relation to prisoners was conducted during Charlie Company's training. According to Peers,

this instruction was directed primarily toward the so-called 5 S's – Search, Silence, Segregate, Speed, and Safeguard. During this instruction, little emphasis was placed on the treatment of civilians and refugees or the responsibility for reporting war crimes or atrocities.¹⁴

To add to the struggle of dealing with losses within the company and a constant transformation of the men comprising the company, the men of Charlie Company had to also deal with the fact that they were given little instruction on how to handle civilians and crimes against them.

To confound matters for Charlie, upon their arrival in the My Lai area in January 1968, over 50 percent of their field strength at the time had not completed the company training in Hawaii. This omission reduced what effectiveness the training had even further. The company then attended Americal's in-country indoctrination training program which focused on becoming familiar with the local area and its culture. According to testimony to the commission, the handling of civilians and prisoners was not included in this training.¹⁵

Following their training and orientation to the area, Charlie focused primarily on patrols in the weeks leading to March 16, 1968, and avoided major combat situations.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 81.

According to commission testimony none of the men of Charlie had any significant combat experience leading up to the events at My Lai and for many of them, this was their first deployment. The majority of their contact with the Vietcong resulted in sniper fire and defensive actions. As of March 16, Charlie had suffered four deaths and thirty-eight wounded, with only one of the deaths and two of the wounded resulting from direct contact with the enemy. The vast majority of their casualties were the result of Vietcong boobytraps and land mines.¹⁶

Although the Peers Commission has found that the men of Charlie Company were let down by their leadership in the lack of specialized training, Medina was regarded among his men as an outstanding company leader. Of the twenty-three officers who reported to Medina, two-thirds were enlistees and were well above average in all army evaluated areas. Charlie's officers had a higher percentage of high school graduates and men with college experience than the rest of the U.S. Army. In addition to their high marks in education, the officers were graded at above army average in "general learning and infantry ability."¹⁷ Adding the high grades and accomplishments of the enlisted soldiers to those of the officers and Medina, Charlie Company, on paper, was a group with no significant failures or eye-openers which would lead to any concern.

LTC Barker and his immediate staff within TF Barker were responsible for conceiving and planning the operations at My Lai for March 16, 1968. Normal procedure within Americal allowed battalion or task force commanders to design and subsequently conduct operations within their own command as long as the division commander approved of the operation. Under testimony in front of the Peers Commission Samuel

¹⁶ Ibid., 82.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Koster, a major general and commander of Americal Division, stated that although he did not remember approving the operation, he did remember being briefed about the plans and it was “likely that he did approve it.”¹⁸ In addition to notifying Koster, TF Barker notified Oran Henderson, a colonel and commanding officer of the 11th Brigade, of the combat operations. The Peers Commission believed that the officers mentioned were apprised of the combat operations, but found that they were not fully briefed on the complete details of Barker’s plans.

The primary objective of the My Lai operation designed by Barker was a search and destroy mission in the My Lai area on March 16, 1968, and it would include all three companies within TF Barker. Defined at the time by the Military Assistance Command directive, search and destroy operations were “conducted for the purpose of seeking out and destroying enemy forces, installations, resources, and base areas. These operations were oriented on enemy forces inside or outside of US units’ assigned tactical areas of responsibility.”¹⁹ The enemy focus of TF Barker was the 48th Vietcong Local Force Battalion, and the objective was to destroy the 48th’s logistical support and their staging area. According to research conducted by TF Barker, the 48th had been growing in the area for a number of months and was continually receiving supplies and local support. During some of the smaller skirmishes between companies of TF Barker and the 48th, U.S. forces noted that the 48th possessed heavy weapons, including rockets and mortars, and had been responsible for a number of TF Barker casualties.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., 87.

¹⁹ Ibid., 88.

²⁰ Ibid.

On March 15, 1968, at Landing Zone (LZ) Dottie, the command center for TF Barker, LTC Barker issued the orders, orally, for the My Lai operation to be conducted the following day. According to Peers, no written orders were issued detailing the operation, and the commission did not discover any evidence that suggests that Barker issued any complementary materials to his oral issuance.

In attendance at the briefing, in addition to Frank Barker, were Ernest Medina and Oran Henderson. Colonel Henderson addressed those at the briefing prior to Barker issuing the orders for the My Lai operation. Henderson briefed the companies with summaries of future operations and addressed concerns that he, as the commanding officer, had concerning some previous failures of the companies which were part of TF Barker. He encouraged the troops to continue their pursuit of the enemy and to remain aggressive during any future encounters. According to Peers, several witnesses testified that Henderson mentioned the elimination of the 48th “once and for all.”²¹ During his testimony in front of the Peers Commission Captain Medina stated that Colonel Henderson pointed out the companies’ lack of aggressiveness as they permitted “men, women, or children, or other VC soldiers in the area” to escape following encounters.²²

Eugene Kotouc, an intelligence officer within TF Barker, followed Henderson and Barker at the briefing at LZ Dottie. Kotouc testified to the Peers Commission that he believed, and announced this information during the briefing, that the strength in the My Lai area would be over two hundred Vietcong troops. Medina and other officers left the briefing with the belief that they would encounter a large force the following morning.

²¹ Ibid., 89.

²² Ibid., 90.

Those at the meeting also left the meeting under the assumption that the civilians of the village would be away from their homes the morning of the attack. The attack was planned for a Saturday morning, the day that the Vietnamese would routinely visit the local markets.

The Peers Commission research found that Barker's plan for the operation, described at the briefing, was to begin at 0725 on March 16, 1968, with a five minute artillery preparation prior to the combat assault.²³ At 0730 the first airlift of Charlie Company was to commence, with the second shortly after, under the cover of helicopter gunships. The helicopters were to provide cover for Charlie Company during the landing and unloading of the troops into the village. The combat operation plans called for Charlie Company to move to the opposite end of the village to secure a nighttime position for two of the TF Barker companies, while the third company would secure the opposite entry point into the village. In addition to having the assistance of helicopter gunships and troop lift helicopters, TF Barker arranged to have U.S. Navy swift boats run patrol on the coast of the Batangan Cape, east of My Lai.

The Peers Commission found issues with the reports of the briefing of March 15 through their research and the volumes of testimony. The Peers Commission found conflicting evidence in the testimonies it received concerning Barker's orders in relation to the complete destruction of the My Lai village. Peers argues that "the preponderance of the evidence indicates that such destruction was implied, if not specifically directed" during Barker's briefing of March 15. Peers argued strongly that Barker failed to clarify the mission of destroying the village and this caused confusion. In response to this clarification, Peers argued that

²³ Ibid., 92.

whether LTC Barker attempted to make any distinctions, during the briefing or in his subsequent instructions, between dwellings, livestock, and foodstuffs of noncombatants versus those belonging to the VC is highly doubtful since he and his staff apparently acted upon the intelligence assessment that virtually the entire area was controlled and inhabited by VC and VC sympathizers.²⁴

The Peers Commission also found that the evidence indicated that at the task force level, or during the briefing, there were no plans or precautionary arrangements made for the handling of noncombatants in the area during the attack. More time was spent instructing the companies to “destroy” than there was to proceed with caution when approached by an unarmed noncombatant. Charlie Company’s lack of training and education concerning the treatment of civilians and the local customs, as well as Barker’s perceived lack of clarification in relation to the destruction of the village, allowed four hundred innocent civilians to be killed the next morning.

When the Peers Commission studied the evidence concerning the instructions, or lack thereof, issued on how to handle noncombatants, they found some problems. Arguing that TF Barker assumed their intelligence was correct when it stated that the My Lai area was comprised of mainly Vietcong or its sympathizers and that the village would be empty of civilians who went to the Saturday morning market, Peers argued that it seemed

reasonable to conclude that LTC Barker’s minimal or nonexistent instructions concerning the handling of noncombatants created the potential for grave misunderstandings as to his intentions and for interpretation of his orders as authority to fire, without restriction, on all persons found in the target area.²⁵

²⁴ Ibid., 94.

²⁵ Ibid., 95.

Possibly the most important finding of the commission was that the disastrous outcome of March 16, 1968, was created by the lack of complete instructions from those who were responsible to provide that leadership and direction.

Following Barker's briefing, the company commanders returned to their own units to pass on the information they had received for the operation the next morning. Before Captain Medina addressed the men of Charlie Company, including William Calley, platoon leader of the 1st Platoon, he and the company attended a memorial service for a member of the company who had been killed by a Vietcong boobytrap a few days earlier. Leaving a memorial service and leading directly to a briefing which focused on the destruction of their enemy was bound to lead to regrettable events.

Following the memorial service for a fallen comrade, Medina told his men at the briefing that he expected the company to make close contact with the enemy the next morning and would suffer "heavy casualties."²⁶ During his oral instructions to his company Medina stated, according to his testimony, that he "tried to convey this same message to the people in Charlie."²⁷

Medina warned his men that they would be outnumbered by the Vietcong by a two-to-one ratio and that the enemy would be firing upon their landing in the village. Medina ordered that the 1st Platoon, led by William Calley, would be the first to land and their mission was to sweep the enemy out of hiding and into the open village. Medina ordered his men to bring extra supplies of ammunition for the day and to be thorough when clearing the village. Medina passed along Colonel Henderson's comments

²⁶ Ibid., 98.

²⁷ Ibid.

concerning the company and told his men to prevent the retrieval of enemy weapons from killed Vietcong soldiers by “other men, women, children, or other Vietcong soldiers in the area.”²⁸

During his briefing Captain Ernest Medina made women and children fair game.

The Peers Commission argued that

many witnesses have testified that Captain Medina also made reference to casualties which the company had recently taken from enemy mines, boobytraps, and sniper fire, and that he alluded to the forthcoming operation as an opportunity for ‘revenge’ or to ‘get even’ with the enemy.

Peers continued that it appeared “that the operation took on the added aspect of a grudge match between Charlie Company and an enemy force.”²⁹

The members of the Peers Commission were not the only ones who believed that Medina gave incomplete instructions during his briefing which left the men of Charlie Company under different assumptions about the mission. William Lloyd, member of 1st Platoon, testified that “we knew we were supposed to kill everyone in the village.”³⁰ Robert Pendleton, member of the 3rd Platoon, testified that while preparing the night before, the men of Charlie Company “were talking about killing everything that moved. Everyone knew what we were going to do.”³¹ “Although Captain Medina didn’t say to kill everyone in the village,” testified 1st Platoon member James Bergthold, “I heard guys talking and were of the opinion that everyone in the village was to be killed.”³² Although

²⁸ Ibid., 99.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ William Calvin Lloyd, 1st Platoon, Charlie Company, quoted in Peers, 99.

³¹ Robert Wayne Pendleton, 3rd Platoon, Charlie Company, quoted in Peers, 99.

³² James Robert Bergthold, 1st Platoon, Charlie Company, quoted in Peers, 100.

history and battle field reports show that the events of My Lai are considered to have occurred on March 16, the complete destruction of the village began in briefings on March 15.

At 0730 the following morning, March 16, 1968, the lead assault teams of Charlie Company landed approximately one hundred meters west of the village of My Lai. According to company records, the landing area was designated “cold”, as it was free of enemy fire. Within minutes the initial assault team had set up defensive positions and had secured the landing zone for future helicopter drops. By 0800 all of the members of Charlie Company involved in the operation had been dropped into the safe landing zone. The “cold” designation of the area was confirmed by the helicopter pilots who reported receiving little enemy fire during either their arrival or departure.³³

Colonel Henderson arrived at the combat area via helicopter around 0800 and surveyed the situation from his aerial position. Henderson testified that upon his arrival he saw nearly three hundred people leaving the village in “an orderly manner” on a road leading to the southwest. Henderson contacted Barker who agreed to send the aerial scout helicopters to survey the situation. When one of the scout helicopters arrived over the phalanx of departing villagers, they noticed two individuals wearing uniforms of the Vietcong. The pilots radioed the information down to the ground and members of TF Barker picked up the two individuals and they were placed on Henderson’s helicopter. Henderson’s helicopter arrived back at LZ Dottie at 0830, and he released the two prisoners to a military prisoner interrogation team. During his testimony Colonel Henderson denied having been present at the operation, and he denied ever speaking with

³³ Peers, 101.

Barker during the operation. Henderson's statements were contradicted by multiple sources, including Barker, who were present the morning of March 16.

Just as Colonel Henderson spent the early morning in a helicopter, Frank Barker was above the My Lai operation in his command helicopter communicating with his officers and coordinating the movements of the assault. His first of three return visits to LZ Dottie was at approximately 0835 to refuel. According to reports Barker was on the ground during that first refueling trip for nearly thirty minutes, and he used the time to communicate with his officers to get a detailed status update.

By 0900 the three companies involved in the assault were close to finalizing their positions within the village for the morning. Bravo Company reported no resistance as they moved through the village, but they did suffer one death from an enemy boobytrap early in their mission. At 0945 Barker and his helicopter returned to the village to evacuate three members of Bravo Company who were injured by another boobytrap. Barker was informed that the area was covered with land mines and boobytraps and that the forces on the ground were making minor changes to their movements to avoid further casualties.

Calley's 1st Platoon reached their first objective, the east side of the village, by 0900 hours and continued to monitor the situation for over four hours before moving to their final position of the day. During those four hours, Charlie Company reported that ninety Vietcong had been killed and twenty-three were being held as prisoners.³⁴ At the same time Bravo Company reported they had killed sixty-eight Vietcong and had captured a large amount of gear and weapons.

³⁴ Ibid., 105.

By 1530 hours the members of Charlie Company had reached the nighttime position and met up with Bravo Company. Charlie Company delivered ten prisoners to the defensive position where they were subsequently interrogated.

As the evening of March 16, 1968, came to a conclusion Task Force Barker reported that 128 Vietcong had been killed, three major weapons had been captured, and a large number of mines and boobytraps had been safely detonated. TF Barker reported just two deaths and eleven wounded during the first day of the operation.

Task Force Barker remained in the village for another three days, which were primarily focused on holding the village and sweeping the area. TF Barker faced little enemy combat following the initial assault day of March 16.

The Peers Commission studied and provided a summary recap of the events in the village of My Lai on March 16, 1968. The commission's summary included brief overviews of the actions conducted by the different companies that comprised Task Force Barker. Since the majority of the horrible events which occurred on March 16 were conducted by the members of Charlie Company, the Peers Commission devoted a large part of its research and final report to the actions of the company. While providing an overall summary of TF Barker on March 16, the Peers Commission provided a detailed report of the day's events for the men of Charlie.

As stated earlier in this chapter, the men of Charlie Company were slated to be the first to arrive in the village of My Lai on the morning of March 16. At 0722 hours the first group of Charlie soldiers left LZ Dottie via helicopter and headed southwest to the landing zone at My Lai. At 0724 hours "war lord" helicopters arrived at My Lai ahead of the lift helicopters and fired artillery rounds for five minutes in an attempt to secure the

planned landing zone. As the bullets began to fly, villagers who were working in the rice fields surrounding the hamlet began to run for cover near dikes and ditches within the fields. Other inhabitants sought cover from the “war lord” helicopters in their huts or in wells throughout the village. The “war lord” helicopters ceased their firing at 0730 hours as the first lift helicopter with soldiers from Charlie Company arrived at the landing zone.³⁵

During his testimony Captain Medina stated that he reported the landing zone as “cold” when the first helicopter landed. The Peers Commission found issues with this testimony and believed that what happened next took the men of Charlie Company down a dangerous road. Medina continued in his testimony that shortly after his departure from the helicopter he heard a helicopter pilot on his radio who disagreed with his designation of the landing zone. Medina testified that he heard the pilot yell “negative, negative – the LZ is hot. You are receiving fire. We are taking fire. There are VC with weapons running from the village, and we are engaging them now,” and immediately notified his platoon leaders that the landing zone was “hot.”³⁶ Research conducted by the Peers Commission found that the information in Medina’s testimony is not in the official TF Barker Journal, which listed the landing zone as “cold,” or in the radio conversations between Barker and the lift helicopter pilots, who confirmed that zone was cold. Did Medina hear something that no one else, on a series of connected radios, could remember hearing? Did Medina get confused or become panicked as he heard some gunfire upon their arrival? In either event, Medina informed his men that the area was “hot”, thus

³⁵ Ibid., 128.

³⁶ Ernest Medina, Commanding Officer, Charlie Company, quoted in Peers, 128.

changing the mindset and awareness of the men of Charlie Company, who now entered the zone on even more of an edge.

The 1st Platoon, led by Calley, left the landing zone and headed east for nearly 150 meters before establishing its portion of the security perimeter. The 2nd Platoon moved two hundred meters northeast of the landing zone and implemented its portion of the security perimeter. As this initial movement was occurring, Captain Medina stayed at the landing zone listening to radio reports and conducting the operation of Charlie Company. After the 1st and 2nd Platoons reached their security positions, local Vietnamese began to run from their shelters and hiding areas near the village's rice paddies. The platoons commenced their firing on the inhabitants and reported to Medina that between four and nine were killed.³⁷

The Peers Commission found that as the 1st Platoon entered the village, they moved towards a series of dikes near the paddies and began firing on a group of armed individuals. While some members of the platoon were focused on the individuals who were moving with weapons, other members of the platoon began firing into bushes, bunkers, into the water wells, and in the direction of Vietnamese who were fleeing the village. Soon after their move to the paddies, the 1st Platoon was joined by the 2nd Platoon which arrived with a heavy amount of gunfire and they killed several Vietnamese in the paddies.

While some members of Charlie Company were already involved in fighting, the second lift helicopter arrived at the landing zone at 0747 hours and connected with Medina. As the lift helicopter left the area the pilot radioed to Barker and reported that the helicopter did receive a small amount of enemy fire, but no injuries or damages were

³⁷ Peers, 129.

accumulated. Barker order that the zone be temporarily listed as “hot” until the area could be secured.³⁸

According to the findings of the commission, at 0800 hours an armed helicopter saw an armed enemy running along a road which led out of the village. Under a command from Medina, the helicopter fired at the individual but was unable to hit the target. The helicopter circled back around searching for the individual and came upon a group of people who were on the same road. According to Peers, many of the group on the road saw the helicopter and came to a stop and lay down on the ground. The group was comprised primarily of unarmed elderly civilians, women, and children. The helicopter dropped a smoke marker near the group and notified Barker of the information.

The group is the same one mentioned earlier that Colonel Henderson viewed during his early morning flight over the village. As Henderson’s helicopter was leaving the area, the 3rd squad of Charlie Company observed the group on foot and began to fire on the group of Vietnamese. Testimony in front of the Peers Commission provided the information that three to fifteen of the unarmed and civilian group were killed.³⁹

Members of Charlie Company searched the road for Vietcong and possible weapons near the group of people on the road. As a small number of the squad crossed the road they saw a woman, holding a young girl, hiding in a ditch on the side of the road. A pilot in a helicopter overhead saw the women shot and killed by U.S. soldiers.⁴⁰ The woman was unarmed, not moving and hiding in a ditch when killed.

³⁸ Ibid., 130.

³⁹ Ibid., 132.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

The 3rd Squad left the road and marched back towards the landing zone. Along their march they shot and killed two Vietnamese who ran the other direction upon seeing the U.S. soldiers coming near them. The Peers Commission found that evidence proved that one of these killed Vietnamese was a child, and that the two were killed at close range by a machine-gunner of the 3rd Squad.⁴¹ By 0800 on March 16, 1968, at least three innocent civilians were killed, and witnessed, by members of Charlie Company.

The commission found that another disturbing event occurred in the middle of the village when Lt. Calley led the 1st Platoon as they began to unload heavy fire on fleeing Vietnamese. The U.S. troops threw grenades into houses and bunkers, slaughtered livestock, and destroyed food storages and crops. Witnesses testified to Peers that they saw an elderly man bayoneted to death by a member of the 1st Platoon, and another unarmed man thrown into a well and killed by a grenade placed into the well. Other members of the 1st Platoon admitted to have participated in “mercy” killings of wounded inhabitants of the village.⁴²

Through their research, the commission found that the actions of the 1st Platoon continued to become even more horrible as the morning continued. As the platoon gathered more unarmed civilians as prisoners, they began to move them towards the center of the village, where Lt. Calley was issuing orders and surveying the situation. The first group that reached Calley consisted of sixty to seventy individuals and was comprised of mainly women and children. Under the commands of Calley, a small group

⁴¹ Ibid., 133.

⁴² Ibid.

of soldiers gathered the group and marched them to a ditch on the edge of the village. The unarmed women and children were placed in the ditch and kept under watch.

A second group of prisoners, between thirty and fifty individuals, was marched into the rice paddies where they were placed under the watch of armed U.S. soldiers. While the 1st Platoon gathered individuals to set up the ideal situation for mass killings, the 2nd Platoon went about their killings in a different way.

The Peers Commission found that the 2nd Platoon “neither sought to take nor did they retain any prisoners, suspects, or detainees while in My Lai.”⁴³ Members of the 2nd Platoon began to fire on the people of the village immediately upon their arrival into the area. Members of the platoon attempted to lure the Vietnamese out of their houses, and if that failed they would destroy the house with grenades, fire, and a large amount of gunfire. For those Vietnamese who did make their presence known when the U.S. forces yelled for them to come out, they were brutally shot and killed as they left their houses or bunkers. The platoon did not discriminate when they were deciding who to shoot next. Women who were holding their small babies were gunned down while hiding in their homes. Added to the disgust of these senseless murders, at least two acts of rape were observed by witnesses.⁴⁴

On March 16, 1968, it is estimated that in addition to destroying livestock and food crops, the 2nd Platoon of Charlie Company killed at least fifty, and possibly as many as one hundred, inhabitants. These inhabitants were not armed Vietcong who were

⁴³ Ibid., 134.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

shooting back. They were old men, women, children, and babies who lived in the village and in many cases attempted to surrender to the Americans.

Peers found that as the morning hours continued to pass by, the men of Charlie Company continued to target noncombatants at My Lai. At 0900 hours the members of Lt. Calley's 1st Platoon murdered the villagers they were guarding in the rice paddies. After they notified Calley of their actions, the lieutenant and some men gathered more inhabitants and directed them to the ditch and to the rice paddies. Calley arrived at the ditch to see it now holding up to seventy innocent civilians. By 0915 all of the civilians who were dragged into the ditch had been killed by the guns of the 1st Platoon.

In addition to those who were senselessly murdered in the ditch, Peers found that outside of the ditch up to twenty women and children were placed in a small circle. Using a grenade launcher, U.S. soldiers fired several 40mm rounds into the group, killing several and wounding the rest. The wounded were not attended to by the platoon's medics; rather they were killed with small pistol fire. One of the injured young women was raped and then killed.⁴⁵

The Peers Commission stated that the members of Charlie Company continued their rampage and proceeded with their destruction and killing. Although Captain Medina learned through the interrogation of an elderly male that the thirty or forty Vietcong who were present in the village had left the night before, Charlie Company continued to hunt and kill.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 136.

A few minutes after 0900 hours Hugh Thompson returned to My Lai and from his vantage point in his helicopter saw numerous killed and wounded Vietnamese just outside the center of the village.

After marking the first group of wounded he saw, Thompson flew over the ditch where the mass killing had taken place. Thompson testified that he saw that some of the people in the ditch were still alive so he decided to land his helicopter near the ditch. Thompson testified that he rushed to the ditch and spoke to one soldier and Lt. Calley. Thompson told the soldier that medical attention was needed for those in the ditch. According to testimony the soldier responded, in a jokingly matter, that the best way to help them was to kill them.⁴⁶ Thompson reluctantly left the ditch and returned to his helicopter. As Thompson was taking off, his crew chief witnessed the soldier offered his help to the wounded by shooting into the ditch.

Peers found that at approximately 0945 hours the 1st and 3rd Platoons joined with each other in the center of the village and the killings of the innocent inhabitants continued. The platoons rounded up twelve women and children, and attempted to strip the clothes off of a young female. The only thing that appeared to stop them from their cruel deeds that day was the presence of a press photographer who was about to shoot a picture of the teenager. Instead of getting their picture taken, the men decided to leave the clothes on the young female and kill her and the others they had rounded up.

According to Peers, one witness testified that it was clear that those who were killed were innocent civilians. Later in the morning as Medina and his officers continued to survey the achievements of Charlie Company that morning, a group of soldiers came upon the group of bodies that were killed in the rice paddies. The same witness also

⁴⁶ Ibid., 138.

stated that while the group of soldiers studied the situation one U.S. soldier killed a small boy who was standing and crying in the middle of the killed civilians. Captain Medina was seen at this time shooting and killing a woman who was fleeing the oncoming U.S. soldiers.⁴⁷

Shortly following Medina's killing of the woman, Hugh Thompson and his crew chief spotted a bunker full of children near the center of the village. Thompson also noticed that a group of American soldiers was headed directly towards the bunker. As seen in Chapter Two, Thompson testified he landed his helicopter and told his crew that he was headed to the bunker. Thompson ordered his crew to fire upon the oncoming U.S. soldiers if any of them shot into the bunker towards the children.

The investigation conducted by Peers would find that a scene between Thompson and a fellow American soldier would become the focus of the leadership of America. Thompson left his helicopter and ran towards a lieutenant who was standing at the edge of the bunker. Thompson told the lieutenant that they needed to evacuate the group of people and provide them with help. According to Thompson the lieutenant replied that the "only way to get them out was with a hand grenade."⁴⁸ Thompson testified that he responded to the lieutenant that he would make sure the civilians escaped safely. Thompson escorted sixteen men, women, and children to his helicopter and three flights were made to a safe area outside the village to release the innocent civilians. Thompson and his crew saved the lives of sixteen civilians who were moments away from being

⁴⁷ Medina's killing of the woman is an issue that the Peers Commission avoided. At the time of the commission's investigation Medina had admitted to the killing of the unarmed woman, but was under criminal investigation for the murder. This investigation prevented Peers from gathering testimony or evidence to describe the situation.

⁴⁸ Hugh Thompson, quoted in Peers, 141.

killed for no reason. The lieutenant at the bunker who joked about using a grenade and forced Thompson to aim his weapons on his fellow soldiers was William Calley.

As Thompson made the evacuation flights and subsequent trips around the village, he and his crew spotted numerous groups of dead Vietnamese throughout the village. Many of the killed who Thompson saw were lying in ditches or bunkers that became mass graves. As Thompson was still in the air at 1030 or 1045 hours, Medina issued an order to his men to stop shooting and to stop killing. The different segments of Charlie Company began to gather around Medina, and witnesses testified that they saw up to seventy dead civilians lying in the streets of My Lai.⁴⁹ These numbers do not include those lying in ditches, bunkers, or rice paddies.

According to Peers, the heroics of Thompson continued at 1100 hours as he flew his helicopter over another ditch full of dead Vietnamese where he saw one individual moving. Thompson again landed his helicopter and approached the ditch to find the movement was a small boy who was wounded. Thompson's crew chief grabbed the boy and brought him back to the helicopter. Thompson and his crew flew the boy to a Vietnamese hospital in Quang Ngai and then returned to LZ Dottie. Upon his arrival at LZ Dottie, Thompson went immediately to his commanding officer and gave his report of the morning. This report would become known as the "Thompson Report."⁵⁰

According to the Peers Commission the order was a result of Hugh Thompson notifying his commanding officer of what he had seen take place throughout the morning. At 1200 hours while the men of Charlie Company took a break for lunch, Barker radioed

⁴⁹ Peers, 142.

⁵⁰ The "Thompson Report" and others will be discussed in Chapter 4 of this study.

to Medina. Barker told Medina to tell the men of Charlie to make sure there was “no unnecessary killing/burning or words to that effect.”⁵¹ Hugh Thompson saved lives in person during the morning, and his words would save others for the rest of the day.

As March 16, 1968, neared its end, the men of Charlie Company had killed no fewer than 175 to 200 Vietnamese men, women, and children, while only suffering one casualty.⁵² Evidence studied by Peers shows that only three or four of those killed by Charlie were confirmed to be Vietcong. The commission did suggest that some of those killed may have been Vietcong who were not in uniform or were lacking Vietcong markings, but they were unarmed when they were killed.

According to Peers the killing was concluded by the afternoon. Between 1530 and 1700 hours Charlie Company established its nighttime position while having little contact with the Vietnamese. While in the nighttime position, Vietcong prisoners were interrogated by the Vietnamese National Police and members of Charlie Company. During the interrogation one of the suspects was tortured and subsequently killed in a mass killing of a group of prisoners.⁵³ For Charlie Company, the day ended like it began – with the unrelenting killing of unarmed individuals.

The tragedy of My Lai was more than a battle which occurred on March 16, 1968. Although the brutal killings, which became an evil scar in the history of the United States, happened quickly on one March morning, events in the hours and days leading up

⁵¹ Peers, 143.

⁵² This estimate by the Peers Commission does not include an accurate number of those killed while still in their houses or in large groups in the paddies or bunkers. The estimate also does not include those innocent civilians who were killed as Charlie Company retreated to their night-time position.

⁵³ Peers, 145. Similar to the incident of Medina killing the unarmed women, the killing of numerous prisoners of war was in the midst of a criminal investigation and was off limits to Peers.

to it were crucial factors as well. The orders given on March 15 in numerous meetings by numerous individuals were the leading factor for the assault and tragedy in My Lai. The lack of clarity in the orders given led directly to the killings in My Lai.

When studying the factors which led to My Lai, the Peers Commission found that there was “no evidence that the plan included explicit or implicit provisions for the deliberate killing of noncombatants.”⁵⁴ The lack of clarity and direct orders by the commanding officers of TF Barker and Charlie Company led to the killings.

Peers found that there was ample confusion among the officers and men of TF Barker when it came to deciphering the objective of a “search and destroy” mission. The lack of solid intelligence concerning the enemy was a contributing factor as well. TF Barker was under the assumption that the village of My Lai would be swarming with Vietcong and that the enemy would provide a fierce battle, providing the opportunity for a revenge-minded group of American soldiers to completely eliminate all remnants of the enemy. In the end the village was clear of Vietcong and those still present in the village were unarmed civilians.

The Peers Commission found that the orders issued by Barker “to burn houses, kill livestock, destroy foodstuffs in the My Lai area were clearly illegal. They were repeated in subsequent briefings by Captain Medina and in that context were also illegal.”⁵⁵ In addition to providing unclear orders which led to the horrible killing of civilians, the actions of Barker and his officers were illegal.

Not only did the leadership of TF Barker fail to provide accurate and clear orders to their men, the Peers Commission found that they also failed to control the anger and

⁵⁴ Ibid., 192.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 193.

resentment the men had towards their enemy. The lack of serious fighting combined with the numerous deaths as a result of Vietcong boobytraps, the men of TF Barker were on edge and looking for a fight to equalize the situation. The Peers Commission received testimony that the men of TF Barker found it difficult to respect the local inhabitants and treat them as friendly because the villagers rarely notified the Americans of the locations of mines or boobytraps. The U.S. soldiers believed that if the civilians were actually friendly, they would have provided this assistance. The leadership failed to address this situation or to provide instruction or education on the topic of creating the separation between the Vietcong and friendly Vietnamese.

According to Peers, the continued failure of commanding officers to be effective leaders doomed the assault on My Lai from the beginning. The leadership also failed to address the angst of the men after they were scolded for their inability to finish off the enemy. Providing motivation for the men was a vital need of the leaders of the task force, but the inability of the leaders to focus that motivation led to the killings of My Lai. The men were angry and embarrassed for the reputation they were earning and wanted to prove their worth on the battlefield. That desire is healthy when going into battle, but those in charge must control the desire and ensure that lines will not be crossed or the objective of the mission is not met.

Through research and the hours of testimony the Peers Commission argued that the leadership in TF Barker, beginning at the top, failed to build solid relationships with those they commanded. The commission found that Barker's lack of rapport with his officers and a lack of friendship led to some of the downfalls of March 16. Peers concluded that this missing relationship led to a "lack of understanding on his part as to

the professional capabilities of each of his company commanders, and an uncertainty on their part as to what he specifically expected of them and their companies.”⁵⁶

According to Peers, Captain Medina was generally respected by the men of Charlie Company, but the same cannot be said about Lt. Calley. Calley was remembered by his men as a “nice guy” who lacked the ability to provide control or discipline over his platoon.⁵⁷ The inability to provide discipline arose from the lack of strong leadership as well as the situations where Calley and other leaders “joined with their men in immoral and illegal acts against Vietnamese prior to the My Lai operation.”⁵⁸ The structure of the military, or any organizational chart, will be damaged if insubordination not only goes unpunished, but is allowed.

During its extensive research into the events of My Lai, the Peers Commission found numerous moments leading up to My Lai which if changed, could have allowed TF Barker and Charlie Company to avoid a disastrous morning. The lack of leadership, training, education, and clarity allowed four hundred innocent civilians to be killed ruthlessly during the span of one morning. The fault does not lie with one individual, but an entire command group and chain of command. Frank Barker and Oran Henderson began with unclear briefings and challenges, and these challenges were passed along by the likes of Ernest Medina and William Calley.

In its summary reports of My Lai, the Peers Commission takes aim at the leadership of TF Barker and places the blame on these individuals. There is no doubt that this argument is valid, but the blame must also be placed in the hands of others. The men

⁵⁶ Ibid., 197.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 201.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

of TF Barker and Charlie Company, although following orders, continued to show no mercy and killed numerous, hundreds, of innocent and unarmed civilians. A glimpse of a ray of light was Hugh Thompson, who challenged the leadership and acted in a moral way.

Sadly, the events of the My Lai massacre do not end as the men of Charlie Company rested in their nighttime position on March 16, 1968. The days and months which followed would provide even more unthinkable events which would eventually bring My Lai to the attention of the American public, as well as an example of a dark moment in the nation's history.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Peers Commission's Review of Army Investigations

What happened on March 16, 1968, in the village of My Lai in southern Vietnam was not the conclusion of the tragic story. The morning of the battle was not the beginning of the story either; that occurred the day before in comfortable tents through numerous official briefings. The conclusion of the story was full of reports, investigations, lies, and criminal acts by members of the United States Army.

The United States government and its armed forces are governed by the obligations and rules of war. Civilized nations agreed upon a set of established rules and guidelines to regulate warfare, and the war in Vietnam was fought under the law of land warfare. Determining where an event like My Lai falls under these rules was one of the primary tasks of the Peers Commission.

A large majority of the rules of war are considered the written rule of war, which was created through treaties or conventions, of which the U.S. is a participant. The written law which the U.S. adheres to is comprised of two major sources. The respecting of laws and customs of land warfare is governed by the Hague Convention No. IV, agreed upon on October 18, 1907.¹ The protection of wounded and sick soldiers, prisoners of war, and civilians caught in warfare is governed by the four 1949 Geneva Conventions, which states that the rules “specifically protect people who do not take part

¹ Hague Convention No. IV, *International Committee of the Red Cross.*; available at <http://www.icrc.org>; Internet; accessed April 25, 2008.

in the fighting (civilians, medics, chaplains, aid workers) and those who can no longer fight (wounded, sick and shipwrecked troops, prisoners of war).”²

One of the primary purposes of the written, and unwritten, rules of war is to protect the innocent. The understanding that “safeguarding certain fundamental human rights of persons who fall into the hands of the enemy, particularly prisoners of war, the wounded and sick, and civilians,” was a primary concern for American forces when the issue dealt with their colleagues. What happened at My Lai displayed a moment that created a breach in that belief that the protective rules were always followed.

As a party to the Hague Convention, the United States signed the treaty knowing that the convention called for civilized nations to investigate alleged war crimes and punish those who are found to be guilty of committing illegal acts. The Peers Commission noted that the U.S. defines a war crime as any “violation of the law of war by any person or persons, military or civilian. Every violation of the law of war is a war crime.”³ The Peers Commission was organized to investigate My Lai and its numerous violations of the law of war.

As noted in previous chapters of this thesis, the members of Americal Division and Charlie Company took part in training related to local customs and the handling of innocent civilians and prisoners. Testimony and research presented by the Peers Commission displayed the fact that this training was not adequately administered and not respected by those in the company. Regulations of the U.S. Army dictate that

² 1949 Geneva Conventions, *International Committee of the Red Cross.*; available at <http://www.icrc.org>; Internet; accessed April 25, 2008.

³ Joseph Goldstein, Burke Marshall and Jack Schwartz, eds, *The My Lai Massacre and its Cover-up: Beyond the Reach of the Law? The Peers Commission Report with a Supplement and Introductory Essay on the Limits of Law* (New York: The Free Press, 1976), 34. (hereafter referred to as Peers), 209.

commanding officers must present a thorough description of the Geneva and Hague conventions to all soldiers. In many cases, soldiers are taught the rules of Geneva during the opening weeks of their boot camp. Upon their arrival in Vietnam, U.S. soldiers received a card with four reminders printed on it: the enemy in your hands, the nine rules, U.S. code of conduct, and the Geneva Convention.⁴ Commanding officers received officer versions of these cards reminding them to be dedicated and responsible leaders to their men.

Officers were provided training on what the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) considered to be noncombatants. The MACV considered Vietnamese noncombatants as the “hapless rice farmer and the small town inhabitant,” and the officers were directed to limit their usage of force and not use “unnecessary force leading to noncombatant battle casualties.”⁵ Officers also received information concerning the U.S. policy for handling prisoners of war. Officers were instructed that all prisoners, enemy soldiers or innocent noncombatants, were to be handled humanely and given the full protection of the Geneva Convention.

In addition to being familiar with the rules of war and the responsibilities of handling prisoners and noncombatants, officers were made aware of the regulations concerning war crimes. Officers were trained to know that the purpose of one MACV directive is to “provide uniform procedures for the collection and perpetuation of evidence relative to war crimes incidents and to designate the agencies responsible for the

⁴ Ibid., 211.

⁵ Ibid.

conduct of investigations for alleged or apparent violations of the Geneva Conventions.”⁶ This directive, and others related to it, made it clear that any war crime was illegal and that proper channels had been set up that must be followed.

Military personnel were also provided the knowledge that any incident that may result in being determined as a war crime must be reported to a direct superior. The individual who reports the crime is responsible, under MACV directive, to provide evidence, and a detailed report, as well as assume the responsibility to ensure that the reporting and investigation is moving forward through the designated channels. Those involved in an incident that results in a war crime are to be charged with the crime, as are those individuals who fail to report the evidence or knowledge of an alleged war crime.

As seen in the previous chapter, the morning of March 16, 1968, in the village of My Lai, numerous alleged war crimes were committed. American soldiers ordered the mass killings of noncombatants. American soldiers killed wounded and unarmed civilians. These incidents were witnessed by dozens of American soldiers, including one who landed his helicopter and turned his weapons on his fellow soldiers.

The Peers Commission was ordered to investigate the events of March 16, 1968 and what followed. The commission investigated the reporting of the battle, the actions of those involved, and those in the chain of command who were made aware of the incident. The Peers Commission was instructed to determine if a cover-up had occurred in the days and months following March 16, 1968. The commission was instructed to return a report of what they had discovered and present a series of recommendations. The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the findings of the Peers Commission that relate

⁶ Ibid., 213.

to its study of the conducted investigations and reporting and cover-up by the Americal Division after the My Lai Massacre.

The Peers Commission found that the official report filed by Americal does not include the information concerning the deaths of the innocent civilians. On the morning of March 16, 1968, Task Force (TF) Barker reported its casualty report within minutes of the first American soldiers landing in the area of My Lai. The initial report listed one Vietcong (VC) soldier killed. Within another thirty minutes, TF Barker had a report that six additional VC soldiers had been killed. At 0800 hours TF Barker reported that fourteen VC had been killed near Charlie Company's landing zone. That report changed at 0840 when the tally was changed from fourteen to sixty-nine.

For the rest of March 16 Charlie Company did not report any further casualty reports besides a quick note at 1555 hours that around ten women and children had been killed. Charlie Company noted that this report was sent to TF Barker and to the headquarters of Americal. Within the opening hours of their landing TF Barker was quick to report the nearly one hundred enemy casualties, but reported only a few for the rest of the day, even though numerous accounts of killings had been witnessed throughout the day.

The Americal Division Journal initially reported that on March 16, 1968, TF Barker's assault on My Lai resulted in 128 VC dead and three enemy weapons captured.⁷ The initial journal report does not cite any of the noncombatant deaths or the mass killings of the day.

The Peers Commission discovered through testimony that while viewing the assault on My Lai from his helicopter Oran Henderson, colonel and commanding officer

⁷ Ibid., 233.

of Americal Division, noted two groups of bodies of noncombatants. Henderson noted that one of the groups, on the side of a road leading out of the village, consisted of an old man, a woman, and a child. Only 150 meters south of this group was another group of dead noncombatants, including two men and one woman. The Peers Commission found that these two sightings and the number of casualties were not reported in the official casualty report of the day.⁸

Henderson testified that when he returned to LZ Dottie at 0930 hours the morning of March 16, he met with Sam Koster, a major general and commander of Americal Division, and notified him of what he saw. Henderson left this conversation with the directive of investigating how the deaths had occurred. Henderson testified that he notified TF Barker to report immediately on how the noncombatants were killed, but Barker was unable to provide any information. In a written statement presented to the Peers Commission before his testimony, Henderson contradicted his testimony by writing that he spoke often with Barker during the assault and had promptly learned that up to twenty-four noncombatants had been killed.⁹ The difference in the two statements by Henderson, along with the lack of information in official journal entries of the day mark early signs of confusion and wrong-doing at My Lai.

Koster and Medina communicated with each other around 1000 hours during the assault on My Lai. Medina testified that he made Koster aware that Charlie Company had observed twenty to twenty-eight civilians killed during the morning hours. Later in the day Koster and Henderson spoke again and the number of civilian deaths they were using was twenty. Not only were they reacting slowly to reports of unnecessary killings,

⁸ Ibid., 234.

⁹ Ibid., 235.

the Americal Division was using false information in its reports. The leadership of Americal had to hesitate to falsify their official report in order to hide the actual number of dead.

The Peers Commission found issues with the initial reaction of TF Barker and the commanding officers in Americal. The commission also noted its disappointment in those on the ground at My Lai that they did not appear to take the situation seriously.

Peers stated that

it is clear that LTC Barker, COL Henderson, and MG Koster all had knowledge, as early as the morning of 16 March, that a number of noncombatants had been killed in My Lai. It is equally clear that no action was taken to report such casualties to any headquarters outside of the Americal Division despite the fact that MACV directives required this action.¹⁰

The purposeful or accidental cover-up of the atrocities at My Lai began almost immediately. Although each individual in a leadership role was well aware of what constituted a war crime, they continued to commit criminal acts by failing to act accordingly at My Lai.

In its attempt to create a solid timeline of the events at My Lai, the Peers Commission researched radio communication throughout TF Barker and Americal that occurred on March 16, 1968. Around 0900 hours, probably after he observed dead civilians, Colonel Henderson was quoted on the radio as saying “I don’t want any unnecessary killing down there.”¹¹ According to the Peers Commission, Henderson made this announcement after being informed of possible civilian deaths, but his statement did not sound like an order, but more of a request. Around 1000 hours a message from an unidentified pilot announced that another helicopter was relentlessly

¹⁰ Ibid., 236.

¹¹ Ibid., 237.

firing on fleeing civilians. The officers of TF Barker were made aware of this announcement within minutes.

Around 1030 hours the radios of Charlie Company broadcast the message from another helicopter pilot who stated “that from up here it looks like a blood-bath. What the hell are you doing down there?”¹² Soon after that message, another message was broadcast on Charlie’s radios from Barker to Medina. Barker advised Medina that he had been made aware of civilian deaths in the area of Charlie Company and ordered Medina to investigate the situation. Medina promptly responded to Barker and made it clear that he “was positive it wasn’t his people.”¹³ The conversation between Barker and Medina was not reported in journal entries for the day.

The inquiry of the Peers Commission discovered another message that was assumed to include Hugh Thompson, a first lieutenant and a helicopter pilot for the 123rd Aviation Battalion. The commission reported that there was a two-person exchange over the Charlie Company’s radios that ended with one of the soldiers telling the other that “if you shoot that man, I’m going to shoot you.”¹⁴ With this amount of conversation occurring, and with the horrible context that each conversation appeared to have, it is clear that commanding officers should have noticed the numerous warning signs that morning. The sole focus of the leadership that morning to wipe out the enemy and achieve a cleared out village blinded them to what was occurring right in front of them.

As summarized in the previous chapter of this study, helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson was a hero on March 16, 1968. He delivered the Thompson Report which

¹² Ibid., 238.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

provided both his commanding officers and later the Peer Commission a detailed explanation of what he saw that day.

Thompson and his crew returned to LZ Dottie around 1130 hours for refueling. While on the ground Thompson was complaining to his crew about what they had seen and how disappointed he was following the actions of his fellow soldiers. Thompson talked with other pilots and crew members during the time on the ground and he found that a number of other pilots had seen disturbing events and were frustrated.

Thompson found his section leader Barry Lloyd, captain in the U.S. Army and platoon leader, and notified Lloyd of what he had seen during the morning. Thompson testified that both he and Lloyd then reported to Frederic Watke, a major in Americal Division. Thompson told Watke about the murdered women and children, the confrontation between Thompson and William Calley, first lieutenant and leader of 1st Platoon, near the ditch, and the evacuation of children to the hospital. Watke testified that Thompson and others were “over-dramatizing” what occurred in the village, and left the innocent casualty count at less than thirty.¹⁵ Witnesses of the meeting testified that they heard Thompson use the word ‘murder’ to describe what he had seen. For the first time, just hours into the day, the events at My Lai were being labeled as murder. The Peers Commission made it clear that the actions taken at My Lai did not occur over a long period of time, but rather that the killings began early in the assault and continued at a pace that allowed individuals to describe the killings as murder within hours.

Following his conversation with Thompson, Watke left the landing zone and went to the village and met up with Frank Barker at TF Barker headquarters. Watke notified Barker of the allegations made by Thompson and ordered Barker to investigate the

¹⁵ Ibid., 242.

situation. Watke testified that once he gave the orders to Barker, his subordinate, he was convinced the issue was resolved and in the hands of someone who could see the issue to a conclusion. Watke believed he followed the chain of command, but he also failed to take the responsibility to ensure that the issue was still a priority. Many times during the events of My Lai, individuals were quick to hand off the subject to others and wipe their hands clean.

Later in the afternoon Barker notified Watke that while some noncombatants in the My Lai village had been killed, the killings were done under fire and were justifiable. Barker told Watke that nothing out of the ordinary had occurred and that the assault was moving forward as planned. Watke deliberated on this information from Barker for a considerable amount of time before, at 2200 hours notifying his superior officer John Holladay, commander of the 123rd Aviation Battalion, of the allegations.

Watke had the Thompson Report and numerous witnesses who confirmed Thompson's account for nearly an entire day. Watke then went only to a subordinate to look into the matter and did not force the situation. Nearly nine hours after receiving a report from Barker that contradicted Thompson and others, Watke finally decided to do what he had been trained to do and move the situation through the proper channels and up the chain of command. Although it took too long to accomplish, Watke acted as he was trained to do. If he, and others, had taken the issue more seriously, it is clear that the events of My Lai would have surfaced much sooner.

Holladay composed his own report taken from the information Watke told him in person and from his reading of the Thompson Report. While the Peers Commission found some discrepancies detailing the conversation between Watke and Holladay, it is

clear that Watke finally notified Holladay of the war crimes which had been committed and that Holladay told those around him that he was concerned about the information he had received. That concern, noted Peers, was not enough for Holladay to awaken his superior officer and notify him of the murders at My Lai. The lack of desire to wake someone up to notify them of countless murders shows the lack of responsibility of Americal's leadership.

On March 17, 1968, Watke and Holladay met with John Young, a brigadier general and the Assistant Division Commander, and presented their information. In his testimony Young described that he left the meeting with more concern, due to the presentation of Watke, about the confrontation between Thompson and Calley than he had with the killings. Young testified that Watke did not mention dead bodies in a ditch, murdered women and children, or deaths of noncombatants on a large scale. At some point, those in the room who knew information was being suppressed had the obligation to stand up and present that information.

Holladay took this information, again lacking any explicit details of innocent civilians being killed, to his superior Major General Koster. Due to the fact that pivotal information had been left out of Watke's report, Koster ordered Oran Henderson to investigate two matters: the confrontation between Thompson and Calley and why troops were firing their weapons more than was required. There was no mention to Henderson to investigate ditches full of dead civilians or to investigate whether the men of Charlie Company had shot injured children.

The Peers Commission found faults with the testimonies of Young, Holladay, Watke, and Koster. Peers wrote that the commission found it difficult to believe that an

incident, a shouting match, between two American soldiers would move this far up the chain of command. If Watke shared information from the Thompson Report in his initial report to Young, how did Young not know about the allegations Thompson made. The same can be said for Holladay and Koster. The Thompson report clearly stated what Hugh Thompson saw that day, and those who read his report would not leave confused about his allegations. Peers stated that it was clear that the testimonies suggested “that these individuals sought to suppress the true facts concerning the events surrounding the My Lai operation.”¹⁶

While the officers were focused on the battlefield confrontation and ignored the depth of the Thompson Report, there were numerous indicators that pointed to an unusual event. The number, and type, of events being reported to the commanding officers should have resulted in a faster response. As the Thompson Report moved up the chain of command, those reading the report read about noncombatant casualties, a captain shooting an unarmed woman, groups of bodies piled in ditches, and numerous witness accounts of the atrocities.

In addition to the indicators within the Thompson Report the Peers Commission found a series of additional indicators which should have been noticed by the commanding officers at My Lai. Peers noted that the mass exodus of civilians, an early report of many Vietcong dead, the small number of Vietcong weapons captured by TF Barker, and the amazingly low ratio of American dead. The commission detailed these indicators which the leadership at My Lai passed over.¹⁷ As the events of My Lai continued it had become clear that those in a leadership role continually failed to exert

¹⁶ Ibid., 246.

¹⁷ Ibid., 247.

that leadership. The knowledge of war crimes was growing nearly every time those in charge met to discuss the morning of March 16.

In the briefings leading up to the assault on My Lai, intelligence was presented that stated that the village would be clear of noncombatants by 0730 hours. TF Barker planned its attack based on the information that the local citizens would be away to visit their local markets. Within minutes of the arrival of the American forces numerous witnesses including Colonel Henderson observed a large group of innocent civilians fleeing the village amidst American gunfire. Reports circulated through TF Barker that this large group consisted primarily of women and children. Even though the village was supposed to be clear of noncombatants the presence of a large number of them did not press the leadership of TF Barker to issue any warning or order to be on the lookout for unarmed civilians in the village.

Within ninety minutes of touchdown in the village, Charlie Company had reported that nearly ninety Vietcong had been killed. The Peers Commission argued that this was a large red flag that no one in the TF Barker leadership paid any attention to. In most cases of battle, a resounding success at that rate would have caused leadership to inquire how the battle was able to be so successful. If more than one enemy was being killed per minute and within two hours the area was reported to be cold, why didn't leadership quickly arrive to observe the situation? Why did TF Barker not brag about these results and pass the news up the chain of command as quickly as possible? Peers was unable to acquire a satisfactory answer to these questions of the leadership from those involved, and unfortunately those answers may never be answered.

During its research the Peers Commission found that through the previous months leading up to the assault on My Lai the companies that comprised TF Barker captured one enemy weapon for each ten enemy killed. The morning of March 16, 1968, saw that number rise significantly to one-to-forty.¹⁸ The rapid rise in the number of dead combined with the small number of “hot” areas reported and the small number of weapons captured was another red flag that TF Barker leadership refused to see. The lack of weapons captured by American forces should have led the officers to one of two conclusions. The first would have been that the events on the battlefield are not lining up correctly. To kill ninety enemy soldiers in such short order and not obtain any weapons in such a small place would lead one to believe there was something strange about the battle.

Peers found that the final indicator which should have led leadership to take a closer look at the happenings at My Lai and see what was really occurring was that while over one hundred enemy were listed as killed by lunch, only one American soldier was killed. Considering this group was criticized for lacking discipline and the aggressive nature to succeed in battles, those involved in the ranks of leadership at My Lai should have been surprised by the numbers being reported to them. Or is it possible that the leadership assumed their pep talks had worked and the men scored an overwhelming victory at My Lai?

As the Thompson Report and other eyewitness accounts of My Lai slowly moved through the chain of command, the leadership involved decided to meet to discuss an investigation which Colonel Henderson was slated to operate. The meeting involving

¹⁸ Ibid., 253.

Young, Henderson, Barker, Holladay, and Watke took place an amazing two days after the assault on My Lai.

Young and Koster testified to the Peers Commission that they did spend a small amount of time on March 17, 1968, talking to soldiers to see if they knew or heard anything about what happened at My Lai. Koster testified he had mixed results and, therefore, was satisfied at the pace of the investigation and was not overly concerned.¹⁹

The Peers Commission discovered that on March 18, 1968, the meeting of leadership took place at 0900 hours at LZ Dottie. Young began the meeting by stating that Henderson would investigate whether the accusations of a confrontation between Thompson and Calley took place and investigate if American soldiers fired upon noncombatants while under heavy enemy fire. Two days after the assault where hundreds were killed, the leadership of Americal and TF Barker continued to be focused on a confrontation as well as being blind to the fact that their soldiers were not under heavy enemy fire and still fired into areas full of civilians.

The Peers Commission found through testimony that Colonel Henderson stated that following this meeting he toured LZ Dottie and spoke to numerous soldiers and helicopter pilots, including Thompson, about My Lai. Henderson testified that his conversations included discussions about soldiers firing into ditches, wild shooting by American forces, and the indiscriminate killing of women and children. Thompson testified that the conversation lasted nearly thirty minutes and that he relayed a vast amount of details to Henderson.

Following the meeting with Thompson, Henderson flew to the field location of Charlie Company in My Lai to meet with Captain Medina. During their conversation

¹⁹ Ibid., 260.

Medina answered questions from Henderson and convinced the colonel that he used self-defense when killing the female civilian which was witnessed by many members of Charlie Company. Medina told Henderson that Charlie Company saw twenty killed civilians and no more than that. According to witnesses Henderson did not take his investigation seriously with Medina and did not ask Medina to ensure that only twenty had been killed. Testimony showed that Henderson did not relate much information from the Thompson Report to Medina, nor did he push him on groups of bodies in ditches or the rice paddies.

The further significance of this meeting was that it was the only time that Henderson spoke to Medina during his investigation.²⁰ How is it possible that the man put in charge of the investigation does not meet with one of the most important individuals of the morning? Medina was cited, and he admitted to the act, for killing an unarmed woman. Medina was the commanding officer of William Calley who grouped noncombatants into a ditch and killed them. Calley was also the individual who had an altercation with Thompson that was under scrutiny from America's leadership. The failure of Oran Henderson to continually meet with Medina is a war crime in itself.

Following his meeting with Captain Medina, Henderson made a visit to the men of Charlie Company. Henderson gathered the troops and complimented them on their overwhelming victory at My Lai. After beginning with compliments to the men, Henderson asked a leading question by stating that there were some "unsubstantiated reports that we had killed some noncombatant," and asking if any of those present had

²⁰ Ibid., 262.

any knowledge of the situation.²¹ Henderson testified that not one soldier answered the question, and even with directed questions at individual soldiers the only response he received was “no, sir.” Henderson made the assumption that since no one in the group stood forward and said anything, this step of the inquiry was complete.

Did Henderson see the error in using the word “unsubstantiated” when conducting his investigation? The question provided the impression that Henderson was not completely invested in the investigation, and the men were not apt to answer and go against a superior officer in such a public setting.

Through its investigation the Peers Commission found that the conversations referenced above, and many others, were not conducted under oath, nor were they written down in an official matter. Henderson kept notes to himself in a notebook that no one had access to during his investigation. The Peers Commission determined that the notebook was soon destroyed by Henderson, leaving no official notes or remarks about the colonel’s investigation.

Following these conversations on March 18, Henderson had ample evidence which showed that something out of the ordinary occurred on March 16. Henderson was aware of mass killings and the lack of leadership present at the battle scene. Henderson also had information concerning the confrontation between Calley and Thompson. The colonel understood what he had in front of him, but lessened the importance of the mass killings because the leadership of Americal was still focused on the confrontation between Thompson and the men on the ground. A confrontation that resulted in saving the lives of noncombatants, as Thompson rescued a number of innocent civilians from the killing field, was clouding the judgment of Henderson.

²¹ Ibid., 263.

Henderson met with Thompson, other helicopter pilots, Medina, and the men of Charlie Company on March 18. He did not visit the village of My Lai to gain his own perspective. He did not fly over the area to see the ditches or rice paddies that Thompson mentioned. He did not follow up with individuals after gaining new information after talking to other individuals. The Peers Commission found that Henderson concluded his investigation on 18 March 1968, the same day he started.

On the morning of March 20, 1968, Henderson met with Nels Parson, a colonel and the chief of staff of Americal Division, with no witnesses present and advised him of the reason of the meeting and what he had learned during his investigation. Henderson advised Parson that he could not find any proof of the reports of unnecessary killings at My Lai and concluded that Hugh Thompson was the only individual who reported these claims. Henderson continued and told Parson that Medina's shooting of the unarmed woman was justified and nothing out of the ordinary occurred on March 16, 1968. Henderson also testified that he had prepared a written report for Parson and presented it on April 4, 1968, but the Peers Commission was unable to locate the report, and Colonel Parson testified he never saw anything in writing from Henderson.²²

While Henderson was conducting his investigation, Lieutenant Holladay left the meeting of the five officers and met with Colonel Parson. Holladay brought the Thompson Report and other witness accounts of the events at My Lai to Parson and advised the colonel to look into the "murder" which occurred.²³ Colonel Parson testified to the Peers Commission that he decided not to pass any of this information on to other

²² Ibid., 264.

²³ Ibid., 265.

officers because he believed the generals and Henderson had the investigation under control. Why he did not mention his conversation with Holladay when he met with Henderson is difficult to comprehend. Was Parson intentionally covering-up the massacre at My Lai and hoping that Henderson did not come across this information during his investigation? It is difficult to believe that Parson, knowing all that was going on and being said around the division, that Henderson's investigation had the situation under control.

In the week following the events at My Lai and the investigation conducted by Oran Henderson, Major General Koster acknowledged the information presented by Henderson and considered the matter closed. The Peers Commission found that this angle of the My Lai story would be quiet until the following month when other claims of unnecessary killings would surface.

The Thompson Report not only moved through the officer chain of command on its way to Oran Henderson and his short investigation; it also went through the chaplain chain of command within Americal. On either March 16 or 17, Hugh Thompson contacted Carl Creswell, a captain and the division artillery chaplain, to tell him about what he saw in the village. Thompson and Creswell had known each other for some time as Thompson was studying his faith with the chaplain. Creswell testified to the Peers Commission that Thompson was visibly upset and shocked by what he had seen. Creswell advised Thompson to report his observations to his superior and that he would make sure he passed it through the "Chaplain Channels."²⁴

²⁴ Ibid., 267.

Creswell took the information from Thompson to his superior Francis Lewis, a lieutenant colonel and the division chaplain. Creswell recommended that Lewis start an investigation into the matter and to guarantee that the allegations made by Thompson were taken seriously. Lewis assured Creswell that something would be done and that people would be kept informed of the investigation. Creswell testified that after three weeks of hearing nothing from Lewis regarding the investigation, he decided he would drop the issue and go no further.

The Peers Commission's investigation of the Chaplain Channel found that those involved did not apply enough importance to the discussion or investigation of the matter. Peers found that Creswell and Lewis did talk to others within their chain of command, but those discussions were done as part of normal conversation and not within official meetings. Peers also found that these discussions were informal and were based around the at ease question of "did you hear" instead of "what do you know." The commission came down strongly on the chaplain division with the thoughts that many hearing the story would agree. Peers wrote that neither Lewis nor Creswell

took adequate or timely steps to bring these charges to the attention of his [Thompson] commander. It should have been evident to both these chaplains that the idea of conducting an investigation of a war crime through chaplain channels was preposterous.²⁵

The decision made by Creswell to notify his superior was correct, but the Peers Commission was right. Creswell should not have assumed that the chaplains would properly investigate the My Lai Massacre. Creswell and Lewis had the responsibility to gather the information given to them by Thompson and deliver it to those in charge of the military operations at My Lai.

²⁵ Ibid., 268.

The Peers Commission faced numerous road blocks while investigating the reports and investigations which occurred after My Lai. The commission was unable to locate any written record of the Thompson Report within the records of Americal Division. The investigations and reports issued by Americal did not reference Thompson's report, forcing the commission to learn the contents of the Thompson Report from Hugh Thompson and others. Peers was unable to determine the full weight of the Thompson Report as those who testified throughout the inquiry had different tales on what the report was and if it ever existed.

The Peers Commission came to the conclusion that Henderson and the leadership of Americal had enough information from witnesses, images from the battlefield, and the Thompson Report to take the matter seriously but continued to fail to take the required steps. Peers also came to the conclusion that Sam Koster and Americal intended to keep the investigation and reports as close to the division as possible, and instructed Henderson to keep a low-profile while conducting the investigation. The Peers Commission worded their displeasure strongly by stating that "it appears he [Henderson] deliberately set about to conceal information which would indicate its true nature."²⁶ It can be said that keeping things quiet during an investigation in order to ensure that those who are accused do not hide or begin to provide false information, but to keep an investigation secret in order to hide the entire event is another story.

The events just described occurred during the months of March and April 1968 and focused on the efforts and happenings within a small section of the U.S. Army in Vietnam. While Hugh Thompson was telling anyone he could about what he saw and

²⁶ Ibid., 269.

while Oran Henderson was conducting a loose investigation into the events of March 16, 1968, some U.S. personnel and local civilians had become familiar with information being dispersed by the Vietcong and the Government of Vietnam (GVN). The Peers Commission found that the following reports were not investigated to a full extent during the initial Americal investigation from My Lai.²⁷

On March 18, 1968, a grievance was filed by local GVJ officials in the area of My Lai and sent to the Quang Ngai provincial district office of the GVN for their review. The report stated that during a battle with VC the American forces had killed a total of 427 noncombatants throughout the different villages in the My Lai hamlet. The Peers Commission was given access to this initial report and found that the report did not contain any details of the events of March 16, 1968, and concluded this is why the Quang Ngai office did little with the initial report.²⁸

On March 22, 1968, Do Dinh Luyen, the village chief of My Lai, provided the GVN district office with a written report of what he found after the assault of one week prior. Mr. Luyen reported that two U.S. soldiers were wounded during the battle while killing forty-eight Vietcong and injuring fifty-two more. In addition to reporting that 90 percent of property and livestock had been destroyed, Luyen stated that the U.S. forces killed 570 civilians during the morning of March 16.²⁹ Luyen's numbers highlight the ratio of U.S. casualties to Vietnamese casualties to a deeper degree which should have been an indicator to the Americal leadership. Luyen testified in front of the commission

²⁷ Ibid., 270.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 271.

and stated that most of his report was acquired more from oral conversations than from his personal investigation and that over time he may have over reported the number of killed by a small margin.

On April 11, 1968, Tran Ngoc Tan, a lieutenant with the GVN, submitted a detailed report to the provincial office with information from the assault on My Lai. Tan gathered his information through conversations with local residents and Luyen. Tan stated in his report that upon their arrival in the village on the morning of March 16, U.S. forces attacked the village and then gathered over 400 inhabitants and killed them without warning. Tan completed his report asking the provincial office to investigate the matter because he considered the event as an “act of insane violence.”³⁰ Tan testified that he sent copies of his report to U.S. officials in the area, but the Peers Commission was unable to locate any of the copies.

The following day, April 12, 1968, the leadership at the Quang Ngai provincial office ordered an investigation into the events at My Lai. The orders included the command that if the reports were found to be true the investigators should “link-up with the Americal Division to have it stopped.”³¹ Although the orders for a detailed investigation came one month after the assault, the one-day response by the provincial office was a drastic change compared to the efficiency and focus of the U.S. officials.

The Peers Commission also discovered VC propaganda which was released following the assault on My Lai. During the entire Vietnam campaign the U.S. and VC used propaganda to deliver their message. Both sides used radio transmissions, pamphlets, and public gatherings to relay their message. The VC began to release news

³⁰ *Ibis.*, 273.

³¹ *Ibid.*

about My Lai, but the U.S. ignored it as normal propaganda. What made this instance different was the accuracy of the report, including the timing of the attack, the casualties on the U.S. side, and the details concerning bodies in ditches and rice paddies.

On March 28, 1968 the VC issued a note which detailed the My Lai Massacre and was critical and descriptive of the actions taken by U.S. forces. The note stated that

wherever they went, civilians were killed, houses and vegetation were destroyed and cows, buffalo, chicken, and ducks were also killed. They even killed old people and children; pregnant women were raped and killed. This was by far the most barbaric killing in human history.³²

The VC statement concluded with the accusation that over five hundred were killed, including nearly two hundred children.

By the end of April 1968, the Americal Division reopened Colonel Henderson's investigation after receiving the numerous reports from the GVN and the accurate report from the Vietcong. The leadership of Americal was not able to hide from what happened at My Lai. According to testimony, Henderson recalled receiving information, via VC sources, that clearly stated that 470 innocent civilians had been killed the morning of March, 16.

Henderson testified that within thirty-six hours of the re-opening of his investigation he departed Americal's headquarters and visited with Tan. At the meeting Tan questioned Henderson about the reports of the killings at My Lai and what Henderson could tell him concerning the U.S. investigation. Henderson told Tan that he himself had conducted the investigation and that he had visited the area immediately following the assault and questioned the members of Charlie Company. Henderson told

³² Ibid., 275.

him that he had been assured that none of the allegations in fact occurred. Witnesses to the meeting between the two testified that Tan appeared to be satisfied with Henderson's responses.³³

Henderson considered the matter closed again after his reassuring meeting with Tan. He testified that after this meeting he submitted to Americal headquarters copies of the Vietnamese documents, translated into English, which contained the allegations against U.S. forces. Maj. Gen. Koster ordered Henderson to create a written version of his original oral report to file with the Vietnamese documents in case the issue was brought up by others in the future. The leadership of Americal continued to bury the events at My Lai and considered their act of putting something in writing in case someone came looking as the adequate conclusion to their investigation. Is it possible that the leadership had begun to see that what actually happened at My Lai was being accurately described by those in and out of the division, and that they understood that someone would investigate their actions in the future? Did the leadership begin to understand that the killing of hundreds and covering it up was wrong and equaled war crimes?

On April 24, 1968, Colonel Oran Henderson wrote, it was later typed by an assistant, by hand the Report of Investigation. Henderson provided a brief summary of the opening moments of the assault and stated that 128 VC and two U.S. soldiers were killed on March 16. Henderson included that up to twenty noncombatants may have been killed by artillery fire, but after conducting interviews with those on the ground he concluded that "at no time were any civilians gathered together and killed by U.S.

³³ Ibid., 282.

soldiers.”³⁴ Henderson concluded the report by stating that the claim that over four hundred noncombatants had been killed was VC propaganda, and he suggested that a U.S. counter-propaganda program be waged against the VC. Nowhere in his report does Henderson mention Hugh Thompson, the Thompson Report, or other U.S. eyewitnesses.

The report was filed away at Americal’s headquarters and listed as confidential. Henderson testified that only three copies of the report were printed in order to ensure that the information was not leaked. The Peers Commission found that the investigation appeared to end with the filing of the three copies of the Report of Investigation.³⁵ Henderson originally declined to put his investigation into writing, so the three copies made at this point in the investigation equaled a detailed report, even if it was a month late.

During its investigation the Peers Commission inquired into how confidential the report stayed within Americal. Lt. Col. Holladay testified that he saw a copy of the report on April 24, 1968, in Col. Parson’s office and told Parson, after reading the report, he was sure a cover-up had occurred. Other eyewitnesses who were questioned about the report agreed that Henderson’s letter was a completely inadequate report of the events of March 16, and that the lack of any mention of the Thompson Report made Henderson’s letter worthless.³⁶

During his testimony and upon reading the April 24 letter Major Gen. Koster stated that he remembered ordering General Young or Colonel Parson to conduct a complete and formal investigation into My Lai. Both Young and Parson testified that

³⁴ Report of Investigation, April 28, 1968, in Peers, 285.

³⁵ Peers, 288.

³⁶ Ibid., 293.

Koster never gave them this order and that they never spoke to Henderson about a formal investigation. Henderson testified that he contacted Frank Barker the leadership of TF Barker to begin a formal investigation which was to be their top-priority.³⁷

In front of the Peers Commission both Koster and Henderson testified that they submitted a formal report in May 1968 which contained the signatures of nearly twenty witnesses. Peers questioned the named witnesses who may have signed such a formal report and not one remembered signing any document. Other members of Americal testified that they never heard of a formal report, and the Peers Commission was unable to locate a copy of this document.³⁸

Koster testified that he was not concerned about the aftermath of My Lai because he could not believe that a war crime could have been committed by U.S. troops. He also believed that the information must have been propaganda because the VC were known to be in the My Lai area. Koster also took Henderson's report for the final word on the issue and paid little attention to the other information he was receiving. This lack of interest and of leadership led to an inadequate response from leaders within the United States Army. The U.S. Army had the responsibility to handle the events at My Lai in a more professional and responsible matter. Continued reports of hundreds of innocent civilians killed at My Lai did not force the leadership to act urgently.

During its investigation the Peers Commission researched what happened on March 16, 1968, what witnesses said happened, and how the Americal Division handled their required investigation of the matter. When summarizing what they found

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 294.

concerning the Americal investigations, the commission stated that “at every command level from command to division, actions were taken or omitted which together effectively concealed from higher headquarters the events which transpired.”³⁹ Peers continued that “some of these acts and omissions were by design, others perhaps by negligence, and still others were the result of policies and procedures.”⁴⁰ The commission found that on numerous occasions, men wearing the uniform of the United States kept a morning full of war crimes hidden.

The commission found that members of Charlie Company refused to report the atrocities of March 16, 1968, and their refusal to share what they saw made it difficult for others to determine what happened at My Lai. Peers found that the men of Charlie Company were hesitant to report what they had done because of the timing of the event. They had been chastised by leadership prior to the assault for not finishing the job. They had the mindset of revenge after losing numerous colleagues to VC boobytraps. Most importantly the men of Charlie Company were led by ineffective leaders who failed to connect to the men and failed to present an officer-subordinate relationship which would have led to the men providing reports.

Peers also found that Captain Ernest Medina’s report of twenty noncombatants killed at My Lai was not only a false report, but that it was a way to appease Oran Henderson and his investigation. Medina quickly dismissed reports of bodies in ditches and fleeing civilians being shot and killed by American forces. In addition to providing false information to Henderson, Medina ordered his men not to speak to anyone concerning the assault because it was under investigation. Henderson used Medina’s

³⁹ Ibid., 299.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

number in his early investigation and characterized the deaths as accidental deaths, and this allowed him to deny the Thompson Report.⁴¹ If Medina was a leader in Charlie Company and falsified what he saw, it is understandable that the men he commanded would protect what they saw as well.

Another major issue that the Peers Commission discovered was the lack of reporting from Task Force Barker concerning the acts, or allegations, of war crimes being committed at My Lai. Through their investigation the commission found little evidence that showed that Frank Barker took serious interest in an investigation after hearing from Henderson the morning of March 16, or after learning of the full details of the Thompson Report. According to the testimonies of men of Charlie Company, Frank Barker never made a visit to the men to see if they had seen or participated in anything similar to the allegations made by Hugh Thompson.⁴²

Barker also failed to investigate the destruction of the village following the assault. The complete destruction of the village and the property of the local inhabitants was considered a war crime as well. Colonel Henderson would have also been aware of the destruction because of his numerous flights over the village during the assault. Both men of leadership failed adequately to address the situation.

In his command report Barker not only failed to highlight some of the horrible events of the day, but he also presented a successful picture of the assault. Barker noted that the operation went smoothly because it was well planned and well executed, and the men of TF Barker completed their objectives. Barker wrote that the area was inhabited by local civilians which made the operation difficult at times, but “the infantry unit on the

⁴¹ Ibid., 300.

⁴² Ibid., 304.

ground and helicopters were able to assist civilians in leaving the area and in caring for and/or evacuating the wounded.”⁴³ There is some truth in Barker’s report, but he failed to mention that one helicopter pilot conducted the evacuation while having his weapons turned on his fellow soldiers.

The commission summarized their findings of the combat report and labeled it is an “effort by LTC Barker deliberately to suppress the true facts and to mislead higher headquarters into believing that there had been a combat operation in My Lai on March 16 involving a hotly contested action with a sizable enemy force.”⁴⁴ A reading of the report, and subsequently the views of the Peers Commission, indicates that Barker was writing a press release and releasing his own political spin.

During its investigation the commission also heard testimony from Ronald Haeberle, a photographer in the U.S. Army, and Jay Roberts, a journalist traveling with TF Barker. Haeberle took pictures of the assault and of the war crimes with both color and black and white film. He also took pictures on a personal camera and did not release the photos to his commanding officers. After leaving the battlefield Roberts wrote a news release about the battle and failed to mention any atrocities that he witnessed. TF Barker and Americal Division used this press release as more evidence to hide away Thompson’s allegations.⁴⁵

The story of Haeberle and Roberts is another example of individuals not doing the responsible thing and reporting what they had seen or heard. Although neither individual was directly assigned to TF Barker and under no obligation to report to the leadership of

⁴³ Ibid., 305.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 306.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 307.

Barker, they did have the responsibility, as members of the U.S. Army, to provide reports to their superiors.

From the men of Charlie Company to Haeberle and Roberts to Oran Henderson to the leadership of Americal, the events of March 16, 1968, were found to be kept as private and confidential as possible. The events of March 16 were atrocious events which resulted in the deaths of over four hundred innocent civilians, and representatives of the United States went out of their way to ensure that it remained a secret.

The leadership should have been concerned that their men showed no hesitation to shoot and kill fleeing women, or to pile old men, women, and children into ditches and fire at will. This information was formally enough to require the commanding officers to conduct a formal and responsible investigation. The pleas made by Hugh Thompson were ignored and brushed aside, when if they had been followed up with an investigation and interviews of other witnesses, those who were responsible for the war crimes could have been punished.

The Peers Commission found that those on the bottom of the chain of command made an effort to right the wrongs which occurred at My Lai. The commission found that once the news made its way up that chain it lost all of its momentum and lacked a sense of urgency. Although the commission did not find individuals who admitted that there was a design for a cover-up of the events of March 16, it did find that it was clear that through their actions, deliberate and accidental, a cover-up was being enforced and that those in command were doing their part to hide the deaths of over four hundred innocent civilians during the My Lai Massacre from the rest of the world.

The Peers Commission's findings showed what should have been clear to those on the ground in March 1968. War crimes had been committed and no responsibility had been taken by those involved. The leadership of Americal failed the U.S. Army, the men of the division, and the innocent civilians of My Lai with their lack of action concerning My Lai. It is clear that the Peers Commission discovered what Americal hoped would never be found.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

On March 18, 1968, Jay Roberts, a reporter with the Public Information Department of the 11th Brigade, wrote an official press release detailing the events of March 16, 1968. Roberts was with Charlie Company at My Lai and witnessed the massacre but described the March morning as just another battle in the war. Roberts quickly mentions the killing of 128 Vietcong in “a running battle,”¹ in his four-paragraph release which praises the efforts of the U.S. soldiers and their superiors.

Twelve days after the massacre Lieutenant Colonel Frank Barker, the commanding officer at My Lai, wrote his official combat action report giving his detailed account of the battle of the morning of March 16, 1968. Barker describes the mission as one designed to destroy the enemy and its fortifications, as well as the capture of any personnel they could. In his report Barker lists the enemy losses at 128, the same number issued by Roberts in his press release ten days earlier. Barker concludes his analysis of the day with the disturbing notion that there were approximately two hundred civilians in the area and that U.S. forces “were able to assist civilians in leaving the area and in caring for and/or evacuating the wounded.”²

Nearly eight months later on November 26, 1969, General W.C. Westmoreland, the U.S. Army chief of staff, sent a memo to William R. Peers, a

¹ Press Release by Jay A. Roberts, March 18, 1968 in James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 1998), 27.

² Combat Action Report by Lt. Col Frank A. Barber Jr, March 28, 1968, in Olson, 31.

decorated veteran of World War II who had become lieutenant general in the army, which placed Peers in command of an investigation concerning the events at My Lai. The investigation was, according to Westmoreland's orders, to concentrate on the time period from March 16, 1968 through the appearance of Ronald Ridenhour's letter, who served in the aviation section of the 11th Infantry Brigade in Vietnam, letter in March 1969. Peers immediately replied with his understanding of the investigation, as well with as his goals. Peers suggested he and some chosen aides begin their investigation with interviews of witnesses, a trip to Vietnam if necessary, and a report back to Westmoreland by January 10, 1970. The event had been unknown for over one year, but Peers was determined to get everything in the open in just six weeks.

The Peers Commission conducted hundreds of interviews which resulted in thousands of pages of testimony of those who were involved at My Lai and those who had heard about the incident. The commission also invested countless hours into investigations of the event itself, the environment surrounding the troops and the battle, the leadership present at My Lai, and the numerous internal investigations and reports conducted in the days and weeks following My Lai. In the commission's report to Westmoreland they stated that troops "massacred a large number of noncombatants," and that the precise number of killed could not be determined, the number was "at least 175 and may exceed 400."³

³ Joseph Goldstein, Burke Marshall and Jack Schwartz, eds., *The My Lai Massacre and its Cover-up: Beyond the Reach of the Law? The Peers Commission Report with a Supplement and Introductory Essay on the Limits of Law* (New York: The Free Press, 1976), 314. (Hereafter referred to as Peers) .

The commission found that the leadership of Task Force (TF) Barker failed to prepare adequately their men for the planned mission at My Lai which resulted in U.S. troops having unclear objectives entering a battle. The leadership also failed to appropriately address the allegations of war crimes committed on March 16, 1968, and failed to follow the chain of command for the reporting of such incidents. Peers also stated that the commission believed that at every command level within the Americal Division actions were acted upon which, “both wittingly and unwittingly,” hid information concerning the events at My Lai.⁴

In its report the Peers Commission focused on a small group of individuals who they found, through testimonies and research, suppressed information, committed war crimes, or failed to investigate the events of March 16, 1968. The commission recommended that Westmoreland and the U.S. Army investigate the individuals named and send them before a court martial for disciplinary and administrative action. This chapter will analyze the conclusions made by the Peers Commission concerning specific individuals connected to My Lai.

The commission charged that Samuel Koster, a major general and commander of Americal Division, committed numerous offenses related to My Lai. According to Peers, Koster did not adequately prepare the battle plan for My Lai nor did he prepare his men appropriately to handle and treat noncombatants. Peers also found that by the evening of March 16 Koster was aware that noncombatants had been killed at My Lai. He failed to notify his staff or other command elements, and he failed to launch an internal investigation in a timely manner. Koster also failed to address the claims

⁴ Ibid., 316.

brought to him in the Thompson Report with an investigation or notification of other commanding officers.

The Peers Commission also listed Koster's name in its final report because they believed he may have falsely testified in front of the commission. Koster testified that he did notify his staff and other officers, but his testimony was not backed up by others who were questioned. Koster also testified that he prepared a formal report of My Lai and shared that document with others within and outside the division. The commission never found the report.⁵

The Peers commission also concluded that John Young, a brigadier general and the assistant division commander of Americal, also failed to notify his superior officers and his staff of the allegations of war crimes committed at My Lai. In addition to not handling an investigation of war crimes at My Lai, the commission found that Young falsely testified before the commission. Young testified that the noncombatants were killed after being caught in the middle of cross-fire between VC and U.S. forces, but the commission found no evidence of enemy opposition the morning of March 16.⁶

The commission concluded that Colonel Oran Henderson failed to aid and assist injured noncombatants and stop the destruction of the property within My Lai. Henderson, according to Peers, failed to address the allegations of injured and killed civilians the morning of March 16. He also failed to notify his staff and commanding officers that the men of Charlie Company were destroying the private property of the My Lai inhabitants.

⁵ Ibid., 324.

⁶ Ibid., 326.

Henderson also failed to properly address the Thompson Report and failed to investigate Thompson's claims. Henderson told his staff that Thompson was the only one who saw anything proving, in his mind, there was no substance to the report. This belief led Henderson, according to Peers, to "conceal the existence of war crimes" as he did not relate the Thompson Report to others, and properly discuss the allegations with Thompson.⁷

The commanding officer of TF Barker was Lieutenant Colonel Frank Barker and the Peers Commission concluded that he was one of the individuals most responsible for the events at My Lai. The commission included Barker's name in the list even though he was killed in action on June 9, 1968, to ensure that his actions at My Lai were accounted for in the final report. The commission placed a large amount of blame for My Lai on Barker by finding that he

planned, ordered, and actively directed the execution of an unlawful operation against inhabited hamlets which included destruction of houses by burning, killing of livestock, and destruction of crops and other foodstuffs.⁸

In relation to Barker's role in the killing of noncombatants, Peers stated that "while he did not directly order the killings of such persons, he may have created a belief in the minds of some of the unit commanders that they were authorized to kill any persons found there."⁹ The horrible thought that men wearing the uniform of the United States went into battle not knowing if they were allowed to kill civilians or not shows a complete lack of leadership and a failure of the U.S. Army to properly train its soldiers.

⁷ Ibid., 327.

⁸ Ibid., 331.

⁹ Ibid.

According to Peers, Barker also filed false field reports, listing the incorrect number of innocent civilians killed and failed to report any allegations of war crimes being committed. Frank Barker was the leading field commander at My Lai on March 16, 1968, and was on the ground the entire day of the battle. Barker was aware that noncombatants were in the village and were being killed. He was aware that U.S. forces were destroying the village and all that inhabited it. His actions that day not only hid a series of war crimes, but his failures resulted in another series of crimes.

The Peers Commission concluded that the “Chaplain Channel” had individuals who were part of the cover-up at My Lai. Francis Lewis, chaplain of Americal Division, received information via the Thompson Report and failed to investigate the situation and report the information to commanding officers within the division. Lewis’ only discussions concerning the Thompson Report were off-the-record and were seen as casual and unofficial conversations. In addition to the findings of the Peers Commission, Lewis failed on a moral level as well. A chaplain should have taken it upon himself to investigate claims that the lives of many innocent civilians, women, and children were killed by U.S. forces.

The commission also concluded that Carl Creswell, a chaplain in Americal, failed to follow-up after he passed on the information he received from Thompson to Lewis. Creswell followed the “chaplain channel” but did not follow the official chain of command when reporting the Thompson Report. Creswell notified Lewis of his conversation with Thompson but never took the news to another level or followed up with Lewis.

Ernest Medina, captain and commanding officer of Charlie Company, led his men into battle at My Lai and, according to the Peers Commission, failed to properly address the noncombatant situation in the village and failed to stop his men from killing innocent civilians and destroying their property. Medina admitted to killing one woman, claiming self-defense, and possibly killed two others the morning of March 16.¹⁰

According to Peers, Medina also participated in the suppression of evidence of the killing on noncombatants at My Lai. Medina told his men not to discuss the events of March 16 with anyone. He instructed one of his men not to write his congressmen with information related to My Lai, and he failed to report any civilian deaths in his field reports. Medina mistreated a prisoner by hitting him in the head numerous times and failed to provide medical treatment for injured civilian and prisoners.

According to research and testimony the Peers Commission found that Medina lied to the commission on three points. Medina claimed he did not see any dead civilians at My Lai, where research showed he admitted seeing at least twenty bodies. Medina claimed that only a handful of civilians were killed and stated he did not know the full amount of those dead. Medina also told the commission he addressed the situation with his field staff following March 16, but according to witnesses those conversations never took place.¹¹

The Peers Commission found that William Calley, first lieutenant and leader of the 1st Platoon of Charlie Company, directed his men, and concluded that he

¹⁰ Ibid., 340.

¹¹ Ibid., 341.

participated as well, in the indiscriminate killing of civilians the morning of March 16, 1968. Calley committed further war crimes by not reporting the deaths of noncombatants to his commanding officer. Reporting the murders was something Calley was not apt to do considering many levels above him failed to report, and he was critically involved in the shooting and murders himself.

Following the recommendation of the Peers Commission, the United States Army charged over twenty individuals, including Sam Koster, Ernest Medina, Oran Henderson, and William Calley, with withholding information among other charges related to My Lai. Following a series of trials, only Lieutenant William Calley was found guilty of his actions at My Lai. Calley was convicted of the premeditated murder of twenty-two civilians and sentenced to life in prison. Major General Koster was demoted to brigadier general for his role in the ensuing cover-up. The rest of those who were involved in My Lai were acquitted or had all the charges against them dropped.

During his trial, in which he was accused of killing over one hundred civilians at My Lai including women and children, Calley stated that he was obeying orders given to him by Captain Medina. Calley testified that he was ordered to enter the village

and destroy the enemy. That was my job on that day. That was the mission I was given. I did not sit down and think in terms of men, women, and children. They were all classified the same, and that was the classification we dealt with, just as enemy soldiers.¹²

¹² "Testimony of William Calley", http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/mylai/myl_Calltest.html) accessed May 10, 2008.

When asked if he believed he and his troops acted accordingly the morning of March 16, 1968, Calley testified that he “felt then and I still do that I acted as I was directed, and I carried out the orders that I was given, and I do not feel wrong in doing so.”¹³

William Calley was not the only individual who participated in the massacre at My Lai, but he was the only one who was found guilty of his actions by court martial. At the time of his conviction there was sentiment that he was the scapegoat for the U.S. Army and that he did nothing wrong on March 16, 1968. The Peers Commission found that Calley committed atrocities at My Lai and witnesses testified against him during both the Peers inquiry and his court martial. His callousness and lack of sympathy for the murdered innocent civilians removes any doubt about his involvement the morning of March 16.

Ernest Medina was acquitted of the charges brought against him. During his trial Medina testified that he never gave any orders to kill innocent civilians at My Lai, nor did he hide evidence from his commanding officers. Nearly six months following his trial, and when he was no longer under the threat of perjury or court martial, Ernest Medina stated that he had taken part in the events at My Lai and that he had willingly suppressed information from his commanding officers.

Richard Nixon, the thirty-seventh president of the United States from 1969 to 1974, became involved in the Calley case. Nixon believed that the punishment that Calley received was too harsh and ordered that Calley’s sentence be reduced to confinement in his quarters at a military base. The sentence was reduced to ten years and then three months after Nixon resigned Calley was paroled. Nixon later defended his decision because “the whole tragic episode was used by the media and the antiwar

¹³ Ibid.

forces to chip away at our efforts to build public support for our Vietnam objectives.”¹⁴

At the time of the writing of this study, it has been over forty years since the My Lai Massacre. The events of March 16, 1968, in the small village where over four hundred innocent lives were taken, were atrocious. The willingness and the ability of the United States Army to hide what happened for over a year is unthinkable. The events of My Lai occurred in the battlefield during an unpopular war, but the cover-up did not originate at the highest point of command in the United States Army in order to avoid the public learning of the situation. From the beginning the cover-up of My Lai worked its way from the ground up. Men killed innocent women and children, failed to investigate what happened, and then some went in front of an official commission created by the secretary of defense and lied under oath.

Was what happened at My Lai something new to the American soldier that was created in the dense jungles of Vietnam? Or was My Lai another stop in a chain of events that winds through the history of the United States? In 1890 American forces took part in the Massacre at Wounded Knee when American soldiers attacked a group of unarmed Sioux Indians who were at the soldiers fort. The Americans began to shoot into the tents and followed women and children who attempted to flee. In less than an hour U.S. forces killed nearly three hundred Sioux, the majority of

¹⁴ Richard Nixon, from *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, (New York: Touchstone), 1978, in James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 1998), 193.

whom were women and children. The bodies of the dead were buried and frozen by a snowfall and not found until days later.¹⁵

In March 1906 American forces battled a group of native Moros at Mt. Dajo during the Philippine-American war. The well equipped American forces attacked a group of natives who had few weapons and were protecting the women and children who were with them. After the two-day battle, none of the over nine hundred Moros were still alive. Similar to what occurred at My Lai, the enemy were placed in ditches and killed, many of them were unarmed women and children. Upon hearing the news Theodore Roosevelt, president of the United States, commended the U.S. forces and congratulated them on “the brilliant feat of arms wherein you so well upheld the honor of the American flag.”¹⁶ The killing of hundreds of innocent civilians was commended by the president as being a part of an honored event and that the men involved made their country proud.

On November 19, 2005, thirty-seven years after My Lai, twenty-four Iraqi men, women, and children were killed by a group of United States Marines in the city of Haditha, Iraq. Of the twenty-four killed, at least fifteen were noncombatant civilians. Similar to the events leading up to My Lai, U.S. forces in Haditha were under constant enemy fire and had revenge on their minds following the death of one of their fellow soldiers.

¹⁵ Howard Zinn, *The People's History of the United States, 1492 – Present* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2003), 295.

¹⁶ Zinn, *A People's History of American Empire* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008), 75.

Initial reports from the field in Haditha stated that fifteen civilians were killed by an explosive device set off by the enemy, and then U.S. forces killed eight enemy soldiers following the blast. A reporter covering the war in Iraq asked questions about the event, and his investigations of the incident led the Pentagon to get involved in Haditha. After months of investigations an anonymous Pentagon official stated that “U.S. Marines deliberately shot civilians, including women and children.”¹⁷ Eight marines were charged with war crimes, including suppression of evidence, following the Pentagon’s investigation.

Events at Wounded Knee, Mt. Dajo, My Lai, and Haditha are connected by the large number of innocent deaths and immediate plans to hide the information from those outside the battlefield. The massacres at Wounded Knee and Mt. Dajo were before the age of television and embedded reporters, allowing those involved to create their story and cover up the horrible details. My Lai and Vietnam were covered by the press, and images of the war were seen on a daily basis around the world. Yet an army reporter with Charlie Company saw what happened and still produced a press release with false information. The events in Haditha happened in an age where American citizens can see the intensity of the battles in near real-time on massive televisions producing a high-definition picture, and yet the U.S. Marines took the initiative to cover-up what occurred. The U.S. armed forces knew the truth came out after My Lai and suffered the same fate of not learning from past mistakes and allowing their men to commit the same war crimes nearly forty years later.

¹⁷ “Evidence Suggests Haditha Killings Deliberate: Pentagon Source,” *Associated Press News Service*, August 2, 2006 [Internet] available at <http://www.cbc.ca/story/world/national/2006/08/02/haditha-investigation.html>, accessed May 22, 2008.

Those involved during the morning of March 16, 1968, had to know what they were doing was wrong on many levels. They had to know and understand that forcing unarmed civilians into ditches and shooting until all of the individuals are dead was wrong and not part of normal combat operations. They had to know that shooting young fleeing children was wrong and was not a critical part of the planned operations for the day. Those involved had to come to the realization that the morning was not going as it should have after a fellow soldier landed his helicopter, turned his guns on his fellow men, and demanded that American forces show humanity to those who were suffering.

The leadership at My Lai continued the massacre by downplaying its seriousness and not appropriately handling reports from those who witnessed the atrocities. The leadership of Americal Division and Task Force Barker had to know that what they were witnessing on the ground the morning of March 16 were not only war crimes, but criminal acts. At some point during the cover-up and false reporting and speedy investigations, the leadership had to realize that what they were doing was wrong. The Peers Commission quickly and easily found and came to the conclusion that Hugh Thompson and Ronald Ridenhour are the only two examples of exemplary conduct accomplished on March 16, 1968.

In his memoirs, General Peers wrote that

it was embarrassing and unwelcome news for the American people and the administration to learn officially from our report that on March 16, 1968, a large number of women, children, and old men, possibly in excess of over four hundred, had been ruthlessly killed at My Lai, that several rapes, extensive destruction of property, and killing of livestock had also occurred, and that senior Army officers were charged with concealing what had

happened. It was clear to all that the forthcoming prosecutions would provide further unwelcome publicity.¹⁸

The publicity of what happened at My Lai may have been unwelcomed by the United States Army and the White House, but the American public, and the world, had the right to know what occurred at My Lai.

William Peers led a commission that produced thousands of pages which showed what happened at My Lai on March 16, 1968, and in the days and months that followed. The Peers Commission provided a detailed picture of what the U.S. Army had suppressed for over a year. The Peers Commission achieved something that the leadership of the Americal Division did not and conducted a thorough investigation and supplied a complete field report of the assault on My Lai. Ronald Ridenhour's letter gave notice to Washington, D.C., of what happened at My Lai, while the report of the Peers Commission showed the world the atrocities which occurred on March 16, 1968.

The story of the My Lai Massacre is not a historical subject that many would choose to discuss, but it is one that needs to be known in order for present and future generations to ensure that the world does not have to see hundreds of people lying in a ditch. The My Lai Massacre is rarely known by Americans, even those who lived during the tumultuous 1960s.¹⁹ With the twenty-first century beginning with the unpopular Iraqi War, there is hope that the events at My Lai will begin to be known by more in American society. My Lai resurfaced in the news following the killings of

¹⁸ W.R. Peers, *The My Lai Inquiry* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 253.

¹⁹ The author has had the privilege to discuss this study with individuals of different generations and when the My Lai Massacre is mentioned, the initial response in most cases is not knowing the reference. Some of those living in the 1960s knew the term and the name William Calley, but knew nothing further. Vietnam veterans with whom the author had the great opportunity to speak knew a great amount about My Lai, and all had their own perspectives on what happened.

Haditha, but it did allow the opportunity for people to ask questions and look to their government for the truth. At My Lai over four hundred individuals were killed in one short morning and those who were responsible did their best to hide the facts. It is time, forty years later, to ensure that March 16, 1968, is a date which is not forgotten, and a time when society questions reports of innocent civilians being killed.

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