

Remember My Lai: GIs Call Viet Killings ‘Point-Blank Murder’

Story by Seymour Hersh Nov. 20, 1969

By [Seymour M. Hersh](#)

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Three American GIs who participated in March 1968 attack on “Pinkville” said in interviews released yesterday that their Army combat unit perpetrated, in the words of one, “Point-blank Murder” on the residents of the area.

“The whole thing was so deliberate. It was point-blank murder and I was standing there watching it,” said Sgt. Michael Bernhardt, 23, now completing his Army tour at an East Coast base.

Bernhardt was a member of one of three platoons of an 11th Infantry Brigade company, under command of Capt. Ernest Medina, that entered the Viet Cong-dominated area of Pinkville on March 16, 1968, while on a search-and-destroy mission. Pinkville, a complex of hamlets know as Song My village, is about six miles northeast of Quang Ngai in northern South Vietnam.

THE ARMY HAS CHARGED Lt. William L. Calley Jr., 26, a platoon leader, with the murder of 109 South Vietnamese civilians in the attack. A squad leader in Calley’s platoon, Sgt. David Mitchell, 29, is charged with assault with intent to murder.

At least four other men, including Medina, are known to be under investigation. Calley and his lawyer, George W. Latimer, contend that Calley was under orders to clear the area.”

Bernhardt, interviewed at this duty station, said he had been delayed and fell slightly behind the company. Led by Calley’s platoon, as it entered the village area.

“I walked up and saw these guys doing strange things...’Setting fire to the hootches and huts and waiting for people to come out and then shooting them... going into the hootches and shooting them up...gathering people in groups and shooting them.’

AS I WALKED IN YOU COULD SEE piles of people all through the village... all over. They were gathered up into large groups.

"I saw them shoot an M79 (grenade launcher) into a group of people who were still alive. But it was mostly done with a machine gun. They were shooting women and children just like anybody else."

"We met no resistance and I only saw three captured weapons. We had no casualties. It was just like any other Vietnamese village-old Papa-Sans, women and kids. As a matter of fact, I don't remember seeing one military-age male in the entire place, dead or alive."

(An Army communique reporting on the operation said Medina's company recovered "two M1 rifles, a cabine, a short-wave radio-and enemy documents" in the assault; 128 Viet Cong were reported killed; there was no mention on civilian casualties.)

Interviewed at his home, Michael Terry, 22, of Orem, Utah, a former member of Medina's C platoon, and now a sophomore at Brigham Young University, said he, too, came upon the scene moments after the carnage began.

"They just marched through shooting everybody. Seems lie no one said anything. They just started pulling people out and shooting them."

"They had them in a group standing over a ditch-just like a Nazi-type thing-one officer ordered a kid to machine gun everybody down, but the kid just couldn't do it. He threw the machine gun down and the officer picked it up..."

"I DON'T REMEMBER SEEING any men in the ditch," Terry said, "mostly women and kids." Later, Terry said he noticed "some of them were still breathing... they were pretty badly shot up. They weren't going to get any medical help, and so we shot them. Shot maybe five of them..."

Why did it happen?

"I think that probably the officers did not really know if they were ordered to kill the villagers or not...a lot of guys feel that they (the South Vietnamese civilians) aren't human beings... we just treated them like animals."

What happened at Pinkville, Terry said, "never happened to us before and never happened again."

Only one officer, not from Medina's company, tried to halt the shootings. Terry and Bernhardt both reported that this man was a helicopter pilot from an aviation support unit who landed in the midst of the incident. The officer warned he would report the shootings. Next day, he was killed in action and the subsequent investigation launched by officials of the 11th Brigade was dropped after 1 1/2 days because of "insufficient evidence."

THE THIRD WITNESS TO THE shootings cannot be named. Still on active duty on the West Coast, he corroborated in detail the Bernhardt and Terry descriptions.

"I was shooting pigs and a chicken while the others were shooting people" he said. "It isn't just a nightmare. I'm completely aware of how real this was."

Bernhardt, Terry and many others contributed information contained in a three-page letter that a former GI, Ronald Ridenhour, sent in late March to the Army and 30 other officials - including many senators -outlining details of the Pinkville incident as he understood them. It was Ridenhour's persistence that prompted the Army to begin its highlevel investigation in April.

Ridenhour, now a student at Claremont (Cali.) Men's College, was-not in Medina' company and did not participate in the shootings.

Calley's lawyer declined comment on the new charges brought out in the interviews. But another source, discussing Calley's position said "nobody's put the finger yet on the man who started it." The source also said he understood that Calley and other officers in the company initially resisted the orders, but eventually did their job.

BERNHARDT SAID HE HAD NO IDEA precisely how many villagers were shot that day but an official body count "was about 300 or something." He had heard of other death counts ranging from 170 to more than 700. Peasants have said 567 were slain.

Why did the men run amok?

"It's my belief," the sergeant said, "that the company was conditioned to do this. This treatment was lousy... we were always out in the bushes. I think they were expecting them (the Viet Cong) to use the people as hostages."

A few days before the mission, he said, the men's general contempt for Vietnamese civilians had increased when some GIs walked into a land mine, injuring nearly 20 and killing at least one member of the company.

WHY DIDN'T HE REPORT THE ATROCITY at the time?

"After it was all over, some colonel came down to the fire base where we were stationed and asked about it, but we heard no further. Later they (Medina and some other officers) called me over to the command post and asked me not to write my congressman."

Bernhardt said roughly 90% of the 60 to 70 men in the shorthanded company were involved in the shootings. He took no part, he said. "I only shoot at people who shoot at me."

"The Army ordered me not to talk," Bernhardt said. "But there are some orders that I have to personally decide whether to obey -I have my own conscience to consider."

"When I testified during Calley's hearing (an Article 32 proceeding at Fort Benning, Ga.) they asked me if I thought the deaths could have been caused by artillery or crossfire. I asked them if they had ever seen artillery or crossfire leave the dead neatly stacked up in piles."

BERNHARDT SAID THE ARMY must have known at high levels just what did happen at Pinkville. "They've got pictures." He said the photographs were shown him during the Article 32 proceeding which concluded that the charges against Calley were justified.

WARNING: This video is powerful. It contains very graphic interviews of the victims and perpetrators of violent atrocities. It also includes graphic photos of victims and butchered corpses. "Produced by Kevin Sim and Michael Bilton of England's Yorkshire Television. Broadcast by FRONTL in 1989.

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Featured image: Photo by United States Army photographer Ronald L. Haeberle on March 16, 1968 in the aftermath of the My Lai massacre. (Wikipedia)

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Articles by: [Seymour M. Hersh](#)

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