

The Vietnam War: C Company, US 11th Infantry
Brigade Pacify My Lai, 16 March 1968

Time Magazine Correspondent

ews of the My Lai massacre did not break until November 1969. A Army investigation of the incident had begun in September 1968. Lieutenant William Calley was court-martialed for the murder of 109 Vietnamese civilians.

West, a squad leader in a platoon commanded by Lieutenant Jeffrey La Cross, followed Calley's platoon into My Lai. 'Everyone was shooting,' he said. 'Some of the huts were torched. Some of the *yanigans* [young soldiers] were shooting kids.' In the confusion, he claims, it was hard to tell 'mama-sans from papa-sans', since both wore black pyjamas and conical hats. He and his squad helped round up the women and children. When one of his men protested that 'I can't shoot these people', West told him to turn a group over to Captain Medina. On the way out of the village, West recalls seeing a ditch filled with dead and dying civilians. His platoon also passed a crying Vietnamese boy, wounded in both a leg and an arm. West heard a GI ask, 'What about him?' Then he heard a shot and the boy fell. 'The kid didn't do anything,' said West. 'He didn't have a weapon' . . .

Another soldier in the group following Calley's was SP4 Varnado Simpson, twenty-two. 'Everyone who went into the village had in mind to kill,' he says. 'We had lost a lot of buddies and it was a VC stronghold. We considered them either VC or helping the VC.' His platoon approached from the left flank. 'As I came up on the village there was a woman, a man and a child running away from it towards some huts. So I told them in their language to stop, and they didn't, and I had orders to shoot them down and I did this. This is what I did. I shot them, the lady and the little boy. He was about two years old.'

A detailed account came from Paul David Meadlo, twenty-two, a member of Calley's platoon . . . Meadlo says his group ran through My Lai, herding men, women, children and babies into the centre of the village - 'like a little island'.

'Lieutenant Calley came over and said, "You know what to do with them, don't you?" And I said, "Yes." And he left and came back about ten minutes later, and said, "How come you ain't killed them yet?" And I told him that I didn't think he wanted us to kill them, that he just wanted us to guard them. He said, "No, I want them dead." So he started shooting them. And he told me to start shooting. I poured about four clips [68 shots] into them. I might have killed ten or fifteen of them.

'So we started to gather more people, and we had about seven or eight, and we put them in the bootch [hut] and then we dropped a hand grenade in there with them. And then they had about seventy to seventy-five people all gathered up by a ravine, so we threw ours in with them and Lieutenant Calley told me, "Meadlo, we got another job to do." And so he walked over to the people, and he started pushing them off and started shooting. We just pushed them all off and just started using automatics on them.'

According to SP5 Jay Roberts, the rampaging GIs were not interested solely in killing, although that seemed foremost in their minds. Roberts told *Life*, 'Just outside the village there was this big pile of bodies. This really tiny kid - he had only a shirt on, nothing else - he came over to the pile and held the hand of one of the dead. One of the GIs behind me dropped into a kneeling position thirty metres from this kid and killed him with a single shot.' Roberts also watched while troops accosted a group of women, including a

teenage girl. The girl was about thirteen, wearing black pyjamas: 'A GI grabbed the girl and with the help of others started stripping her,' Roberts related. 'Let's see what she's made of,' a soldier said. 'VC boom-boom,' another said, telling the thirteen-year-old girl that she was a whore for the Vietcong. 'I'm horny,' said a third. As they were stripping the girl, with bodies and burning hu around them, the girl's mother tried to help her, scratching and clawing at the soldiers.

Continued Roberts: 'Another Vietnamese woman, afraid for her own safety, tried to stop the woman from objecting. One soldier kicked the mother, and another slapped her up a bit. Haeberle [the photographer] jumped in to take a picture of the group of women. The picture shows the thirteen-year-old girl hiding behind her mother, trying to button the top of her pyjamas. When they noticed Ron, they left off and turned away as if everything was normal. Then a soldier asked, "Well, what we do with 'em?" "Kill 'em," another answered. I heard an M60 go off, a light machine-gun, and when we turned all of them and the kids with them were dead.'

"I didn't know I had it in me."

THE MY LAI MASSACRE

March 16, 1968
South Vietnam

VARNADO SIMPSON

When Lieutenant William Calley and his men raided the small village of My Lai they killed an estimated three hundred and forty-seven people, mostly unarmed civilians. The incident was covered up, but one soldier wrote to government officials repeatedly until they investigated. Many of the soldiers were charged, five were court-martialed, and one, Calley, was convicted on charges of premeditated murder of twenty-two civilians. He was sentenced to life imprisonment, but a federal court overturned the decision. The incident helped turn public opinion against the war.

Varnado Simpson was a member of Calley's unit. He told his story to Michael Ashton and Kevin Sim, authors of Four Hours in My Lai.

That day in My Lai, I was personally responsible for killing about 15 people. Personally. Men, women. From shooting them, to cutting their throats, scalping them, to cutting off their hands and cutting out their tongue. I did it. I just went. My mind just went. And I wasn't the only one that did it. A lot of other people did it. I just killed. Once I started, the training, the whole programming part of killing, it just came out. A lot of people were doing it. So I just followed suit. I just lost all sense of direction, of purpose. I just started killing any kinda way I could kill. It just came. I didn't know I had it in me.

But like I say, after I killed the child, my whole mind just went. It just went. And once you start, it's very easy to keep on. Once you start. The hardest—the part that's hard is to kill, but once you kill, that becomes easier, to kill the next person and the next one and the next one. Because I had no feelings or no emotions or no nothing. No direction. I just killed. It can happen to anyone. Because, see, I wasn't the only one that did it. Hung 'em, you know—all type of ways. Any type of way you could kill someone, that's what they did. And it can happen.