

## The My Lai massacre, March 1968

### What was the My Lai massacre in 1968 and what were its consequences?

#### My Lai village

Soon after dawn on Saturday, 16 March 1968, nine large black helicopter gunships landed close to the small Vietnamese village of My Lai on the coast about 120 kilometres south of the huge American base at Danang. The village consisted mainly of thatch-covered red-brick houses next to a minor road set among hedges, bamboo trees and a paddy field. About 700 inhabitants lived there at the time when the Americans came.

Three platoons of American soldiers left the helicopters. They were part of a search and destroy mission codenamed Task Force Barker after its overall commander, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Barker. You can see what happened next in Sources B to I. One of the platoons, led by Lieutenant William Calley, spent the next two hours or so killing in cold blood a large number of unarmed Vietnamese men, women and children.

**Source B** From a diary written by Thomas Partsch

Got up at 05.30 and we left 07.15. We had nine choppers. We started to move slowly through the village, shooting everything in sight, children, men, women, and animals. Some was sickening. Their legs were shot off and they were still moving. They were just hanging there. I didn't fire a single round yet and didn't kill anybody, not even a chicken. I couldn't.

Quoted in *Four Hours in My Lai* by Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, Viking Penguin, 1992

Lieutenant Calley came over and said, 'You know what to do with them [a group of Vietnamese men, women and children] 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.

Quoted in *Time* magazine, 5 December 1969

**Source A** Map showing the position of My Lai



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

From *My Lai 4* by Seymour M. Hersh, 1973

**Source C** By Sergeant Michael Bernhardt

**Source D** By Paul David Meadlo (aged 22)

**Source E** By Ronald L. Haeberle, an official army photographer

I saw two small children, maybe four or five years old. A guy with an M-16 fired at the first boy, and the older boy fell over to protect the smaller one. Then they fired six more shots.

Quoted in *Time* magazine, 28 November 1969

#### Why kill?

The villagers were assumed to be Vietcong sympathizers although most of the genuine Vietcong in the village escaped (Sources F and G).

Everyone who went into the village had in mind to kill. We had lost a lot of buddies and it was a VC stronghold. We considered them either VC or helping the VC.

Quoted in *Time* magazine, 5 December 1969

**Source F** By Varnado Simpson (aged 22)

**Source G** By an American war correspondent

The few Vietcong who had stayed near the hamlet were safely hidden. Nguyen Ngo, a former deputy commander of a Vietcong guerrilla platoon operating in the My Lai area, ran to his hiding place 300 metres away when the GIs came in shooting, but he could see that 'they shot everything in sight.' His mother and sister hid in ditches and survived because bodies fell on top of them.

From *My Lai 4* by Seymour M. Hersh, 1973

#### The evidence

Although the My Lai massacre took place in March 1968, the shocking secrets of this appalling tragedy did not come to light until eighteen months later in November 1969.



On Tuesday, 25 November 1969, Paul Meadlo was interviewed on US television. He told viewers he had killed 'ten or fifteen men, women and children' when his unit entered My Lai. When asked why, he replied: 'I felt I was doing the right thing, because like I said I lost buddies in the fighting.' Most Americans were horrified and public pressure forced the US Army to launch an official investigation (Source H). The evidence from the men who had taken part was overwhelming and included photographs taken by an official US Army photographer (Source I).

During the interview T'Souvas admitted the company had murdered four hundred unarmed civilians. He admitted himself shooting a girl aged about 15. He killed four others who were wounded because they wouldn't get medical treatment. 'I wanted to talk about this for a long time and am glad now that it is off my chest. It is wrong. Even before it was investigated I wanted to write about it to my Senator, but I didn't know how to go about it.'

From *Four Hours in My Lai* by Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, Viking Penguin, 1992

**Source H** Private Robert T'Souvas interviewed by military police

**Source I** Murdered women and children after the My Lai massacre. American newspapers were heavily criticised when they reproduced photographs of the massacre. One woman complained: 'How can I explain these pictures to my children?'

#### Questions

- 1 What evidence is there that there were Vietcong in My Lai village?
- 2 Imagine you are an American or Vietnamese eyewitness of the My Lai massacre. Write a letter to a relative in Britain describing what has happened.
- 3 Use these sources and those on pages 30–31 to explain how the 'search and destroy' operation at My Lai was different and how it was similar to routine operations in other parts of Vietnam.

## Obeying orders

As the evidence of the massacre flooded out, some of the soldiers concerned expressed remorse for their actions, some shifted the blame on to others, while a few acknowledged their guilt. Most said they were only obeying orders even though US Army instructions clearly stated that a soldier had a duty to disobey any orders which 'a man of ordinary sense and understanding would know to be illegal'.



There was an order from the Captain. He gave the order. He said there would be no children and there would be no civilians in the village at 07 30. He stated that everything that was there was VC or VC sympathizers. There was no doubt in the men's mind that they [the people in the village] were VC.

We obeyed our orders. If an officer tells me something and I don't do it, I'd find myself court-martialled. He was my superior officer and I had to follow him whether I wanted to or not – personal opinions don't enter into it.

Quoted in *The Times*, 9 December 1969 (adapted)

**Source J** Helicopters similar to this Chinook helicopter (seen in action in September 1967) were used in the My Lai operation. It was standard procedure. The US Army had no reason to think My Lai was any different from hundreds of similar missions elsewhere in Vietnam at that time.

**Source K** By Sergeant Isaiah Cowen

Most of those responsible were never brought to justice and, of those charged with war crimes, all were acquitted except Lieutenant Calley. His attitude was summed up in four words: 'No big deal, Sir.' He later argued: 'We weren't in My Lai to kill human beings, really. We were there to destroy Communism.' Calley was sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labour but came out of prison in 1974 after only three years. As for the other soldiers and officers involved, the authors of *Four Hours in My Lai* summed it up: 'Everyone else responsible for the most inexcusable act of American arms during this century had got clean away with it.'

The Vietnamese at My Lai who survived the massacre, however, will never forget (**Source M**).

I think of it all the time. I think about it and I can't sleep. I won't forgive. I hate them very much. I won't forgive them as long as I live. Think of those children, that small. Those children at their mothers' breasts being killed.

Quoted in *Four Hours in My Lai* by Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, Viking Penguin, 1992

**Source M** By Truong Thi Le, who hid in a paddy field while nine members of her family died

**Source L** By Sergeant Hodges

The order we were given was to kill and destroy everything that was in the village. It was to kill the pigs, drop them in the wells; pollute the water supply, kill, cut down the banana trees, burn the village; burn the hootches [houses] as we went through it. It was clearly explained that there were to be no prisoners.

Quoted in *Four Hours in My Lai* by Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, Viking Penguin, 1992

## Justice

Exactly how many Vietnamese civilians were killed was never determined. Official estimates put the number at not less than 175 while it could have been as high as 400 or 500.

## Reaction to the massacre in the United States

Most Americans were as horrified as the rest of the world when the massacre made headline news. Many were so appalled they doubted whether it could be true (**Source N**). In some quarters, however, Lieutenant Calley was treated more as a hero than as a killer. A record called *The Battle Hymn of Lt Calley* sold 200,000 copies and was even played on the armed forces radio network in Saigon.

**Source O** The Vietnamese civilians murdered at My Lai were little different from these frightened Vietcong suspects photographed in 1966. People at home in the United States seeing a photograph like this found it impossible to credit that ordinary American boys of 19 (the average age of a GI in Vietnam) could find it in their hearts to kill innocent people in cold blood.

**Source N** Popular reaction to news of the My Lai massacre

*Cleveland woman*: It sounds terrible to say we ought to kill kids, but many of our boys being killed over there are just kids, too.

*Los Angeles salesman*: I don't believe it actually happened. The story was planted by Vietcong sympathizers and people inside this country who are trying to get us out of Vietnam sooner.

*Philadelphia office worker*: I can't believe our boys' hearts are that rotten.

*GI serving in Vietnam*: There's gotta be something missing.

*Cleveland woman to local newspaper*: Your paper is rotten and anti-American.

*Another GI serving in Vietnam*: The company must have been hit hard before the action.

*Former serviceman*: No American would ever kill 100 people like that.

Quoted in *My Lai 4* by Seymour M. Hersh, 1973



1 Using the sources here and on pages 32–33, write a short essay saying what happened at My Lai on Saturday, 16 March 1968.

2 Design a poster accusing US forces in Vietnam of war crimes.

3 Examine each source in turn and list any factors which suggest it may be unreliable and those which suggest it may be useful.

4 Is there any reason to doubt the reliability and accuracy of any of the sources on these pages?

Questions