

The Man Who Wrote the Letters



Letter from Ronald Lee Ridenhour prompted investigation.

By CHRISTOPHER LYDON, New York Times Staff Writer

ONE FULL YEAR before the American public heard the first reports about an alleged massacre at Song My village, Spec. 4 Ronald Lee Ridenhour of Phoenix, Ariz., had completed the fundamental detective work on the case in Vietnam as an individual mission of conscience.

Now a 23-year-old student at Claremont Men's College in California, Ridenhour observes the widening, horrified preoccupation with the incident with only partial satisfaction.

It was Ridenhour's letter to Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird that prompted the Army to reinvestigate the matter and charge Lt. William L. Calley with murder.

But Ridenhour says he is convinced the Army is determined to protect the senior officers who allegedly gave Calley his orders, and he is still more profoundly troubled by the hostility and delay with which his friends at home, the national press and certain "doves" in Congress have responded to the evidence he presented.

RIDENHOUR heard the first rumors about Song My "with some skepticism" in April 1968, a month after the massacre allegedly took place. At the time he was a door gunner on an observation helicopter, assigned to the 11th Light Inf. Brig. But he was soon transferred to commando reconnaissance around Chulal, an assignment which he says gave him an unusual opportunity to talk with soldiers in many different camps.

By June, he had found four members of Co C who confirmed their participation and offered matching details about the killings at "Pinkville" the previous March. In November, just before he returned to the United States, he met a fifth member of the company, who corroborated the account and

added that the company commander, Capt. Ernest Medina, had warned him against talking about the event.

"The guys I talked to, Ridenhour said in an interview, "I didn't want to believe that they had taken part in this thing. I really don't know why it didn't bother them more. But that's something that everybody should be asking at this point."

Ridenhour spent the first months of this year in Phoenix, recovering from malaria and talking with friends about "how to handle this thing." Except for one of his former instructors at Phoenix College, everybody he knew told him to forget it. "That's war, man, war is hell," they said. "You weren't there. How do you really know it happened?"

At the end of March, nonetheless, he compiled everything he had heard about Pinkville, naming his source (and spelling Calley's name "Kally") in a calm, 1,500-word letter. He mailed copies to President Nixon, Laird, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, George McGovern and Eugene J. McCarthy, and "at least 20 other members of Congress."

Only members of the Arizona congressional delegation responded to his letter, Ridenhour says, and only Rep. Morris Udall of Arizona expressed any personal interest.

In April, Ridenhour was interviewed by an Army investigator, but by the beginning of June, he says, he was convinced that the Army would "whitewash" the case and keep his evidence secret.

From a writers' guide in the Phoenix public library, Ridenhour picked the name of Michael Cunningham, a "literary agent" in Hartford, Conn. The selection was random, he says, and possibly unwise. "But he seemed to have the right geographical location for what I wanted, and his blurb in the book suggested that he might be sympathetic."

Cunningham, whose full-time employment is with a Hartford insurance company, has not yet documented his efforts to release the story. But Ridenhour believes that his evidence was offered to major newspapers in Boston and New York, three national magazines, both wire services and at least one of the three television networks.

"Everybody Mike Cunningham talked to actively discouraged him," Ridenhour says. "Supposedly responsible people all said: What are you associating yourself with something like this for?"

Ridenhour had considered the possibility that Ramparts magazine and the underground press would pursue his story. "But those people have a reputation for being radical and nutty," he commented. "They're not taken seriously by the public at large. And, let's face it, it's the public at large, the silent majority, that has to face this sort of thing."

she was running into the door," a United Press International dispatch quoted him. He added, "When I turned her over, there was a baby, a little boy about two years old, I guess, under her"—and both were dead.

Simpson said he killed about 10 persons. He said he considered he was obeying orders. Most Viet Cong, he said, had probably left, but the company still underwent sporadic sniper fire.

"When the attack started," West said, "it could not be stopped by anyone. We were mad, and we had been told that the enemy was there, and we were going in there to give them a fight for what they had done to our dead buddies. Then some of the yannigans in the company began to kill civilians after we captured the village."

"As we entered, we drew fire from some of the huts, and then a lot of the guys sort of went crazy," Gruver told the Associated Press. One soldier, he said, went behind a tree and "deliberately shot himself in the foot" to avoid taking part.

Former Pvt. James R. Berghold, in the Niagara Falls Gazette, was quoted as saying he killed one old man "just to put him out of his misery." He said he believed "most of the men" carried out slayings and "only a few of us refused," including himself.

FORMER Sgt. Ronald L. Haerberle, 28, of Cleveland, then a combat photographer, took the pictures shown last week to members of Congress. In a copyrighted interview in the Cleveland Plain Dealer, Haerberle declared the killings were done "recklessly, wantonly and without any provocation."

The army has honored a helicopter pilot, CWO Hugh Thompson Jr., 27, of Decatur, Ga., with a Silver Star medal. The citation said he twice landed his helicopter that day—once to extricate 15 children trying to hide in a bunker and then to rescue a wounded child in disregard of his own safety.

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The My Lai Incident

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Then, they were taken to three groups of 20 soldiers at each group in about 15 minutes. Hoai said they were taken under bodies of victims.

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By JULES LOH, AP Staff Writer

WILLIAM L. Calley came home with medals on his chest and a cloud over his name. To old friends, there was little in Calley's makeup to suggest he was the sort who would merit either.

He was the neighborhood kid they knew as "Rusty" . . . the boy who played the drum in the high school band . . . the lackluster junior college student who flunked four courses . . . the railroad conductor who tied up traffic for 55 minutes at a downtown crossing . . . the polite bellhop . . . the dishwasher . . . the salesman . . . and, finally, the young man who drifted away from home to seek his niche.

Now William Calley, the "average guy" as so many who knew him describe him, has been charged by the Army with the premeditated murder of 109 South Vietnamese men, women and children and his name is known around the globe.

The incident is alleged to have occurred at My Lai in March 1968, six months after Calley reported to Vietnam as a platoon leader with C Company, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry of the Americal Division.

Six months later he was home in Florida on leave before returning, voluntarily, to serve again in Vietnam for 11 more months. During that visit he talked about the memories he brought back with him.

He told his sister, Mrs. Marian Keesling of Gainesville, Fla., of "seeing naked and starving children in the streets" and that had upset him, she said. "He said so many of them seemed retarded."

In a letter from Vietnam, Mrs. Keesling said, her brother told her he had undertaken the care of a little Vietnamese girl. "He sort of adopted her and kept her fed," she said. "But one day he came back from several days of maneuvers and she was gone. He was broken up about that."

Mrs. Keesling did not say whether the letter was written during her brother's first or second tour of duty in Vietnam.

While home, Calley also attended a Christmas party with some old chums from Miami, where he grew up. They were taken, too, by his concern for the ragged, hungry children of Vietnam.

"He had compassion for other people," said Chuck Queen, a schoolmate with whom Calley later shared a room.

Recalling their conversation, Queen said: "Rusty said a lot of things went on in Vietnam that would very much upset the average person. I mean it would really upset you—some of the things that he saw. Some of the things that his platoon saw. Some of the things he and his men had to do. Not murder. But, you know, the children starving and things like that."

"I don't think," said Queen, "that unless somebody was putting a gun to his head he would stand and murder anyone or anything."

WILLIAM L. Calley was born in Miami on June 8, 1943, the second of four children and the only boy. He was an active youngster, "up early and always cheerful," his sister recalled.

This was the assessment of a friend. But some of the soldiers who served with Calley said the lieutenant ordered them to kill large numbers of civilians, and participated in the killings himself.

James R. Berghold, 22, of Niagara Falls, N.Y., who said he was also in Calley's outfit, said that on another occasion Calley shot an old man for no

clear reason. This is also under investigation.

"I brought the guy in," Berghold said. "He was standing in a field all by himself and the lieutenant questioned him and then threw him in a well and shot him in the head."

Charles Gruver, of Tulsa, Okla., who also said he served in Calley's outfit, said the lieutenant was intensely disliked by his men, because he "did a few unnecessary things." Gruver refused to say anything more about Calley.

The family, Mrs. Keesling said, "were all brought up on Bible teachings. It wasn't overdone—we didn't sit down and read it every day—but it was an important part of our life."

Rusty Calley seems to have pursued the normal interests of a boy in Miami. He played baseball and football, learned to water ski, joined the Boy Scouts. According to an associate, he still gets a kick out of water skiing.

He attended Georgia Military Academy for a time, then Miami Edison High School. William Thomas, the dean of boys at Miami Edison, recalls Calley as "a well-mannered, average student with no behavior problems."

A schoolmate and neighbor of those days, Douglas Stanley, says Calley "was never rowdy and never looked for trouble. He was kind of searching for something. He never influenced people in high school. He was quiet and went along with the group and I think he was a little lonely."

"He was pretty straight," Stanley said, "not outstanding in anything. He was always cool, never irrational. I never saw him lose his temper."

When Calley was about 10 his father, a salesman of construction equipment, bought a sum-



First Lt. William L. Calley, accused of murder.

An 'Average Guy'

His record shows that Calley did not serve without distinction. He was wounded, awarded the Purple Heart, and won two Bronze Star medals.

He was sent back to Ft. Benning and given a job—or, more precisely, "made available"—in the office of the deputy post commander, Col. Talton W. Long.

He sits at a desk in Building 35 in Long's outer office. Only a secretary and the colonel's driver share the room.

"Lt. Calley was made available to assist me in such ways as he could," Long said. "Most things are done on a project basis." One project involves helping to assemble an Infantry museum at the post; another involved working up a new parking arrangement for Building 35.

Col. Long seems rather fond of Calley. "I would say, based on my experience with Lt. Calley and the nature of the office and the things he's doing for me," said Long, "that he is intelligent, bright, a thoroughly capable young officer."

"He is mature in his judgment. He's certainly no extrovert or hyperegoist. Nor is he, on the other hand, a phlegmatic introvert. A normal young man—a man that knows what he's about. He's well aware of the world about him."

Calley lives at the Bachelor Officers' Quarters across the street. He enjoys reading, music, dancing, chess. He keeps in shape by jogging.

About three weeks ago Calley asked for a week's leave. Long approved, and Calley drove his red Volkswagen home to Miami. He found his father and younger sister, Dawn, living in a mobile home near Hialeah. His father was ill with diabetes.

"He felt he had to get home and talk to his father," Col. Long said. "To reassure him."

When Calley went back to Vietnam, he was commissioned a second lieutenant in a class of 162 men

mer home in the lush green hills of the Smokies at Waynesville, N.C., and when young Calley was 21 the family moved there to live.

CALLEY never knew Waynesville as home, though. He went off to Palm Beach Junior College where he eventually flunked out—scholastic records show two Cs, a D and four Fs—and moved back to Miami where he shared an apartment with Chuck Queen.

He got a job in 1964 with the Florida East Coast Railroad and soon became a conductor.

"He was just about the youngest conductor we ever had," recalled Robert F. Stack, the railway's terminal superintendent.

"He was real small—not over 130 pounds—but a hard worker. I'd like to have him back."

Calley is still a small man. He stands about five feet three, still weighs about 130, though he dropped down to about 120 while in Vietnam. He has sandy blond hair and keeps it cut short at the sides.

Eventually Calley left Miami. "Rusty was always looking for something," said Douglas Stanley. He went to Palm Beach where he had attended school and took a job as a bellhop, later went to Lake Worth and washed dishes in a restaurant. Then he drifted westward. He became a salesman, an appraiser for an insurance company in New Orleans, still essentially rootless.

On July 26, 1966, Calley enlisted in the Army at an induction center in Albuquerque, N.M. That same year, his mother died.

Calley applied for officer candidate school and on March 26, 1967, began the course in class No. 51 at Ft. Benning, Ga. He was commissioned a second lieutenant in a class of 162 men

on Sept. 7. "There was nothing unusual about him," said a fellow member of the class, Capt. Barry J. Gardner. "He was just another student."

FRESH out of OCS, Calley shipped over to Vietnam, with the Americal Division. He did not write home much, but in one letter to his sister, told of staying out "50 days in the heat, mud and grass with only K-rations to eat." He asked her to send him something tasty, some sardines and cheese.

In July 1968, four months after the alleged massacre at My Lai, Calley was transferred to Headquarters Company of the 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry, 198th Brigade, the outfit he was with when he came home on leave.

"When Rusty showed up at that Christmas party," said Rick Smith, the host of the party and an old chum, "I told him we all thought he was dead. Everybody went crazy." Smith hadn't heard from Rusty in years.

A number of Calley's former friends—Smith, Queen, Stanley—said they had the notion that Calley "was always looking for his niche," as Queen put it, and "found his niche in the Army," as Stanley opined.

"I don't think he was emotionally caught up in the Army," said Stanley, "but felt rather he was a soldier doing his duty. He half-heartedly believed in the war but never mentioned the Vietnamese people in our talks. He mentioned that there were some aspects of the war that he didn't particularly care for but never anything specific."

When Calley went back to Vietnam he joined Company G of the Americal Division's 75th Infantry Ranger Battalion. On the day before he was to be discharged from the outfit, and the Army, he was accused in the alleged My Lai massacre.

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