



*“The photographs were like dynamite. They horrified the nation. And the tide of public opinion began to turn against the war.”*

—Seymour Hersh, Investigative Journalist

## My Lai: A Massacre Took 504 Souls, and Shook the World

On March 16, 1968, 105 members of Charlie Company, United States' First Battalion 20th Infantry Regiment, descended into the village of My Lai and nearby hamlets in Quang Ngai Province on a search and destroy mission to kill members of the Viet Cong. The only people to be found were noncombatants: elderly people, women and children.

Nevertheless, the soldiers killed 504 civilians in a four-hour massacre that remains one of the most brutal and notorious in U.S. history.

For more than a year the Army managed to conceal information about the massacre, but all of that changed with the publication in late 1969 of photographs by former Army photographer Ronald L. Haebeler.

More than 50 years later it is still hard to fathom what happened at My Lai, though much has been written. With this exhibit, we hope to spark discussion and teaching about real heroism and the power of images to prick the public's conscience in times of war.

All 19 of Ron Haebeler's photographs are on display for the first time in this exhibit.

*“While on a trail, I approached a group of noncombatants who were surrounded by soldiers. I thought the soldiers were there to interrogate the noncombatants. I yelled, ‘Hold!’ and shot my photo. As I walked away, I heard M-16s open up with full automatic fire. From the corner of my eye, I saw bodies falling, but I didn’t turn to look.”*

—Ron Haebeler



Helicopters en route to the My Lai hamlet.



Sprinting for cover, the soldiers of Charlie Company left the helicopters that had transported them for the assault on the hamlet of My Lai.



A helicopter flew overhead near where I had photographed the two children. I decided to photograph this particular gunship because of the unique depiction of shark teeth on the front.

— Ron Haebler

***“The top brass had to know. Officers were flying around above the site, observing. And the bodies were everywhere.”***

— Ronald L. Haebler

*“Members of Charlie Company were transported to the hamlet of My Lai by the 174th Helicopter Assault Company. I flew along with them for the 15-minute ride. On the way, our pilots told us that the landing zone was considered ‘hot,’ or a danger zone. But after exiting the helicopters it was clear that the landing zone was not hot—that we were not in immediate danger.”*

—Ron Haebler



**My Lai: A Massacre Took 504 Souls, and Shook the World**

A project of WagingPeaceInVietnam.com



Intent on destroying everything that might be of use to the Viet Cong, a soldier stokes a fire with the baskets that are used to dry rice and roots.

*"As I entered the hamlet of My Lai I photographed a house that had been set on fire. I remember that the body in front of the burning house kept twitching, and one soldier commented, 'He got ghosts in him.'"*



An American soldier sets fire to a civilian's house with a zippo lighter.

## My Lai: A Massacre Took 504 Souls, and Shook the World



A boy tries to shield his sister from bullets. Brother: 7-year-old Tran Van Duc. Sister: 14-month-old Tran Thi Ha. They are still alive today.



"I noticed three suspected Viet Cong, all of whom had been shot, on a trail. Later I learned that these individuals were noncombatants."  
-Ron Haeblerle

"When I exited the hamlet, I came across a group of non-combatants, mostly women and babies, that had been shot by members of Charlie Company."

-Ron Haeblerle



## My Lai: A Massacre Took 504 Souls, and Shook the World



A rifleman with Charlie Company, 3rd Platoon, firing at suspected Viet Cong.



"While accompanying the third platoon of Charlie Company, I noticed a woman who appeared from behind a hedgerow. Almost immediately a couple of soldiers opened fire, striking her in the head. I found the woman slumped over, dead. In 2011, I learned that this woman was the mother of two My Lai survivors, Tran Van Duc and Tran Thi Ha."

-Ron Haebeler

Photographed in the aftermath of the shooting of a noncombatant in My Lai.



"When an old man and two small children approached our small group on a road, saying, 'No VC! No VC!' in English, I thought the soldiers would search their meager belongings and question them. But beside me a soldier opened fire with his M-16, killing all three."

-Ron Haebeler

## My Lai: A Massacre Took 504 Souls, and Shook the World

*"This elderly man was trembling so badly that he could hardly walk. He looked as if he wanted to cry. I left him and heard two shots. Later that morning it was confirmed that he had been shot."*  
-Ron Haeberte



*"While I was in the hamlet of My Lai, I discovered a Vietnamese male who was partially submerged in a well. I was informed that he had been shot and then deliberately thrown into the well to contaminate the water that was used for drinking and cooking."*  
-Ron Haeberte



*"After I photographed the scene of the burning house, I noticed two more non-combatants: a small child and a woman who had been shot on the porch of the burning house."*  
-Ron Haeberte



*The only American casualty on that morning in My Lai was a soldier who deliberately shot himself in the foot so that he could escape participating in the carnage.*

## My Lai: A Massacre Took 504 Souls, and Shook the World

# Survivor Stories Emerged Twenty-Six Years Later

as told to William Short and Willa Seidenberg

Photo and Copyright by William Short, 1994

Though she was wounded, Qui was the only one to survive when soldiers herded 170 people into a drainage ditch and opened fire. Her 18-year-old daughter was killed as she tried to climb out of the ditch. Qui's grandchild and mother were also killed, and her home was burned to the ground.

Le's family was taken from their home and forced to march with others down a road in a column. Three people were shot and fell on top of Le, who was shielding her six-year-old son. Le pushed her son aside so he would not be crushed, but he was shot and killed when he moved. Le was able to get away but her entire family was killed.

Ha Thi Qui and Truong Thi Le  
were among very few survivors  
of the My Lai massacre.



# *“We were seeing bodies everywhere.”*

Army helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson, crew chief Glenn Andreotta and gunner Larry Colburn heroically intervened during the four-hour assault on innocent civilians at My Lai, saving lives while risking their own in a desperate effort to end the slaughter.

While flying above My Lai, Thompson's crew recognized that the U.S. troops below were killing civilians, with no Viet Cong in sight. Thompson asked for backup from a gunship and directed his crew to land:

*“We're not going to let these GIs kill any more of these people.”*

Thompson landed multiple times between the civilians and the GIs and told his crew to cover him—and to “open up” on any soldier who fired on him or the civilians. The crew

managed to help at least two groups of civilians to safety by escorting them onto waiting gunships.

Thompson returned to base enraged and reported to his platoon leader.

*“I'll stay on the ground before I'll ever take part in anything like that...That's NOT what this country stands for!”*

Thompson testified before a closed-door Army hearing and before the House Armed Services Committee. According to the *New York Times*, that committee's chairman, Congressman Mendel Rivers, stated that Thompson was the only soldier at My Lai who should be punished—for trying to stop the massacre.



Hugh Thompson meets the press outside of the Army's hearing room.



Pilot Hugh Thompson in his helicopter



# Documenting the Slaughter and Bringing It Before the Public



Ron Ridenhour in Vietnam

Reporter Seymour Hersh won the Pulitzer Prize in 1970 for his reporting on My Lai.



## Ron Ridenhour and Seymour Hersh

Ron Ridenhour heard about the My Lai massacre and spent months while still on active duty in Vietnam, gathering evidence as well as eyewitness and participant accounts.

After returning to the States, in March 1969, Ridenhour wrote a letter detailing the evidence he had collected and sending it to President Richard Nixon, five senior State Department and Pentagon officials and 24 members of Congress:

*"I remain irrevocably persuaded that if you and I do truly believe in the principles, of justice and the equality of every man, however humble... then we must press forward a widespread and public investigation of this matter with all our combined efforts."*

Ridenhour's letter brought about a military investigation—which resulted in charges for First Lt. William Calley in the premeditated murder of 109 civilians. But the full story was not being told.

Finally, Ridenhour turned his information over to investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, who filed the first of his articles about the massacre on November 22, 1969, through Dispatch News Service. It was picked up by 30 newspapers.

# Publication of the Haeberle Photos

On November 20, 1969, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* published Ron Haeberle's My Lai photos and in December Life magazine published them in color with an extensive article, including accounts from participants in the massacre.

The story permeated the media for months but the immediate impact of Haeberle's images was like an explosion of dynamite, according to Seymour Hersh:

*"The brutal photographs brought credibility to the exposés. They horrified the nation. And the tide of public opinion began to turn against the war."*

Haeberle had decided to go public after Army investigator André Fieber questioned him in August 1969:

*"[Fieber] started telling me what happened: babies, women, teens raped and mutilated, What I had seen and photographed was bad enough. I decided, you know, maybe the public ought to know what is going on in Vietnam."*

The Army tried to stop the *Plain Dealer* from publishing, but the publisher said, "Print."

The *Cleveland Plain Dealer's* publication of Ron Haeberle's photographs and Seymour Hersh's article on November 20, 1969, sent shock waves throughout the U.S. and the world.



Ron Haeberle

**1st Photos of Viet Mass Slaying**  
**THE PLAIN DEALER** FINAL  
 FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 1969  
 CLEVELAND, OHIO  
 PRICE 10 CENTS

**Exclusive**  
 The slaughter of more than 300 of the defenseless and defenseless of the village of My Lai, South Vietnam, was the first time the world has seen the horrors of the Vietnam war.

**Cameraman Saw GIs Slay 100 Villagers**  
 A cameraman saw U.S. soldiers slay 100 villagers in a village in South Vietnam.

**Senate OK's Draft Reform; Lottery Eyed for January**  
 The Senate today approved a draft reform bill that would allow the military to draft men from the 18 to 26 age group.

**Today's Plain Dealer**  
 Circulation: 104,100

**PD Prints 1st Photos of Viet Mass Slayings**  
 The Plain Dealer today printed the first photographs of the mass slaying of 300 villagers in a village in South Vietnam.

**GIs Call Viet Killings 'Point-Blank Murder'**  
 U.S. soldiers in Vietnam today called the slaying of 300 villagers in a village in South Vietnam "point-blank murder."

**The Photographer**  
 Ron Haeberle, a 23-year-old Army photographer, was the first to show the world the horrors of the Vietnam war.

**My Lai: A Massacre Took 504 Souls, and Shook the World**

A project of [WagingPeaceInVietnam.com](http://WagingPeaceInVietnam.com)

# Life Magazine Feature, a Shocking Tour de Force

On December 5, 1969, Life Magazine published a selection of Ron Haerberle's photos, as well as an extensive story of the massacre, which included personal stories of some who were involved in the killing. The graphic photos in color further shocked the public.

**LIFE**  
Nov. 27, No. 22  
November 1969

Exclusive pictures, eyewitness accounts

## The Massacre at My Lai



Springing for cover, men of Company C left the helicopters that landed there for the assault on My Lai.

The action at My Lai received only a passing mention at the weekly Saigon briefing in March of 1969. Elements of the Americal Division had made contact with the enemy near Quang Ngai city and had killed 121 Vietcong. There were a few rumors of civilian deaths, but when the Army looked into them—a month after the incident—it found nothing to warrant disciplinary measures. The matter might have ended there except for a former GI, Ron Ridenow, now a California college student. After hearing about My Lai from former comrades, he wrote letters to congressmen warning that “something rather dark and bloody” had taken place. Now an officer has been charged with murder of “an unknown number of Oriental human beings” at My Lai, and 24 other men of Company C, First Battalion, 20th Infantry are under investigation. Congressmen are demanding to know what happened at My Lai, who ordered

it, and whether or not U.S. troops have committed similar acts in Vietnam.

Because of impending court-martial, the Army will say little. The South Vietnamese government, which has conducted its own investigation, states that My Lai was “an act of war” and that any talk of atrocities is just Vietcong propaganda. This is not true. The pictures shown here by Ronald Haerberle, an Army photographer who covered the massacre, and the interviews on the following pages convey a story of undisputable horror—the deliberate slaughter of old men, women, children and babies. These eyewitness accounts, by the men of Company C and surviving villagers, indicate that the American troops encountered little if any hostile fire, found virtually no enemy soldiers in the village and suffered only one casualty, apparently a self-inflicted wound. The people of My Lai were simply paroled down.

“Guys were about to shoot these people,” Photographer Ron Haerberle remembers. “I yelled, ‘Hold it,’ and shot my picture. As I walked away, I heard them say to me, ‘From the corner of my eye I saw bodies falling, but I didn’t have to look.’”

Photographed by RONALD L. HAEBERLE



## My Lai: A Massacre Took 504 Souls, and Shook the World

A project of WagingPeaceInVietnam.com



U.S. soldiers march past the bodies of 200 civilians, including 11 children, on the My Lai massacre site in Vietnam, 1970.



### 'The order was to destroy Mylai and everything in it'

**O**n the morning of March 16, 1968, the 23rd Infantry Regiment of the United States Army was ordered to destroy the hamlet of My Lai in Vietnam. The order was to kill all enemy forces and civilians in the area. The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed. The soldiers were given the order to kill all enemy forces and civilians in the area. The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed. The soldiers were given the order to kill all enemy forces and civilians in the area. The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed.



A destroyed building in My Lai, Vietnam, after the massacre.

### 'You don't call

them civilians—to us they were VC'

### them civilians—to us they were VC'

The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed. The soldiers were given the order to kill all enemy forces and civilians in the area. The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed. The soldiers were given the order to kill all enemy forces and civilians in the area. The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed.



### 'They might have been wild

for a while but I don't think they were crazy'

### for a while but I don't think they were crazy'

The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed. The soldiers were given the order to kill all enemy forces and civilians in the area. The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed. The soldiers were given the order to kill all enemy forces and civilians in the area. The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed.



The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed. The soldiers were given the order to kill all enemy forces and civilians in the area. The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed. The soldiers were given the order to kill all enemy forces and civilians in the area. The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed.



The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed. The soldiers were given the order to kill all enemy forces and civilians in the area. The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed. The soldiers were given the order to kill all enemy forces and civilians in the area. The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed.

### An accused footslog and the company commander

The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed. The soldiers were given the order to kill all enemy forces and civilians in the area. The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed. The soldiers were given the order to kill all enemy forces and civilians in the area. The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed.



### 'Before, Americans always brought us candy and medicine'

The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed. The soldiers were given the order to kill all enemy forces and civilians in the area. The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed. The soldiers were given the order to kill all enemy forces and civilians in the area. The soldiers were told that the enemy was hiding in the houses and that they were to be destroyed.





## “And babies.”

Beginning in December 1969, 50,000 copies of the 'And Babies' poster were distributed free by the Art Workers' Coalition in a dramatic use of journalistic evidence to confront the public with the war's reality.

The poster uses one of photographer Ron Haerberle's most disturbing images, along with a quote from an extensive interview with one of the massacre's participants, Paul Meadlo.

On November 23, 1969, Mike Wallace, the senior reporter for CBS 60 Minutes, walked Meadlo through an exhaustive account of the slaughter, repeatedly asking him for minute details. Three times, Wallace asked Meadlo to describe those who were attacked and killed:

*Q. Men, women and children?*

*A. Men, women and children.*

*Q. And babies?*

*A. And babies.*

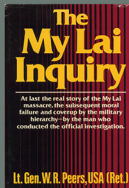
## The Peers Report: An Investigation Delayed, Classified and Suppressed

After Ron Haerberle's sensational photos were published, the Army came under intense public pressure for accountability. In December 1969, the commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, directed retired Lieut. General William R. Peers to lead an investigation of the massacre, including "just how the chain of command had dealt with the situation at the time and whether there had been an official coverup," according to an obituary of Peers published in the *New York Times* (April 9, 1984).

Peers and his staff of 90 spent three months interviewing 398 witnesses, resulting in some 20,000 pages of testimony, and inspecting the ruins at My Lai.

We now know that the 260-page Peers Report described the massacre at My Lai as "a tragedy of major proportions." The report concluded that the scale of the slaughter, including the number of victims, had been lowered at every stage as initial reports from the field traveled up the chain of command.

The Peers Report was classified and wasn't made public until 1975 when the U.S.-supported Saigon government fell.



The Peers Report as published by W.W. Norton, Inc. in 1979



Lieut. General W.R. Peers (Ret.)