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Prologue
The My Lai Story

I

On March 16, 1968, in Son My Village in South Vietnam, more than five hundred people— nearly half of them teenagers or younger— were slaughtered by soldiers of the United States Army. Today most people call this the My Lai Massacre, though "My Lai" actually refers to a group of villages— My Lai 4 and the neighboring subhamlets of Binh Tay and Binh Dong in Tu Cung Hamlet, and My Khe 4 in Co Luy Hamlet, all of them located in Quang Ngai province, a mainly agricultural region in what was then the northern coast of the Republic of South Vietnam and what is today the central coast of the People's Republic of Vietnam. At the time, the villages lay squarely in the region the U.S. Army called "Pinkville," designating it as under Communist control— either by the Viet Cong, the Army of the Republic of North Vietnam, or some combination of the two. The victims, all civilians, were shot, bayoneted, or killed by grenades, and left where they lay— on the trail, in a drainage ditch, in bunkers, yards, pathways, wells, and rice paddies, or in their homes.

In the years that followed, despite efforts at documentation— by Americans, Vietnamese, and international observers— it has proven difficult to settle on the final death toll. In March 1970, the preliminary findings of the U.S. Army arrived at a figure of 360, including two hundred in My Lai 4 (some bodies brought to the ditch from neighboring Binh Dong); seventy in Binh Tay; and ninety in My Khe 4. But later in that same report, its writers asserted that the number might be more than four hundred, reflecting an estimate made by another ongoing investigation— both taking place nearly two years after the event. On April 11, 1968, less than a month after the killings, the village chief of Son My reported a total of 490 civilian deaths, four hundred of them in Tu Cung Hamlet (including My Lai 4 and Binh Tay) and the other ninety in Co Luy Hamlet (including My Khe 4). That same month, the Viet Cong claimed five hundred civilians killed. Today, nearly fifty years after "My Lai," etched into the wall at the Son My War Remnant Site are the names of 504 men, women, and children. Most parties now accept that number as accurate, though some still contend the actual number is smaller.

The chief perpetrator of the killings— particularly along the trail and in the ditch at My Lai 4— was William Laws Calley, Jr., a twenty-four-year-old U.S. Army second lieutenant who headed one of the three platoons in Company C (" Charlie Company") of the 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 11th Brigade of the 23rd (Americal) Infantry Division.

Three years later, in March 1971, a court martial in Fort Benning, Georgia, found Lieutenant Calley guilty of murdering at least twenty-two civilians and sentenced him to life in prison.

In the course of his four-month trial, Calley maintained his innocence, insisting that he had followed orders. He expressed his regret but only that the war itself had required him to do what he had been trained to do in boot camp and Officer Candidate School: to kill. War was the culprit, Calley argued. Those responsible for the fighting, not just in Pinkville but in Vietnam as a whole, bore the chief responsibility for My Lai.

Had My Lai resulted from the depraved actions of one individual— though he was far from alone, as there were more than one hundred men in Charlie Company— or had it been perpetrated by an entire command structure, even by the war with which it quickly became indelibly associated? Who bore responsibility for what everyone eventually acknowledged was a terrible tragedy?

Almost from the start, the U.S. Army realized that everything hinged on the question of orders— the chain of command. That was without question why the army kept the massacre quiet until the press and other news media made it public knowledge in November 1969, principally due to the investigative efforts of the American journalist Seymour Hersh, whose prize-winning articles on My Lai and the cover-up provided the basis for headlines around the country and around the world. He then followed these stories with two books, *My Lai 4* in 1970 (which won the Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting) and *Cover-Up* two years afterward.

The national exposure polarized Americans. On the one hand, it fed opposition to the Vietnam War (which a majority of Americans were now against). Placed within the context of other major events in this era— the Tet Offensive (which had occurred only weeks before My Lai and exerted a powerful and direct influence over it) and the invasion of Cambodia followed by the Kent State shootings— My Lai helped to unite a widely disparate number of Americans against the war, a group that included liberals and conservatives, hawks and doves from both political parties and from every level of society and section of the country. To them the My Lai massacre became both the result and the symbol of what was wrong about the Vietnam War. The army, they said, had turned the war into a contest over body counts, making a My Lai predictable if not almost inevitable. The war had transformed young American men into mass murderers, “baby killers.”

To others, Calley became if not a hero, then at least a scapegoat for a flawed military policy that hampered the efforts of American forces to fight communism. Their reaction to his conviction hardened and deepened their support for the war. Calley and the other GIs in Charlie Company had done their duty in killing those villagers who aided the enemy. The soldiers had been following orders and doing the dirty work of those above them. A court-martial decision had energized a national debate by convincing Americans on both sides of the issue that a conspiracy had been at work.

During the long course of the war in Southeast Asia, other atrocities occurred, perpetrated by all sides in what was, after all, a brutal civil war, one that long preceded 1968. But none came close to My Lai in either the number of victims or the deeply personal— the murderously intimate— nature of their killing. The Vietnam War ground on until the ceasefire in January 1973, nearly five years after My Lai, followed by the withdrawal of the last U.S. troops more than two years later. But for many Americans, My Lai had laid bare the war, revealing that it was unwinnable and that, in the process of fighting for democracy and a way of life, America had lost its moral compass.

II

This book, the culmination of nearly a decade of research and writing, is an attempt to offer a balanced and accurate account of the massacre and its aftermath. One major challenge involves acknowledging that the story of My Lai is to a great degree the story of how it has been told. Who said what to whom and when? What testimony was offered to which organization or institution or journalist or jury? It goes without saying that everyone who has written or spoken about My Lai has had an agenda— whether to blame or defend American policy in Vietnam, the U.S. Army, the Viet Cong, the war itself, even the victims.

If at first My Lai was covered up, it soon exploded with details. Transcripts of interviews and testimonies abound— hundreds of thousands of pages. Some of the soldiers and officers at My Lai, along with their commanders at the base from which they organized and launched the assault on Pinkville, told their stories multiple times— to army investigators, congressional committees, radio and television news commentators, and judges and juries as witnesses in as many as three or four court appearances. Sometimes they were consistent and forthright; sometimes they were less so; many changed their accounts, subtly or dramatically, over time. Perhaps most important, we also now have the records of a number of Vietnamese who were questioned immediately after, and over the course of years, about what happened.

As anyone who works on My Lai knows, accounting for what happened in March 1968 is complicated by the major investigations that took place in the midst of the heated and divisive debate over U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Every statement or assertion became subject to rigorous examination, dissected and parsed by all parties. Those arguments and debates themselves have entered the record to become part of the "evidence."

The Pentagon became concerned about atrocity claims at My Lai and other places in Vietnam and carried out an investigation beginning in 1970, whose findings remained unavailable for nearly a quarter of a decade. When declassified in 1994, the records of the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group in the National Archives revealed more than three hundred allegations of murder and assault during the course of the war.

None came close to what happened in My Lai. The army first came under pressure to undertake an investigation in the spring of 1969, about a year after a Vietnam veteran named Ronald Ridenhour heard of the My Lai massacre from other GIs who were there. Outraged, he wrote a letter, dated March 29, 1969, to thirty military and governmental leaders (including the newly inaugurated President Richard Nixon), exposing what happened and calling for an investigation. The result was an inquiry by the inspector general's office, chaired by Colonel William Wilson. The Wilson inquiry led to a round of testimonies from soldiers, the most important of which was that given by Private Paul Meadlo of Lieutenant Calley's platoon. Meadlo's accusations convinced Wilson that American soldiers in Pinkville had engaged in something truly horrific.

Based on the inspector general's revelations, the army's Criminal Investigation Division (CID) began an inquiry in August 1969 that gathered more testimony and information supporting the atrocity claims. A key moment came when army photographer Ronald Haeberle, who had been in Pinkville, revealed that he had taken color pictures of the victims and brought them to the CID investigators. Suddenly the visual evidence was everywhere, from black-and-white photographs appearing in newspapers and on TV to color reproductions on display in magazine on December 5, 1969. These CID materials are available for perusal in the Colonel Henry Tufts Collection on My Lai at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor (Tufts headed the inquiry). The color photographs, along with the black-and-white photographs taken by Haeberle, are on the Library of Congress website at http:// www.loc.gov/ rr/ frd/ Military_Law/ Peers_inquiry.html.

To determine whether there had been a cover-up, the army established the Peers Inquiry, a panel of investigators chaired by Lieutenant General William R. Peers and comprised of both military and civilian attorneys. The Peers commission took more than four hundred testimonies from civilian and military personnel (some more than once), amassing thousands of pages of information in examining whether the earlier army investigations, which had been undertaken in Vietnam shortly after My Lai— instigated by the report of a helicopter pilot, Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson, who had hovered over the area and observed what happened— had been honest and thorough. To do this, the commission went beyond its narrowly defined mandate to look at the events occurring on March 16, 1968. The Peers Inquiry began its

work in the Pentagon on December 2, 1969, and presented its final report to the public on March 17, 1970. It accused dozens of officers, up to the division level, of suppressing evidence, and it recommended bringing charges of assault, murder, and rape against a large number of soldiers. The document containing its findings was 225 pages in length, a greatly redacted summation of twenty thousand pages of testimony set out in thirty-two books, along with six additional volumes containing five hundred documents. The entire collection became open to the public in late 1974 and is available on the Library of Congress website as well as on DVD. The "My Lai Tapes" of the testimonies are in the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, thanks to the efforts of Celina Dunlop of the Economist. Peers also wrote an insightful book on the subject, *The My Lai Inquiry* (1979).

Virtually competing with the Peers commission was a subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee, chaired by F. Edward Hébert of Louisiana. The Hébert Hearings resulted in a published report in 1970 that suggested a concerted effort by the subcommittee to undermine the allegations of mass killing made by Hugh Thompson. Six years later, the full records of the hearings became public and are on the Library of Congress website at http:// www.loc.gov/ rr/ frd/ Military_Law/ ML_investigation.html. There are other important sources. Calley of course testified at his court martial, but he also shared his most intimate thoughts about his role at My Lai in extensive interviews with journalist John Sack. Much of this information Sack recorded in Calley's words in a book titled, Lieutenant *Calley: His Own Story* (1971). Sack also presented most of this material in a three-part article in *Esquire* magazine, "The Confessions of Lt. Calley" (Nov. 1970, Feb. 1971, Sept. 1971). The Richard Nixon tapes relating to My Lai are among these sources, including those in the Presidential Recording Program of the Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia and the Richard M. Nixon Library in Yorba Linda, California. The Vietnam Center and Archive at Texas Tech University houses the My Lai Collection, a rich archive of testimonies and other documentary materials, much of it accessible over the Internet. Douglas Linder has put together a valuable website titled "Famous American Trials: The My Lai Courts-Martial."

The transcripts for both the Calley trial and the other major trial involving My Lai, that of Calley's immediate superior, Captain Ernest Medina, are available. The court-martial transcript for Calley's trial is in the National Archives in College Park, Maryland; the transcript for Medina's court martial is in the Special Collections of the University Libraries at Wichita State University in Wichita, Kansas. Also valuable for the Calley trial is the first-hand coverage provided by journalist Richard Hammer in his book, *The Court-Martial of Lt. Calley* (1971). For the Medina trial, perhaps the most useful (if self-serving) account is that written by his defense attorney, F. Lee Bailey— *For the Defense* (1975).

In the years following the trials and commissions, My Lai has come up again and again. In December 1994, for example, a major conference on My Lai took place at Tulane University in New Orleans, where Hugh Thompson, Ronald Ridenhour, Seymour Hersh, best-selling novelist and Vietnam War veteran Tim O'Brien, and others discussed My Lai in front of a large audience. Historian David Anderson edited these discussions in a book titled *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre* (1998). Also important to any examination of My Lai are the videos produced by PBS-TV (Barak Goodman, *American Experience:* "My Lai"; Judy Woodruff*, Frontline:* "Remember My Lai"— an award-winning film produced by Kevin Sim and Michael Bilton of Yorkshire Television in the United Kingdom and first shown on BBC-TV) and CBS-TV (Mike Wallace, 60 Minutes). Of the numerous books on My Lai, the most complete account is that by Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim*, Four Hours in My Lai* (1992).

Despite the many testimonies, no single person could offer the full story. Both the American soldiers and the Vietnamese were scattered throughout the villages during the Pinkville campaign and actually witnessed only parts (or even none) of what happened. The My Lai story is therefore a collection, a composite, and by its very nature incomplete and partial. That is why it has also been a subject for novelists, filmmakers, and poets. What happened there has been interpreted and exploited by political

leaders across the ideological spectrum; it has been fodder for lawyers, military leaders, congressmen, philosophers, and psychologists.

As I learned during the process of writing this book, among the most important sources of information, if also the most painfully and ironically overlooked, are the accounts of those Vietnamese who were actually there— the survivors of the massacre. I have included those accounts in the narrative.

Telling such a multifaceted and multilayered story has proved both captivating and challenging. For every view expressed by either a participant or a writer (then and later), there is a counter view. Fifty years later, disagreements persist over numerous aspects of the story, even the core narrative, which involved Lieutenant Calley and those under his command, as well as those under the command of Captain Medina, whose participation and responsibility still cause debate.

Many uncertainties remain. They always will. But it is clear that My Lai, once what happened there came into focus, raised a basic moral question, one that had not been posed since the post– World War II war crimes tribunals in Tokyo and Nuremberg— both of which were evoked during the Calley and Medina trials and thereafter. One figure in particular took center stage— General Tomoyuki Yamashita, commander of those Japanese forces in Manila who committed mass murder and atrocities in 1945. Yamashita was convicted of war crimes. The Supreme Court in 1946 upheld his conviction, and he was hanged. The controversy over the Yamashita conviction, and its relevance to My Lai, is clear: although the general did not personally direct or order the atrocities in the Philippines, he was guilty because he should have known they might happen and did nothing to prevent them. For a very good reason, mention of "Yamashita" struck cold fear into the hearts of everyone in positions of command in Vietnam, from General William Westmoreland on down.

The My Lai massacre became a legal and moral issue by raising the fundamental question of right and wrong, and it grew into a national policy issue by galvanizing the antiwar movement and ultimately helping to end America's involvement in Vietnam. It also brought on reforms within the Army aimed at preventing more atrocities. Only by following these events in their proper sequence can one understand how My Lai became a pivotal moment in America's history.

More important is the question I will pose at the beginning and at the end our story: Why did a massacre take place at My Lai?

I have my own reason for writing this book, but it is not, I hope, a complex one. The Vietnam War is long over, the generation that fought it heading gradually but inexorably into oblivion. What happened at My Lai needs to be recounted to and by every generation, including my own. What we make of it is for each one of us to decide.