Chapter 7

COMPANY B, 4TH BATTALION, 3D INFANTRY: ACTIONS ON 16 - 19 MARCH 1968

A. INTRODUCTION

In the course of the investigation of Task Force (TF) Barker's operations in Son My Village on 16-19 March 1968, evidence was received of the possible commission of war crimes and violations of regulations by members of B Company, 4th Battalion, 3d Infantry (B/4-3 Inf) and the US and Vietnamese personnel working with the company. Although there are no indications that any of these activities were either reported to or investigated by higher headquarters, an attempt has been made by this Inquiry to establish the facts relating to these incidents in order to present the most complete picture of the Son My operation possible under the circumstances.

In the gravest of the incidents, a number of Vietnamese sources alleged that on 16 March 1968 approximately 80-90 noncombatants, including women and children, were killed by US soldiers in My Hoi subhamlet of Co Luy Hamlet, a coastal area of Son My Village shown on US maps as "My Khe (4)."

This allegation was included in a number of contemporary reports submitted through Government of Vietnam (GVN) channels in March and April 1968, copies of which were obtained by the Inquiry from GVN sources. A Census Grievance cadreman submitted a report, dated 18 March 1968, which included the statement that "at Co Luy Hamlet 80 people, young and old, were killed" by US forces. On 22 March 1968, the Village Chief of Son My wrote a report to the Son Tinh District Chief concerning the operations in his village on 16 March which stated that 90 civilians had been killed in Co Luy Hamlet on that day. The District Chief passed this allegation on to the Quang Ngai Province Chief in a letter dated April 11, 1968.
More recent statements by a Vietnamese woman, who claims to have been present at My Khe (4) on 16 March 1968, and by the Chief of Co Luy Hamlet (who has not been in the area since before the incident), also allege that approximately 90 people were killed there on 16 March 1968. Finally, a National Liberation Front Committee notice, dated 28 March 1968, charged that 92 civilians were killed in Co Luy Hamlet on 16 March 1968.

Considerable evidence has been developed tending to show that elements of B Company's 1st Platoon did in fact kill a number of Vietnamese women and children at My Khe (4) early on 16 March, but it has not been possible to establish either the full circumstances or the number of victims of this incident.

Only 22 men of B Company's 1st Platoon appear to have witnessed or participated in the My Khe (4) incident. Of these men, two were later killed in action, eight have refused to answer questions about the incident, and several others who testified claimed to have little or no recollection of their actions and observations on 16 March 1968. In addition, the entire coastal area in which My Khe (4) is located has been virtually leveled in the period since the incident took place. The dwellings, trails, and much of the foliage existing in the area in 1968 have been obliterated, and the surviving populace has moved out of the area. These and other factors have precluded a reconstruction of what occurred at My Khe (4) on the morning of 16 March in the same detail given in the preceding chapter to the events in My Lai.

In addition to events of My Khe (4) on 16 March, there is evidence that detainees held by the company on 19 March were beaten and tortured by both US and Army Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) personnel. On 17 March, the company destroyed three subhamlets by burning. Thereafter, the company's modus operandi changed, and on 18 March it assembled hundreds of Vietnamese for a TF-supported Medical Civic Action Program (MEDCAP).

The purpose of this chapter is to present such facts and evidence as have been developed bearing upon B/4-3 Inf participation in the Son My Village operation. While this is an expansion of information relating to B Company presented in Chapter 5, the full story must await the completion of ongoing criminal investigations and any resulting prosecutions.

B. OPERATIONS 16 MARCH

1. 0800-0830 Hours: The Combat Assault
The men of B Company were assembled at the loading area at Landing Zone (LZ) Uptight prior to 0800 hours for a planned combat assault at about 0900 hours. Issuance of ammunition and final checks of weapons and equipment were completed, and CPT Michles reminded his men to be alert for the mines and boobytraps they could expect to encounter in the Son My area.

After completing the combat assault of C Company into My Lai (4) at 0751 hours, the lift helicopters proceeded immediately to LZ Uptight (see exhibit P-203) to pick up the first lift of B Company troops. LTC Barker had changed the operation plan by advancing by one hour the scheduled pickup time for B Company.

The artillery preparation of B Company's LZ south of My Lai (1) commenced at 0808 hours, about the time the first lift was departing LZ Uptight. Avoiding the gun/target line from LZ Uptight to the objective LZ, the helicopters flew southeast over the South China Sea to a point near the mouth of the Song Tra Khuc (see exhibit P-205) before turning inland and then north toward the LZ located just south of Route 521 near the southwest corner of My Lai (1) (see sketch 7-1). As the helicopters approached the LZ, the artillery preparation did not terminate as planned, with the result that the helicopters were forced to make a 360 degree go-around in order to delay their arrival at the LZ. When the artillery ceased firing, LTC Barker marked the LZ with violet smoke and the first lift touched down at 0815 hours (see exhibit P-207). No resistance was encountered as the troops secured the LZ and it remained "cold" as the second lift touched down at 0827 hours.

2. 0830-0845 Hours: Deployment from the Landing Zone

Some members of B Company believed that sniper fire was received from the west as the company moved out from the LZ, but it is possible that these individuals mistook for hostile fire some occasional rounds landing in the area which had been fired by C Company as it advanced in their direction some 2,000 meters to the west. No serious resistance was encountered as the company deployed from the LZ.

The 2d Platoon, led by ILT Roy B. Cochran, had the mission of searching the subhamlet proper of My Lai (1), and it moved directly north across Route 521 toward its objective (see sketch 7-2). To the west, the 3d Platoon together with the Weapons Platoon and company command group also moved north to Route 521 where they halted temporarily to secure
the area along and just to the north of that trail (see sketch 7-2).

The 1st Platoon, under 1LT (now CPT) Thomas K. Willingham, had preceded the 2d Platoon north to Route 521 and then moved east along that road toward the cement bridge over the Song My Khe (also called Song Kinh Giang) which had to be crossed to reach its objective, My Khe (4) (see sketch 7-2). The 1st Platoon's mission was to search the area around My Khe (4) and to block any enemy attempt to escape to the east from the My Lai (1) area. For the remainder of 16 March and until the following morning, the 1st Platoon was to be separated physically from CPT Michles and the rest of B Company, although they were in continuous contact by radio.

3. 0845-0945 Hours: The Attempt to Enter My Lai (1)

Within 15 minutes of touchdown of the second lift, B Company experienced its first casualties. After leading the 2d Platoon across Route 521, LT Cochran was killed by a land mine while attempting to cross a hedgerow at the perimeter of My Lai (1) (see sketch 7-3). Four members of his platoon were wounded by the same explosion. A dust off was requested, and all of the company except the 1st Platoon held in place until the medical evacuation of dead and wounded was completed about 0915 hours.

At that time a second attempt to enter My Lai (1) began with the platoon sergeant commanding the 2d Platoon. When the platoon had moved approximately 150 meters north along the perimeter of My Lai (1), a second mine was detonated at 0930 hours wounding three more men of the 2d Platoon.

The TF commander, LTC Barker, was airborne over the area when B Company reported encountering the second mine, and he notified CPT Michles and the TF tactical operations center (TOC) that he would pick up the additional casualties in his command and control helicopter. Landing in a field just west of My Lai (1) about 0940 hours, LTC Barker took the three wounded men aboard and immediately departed for LZ Dottie where he was dropped off before the command and control helicopter took the wounded to medical facilities at Chu Lai.

Although he did not meet with CPT Michles while his helicopter was on the ground, LTC Barker at this time apparently rescinded the order for the planned search of My Lai (1) as a result of the heavy casualties already suffered by
the 2d Platoon in its efforts to enter the hamlet. The remaining men of the 2d Platoon were ordered by CPT Michles to withdraw from the approaches to My Lai (1) by retracing their steps. B Company made no further attempts to enter My Lai (1) during the operation.

4. 0845-0930 Hours: 1st Platoon Movement to My Khe (4)

   The 1st Platoon, commanded by LT Willingham, was provisionally organized into two rifle squads and a point team with a machinegun team attached to each rifle squad. The point team was composed of four soldiers who had volunteered to act as the platoon's permanent point element and who were widely respected in the platoon for their courage and their ability to locate mines and boobytraps. They also handled demolitions for the platoon and had a PRC-25 radio for communication with the platoon leader. The point team led the order of march from the LZ to Route 521 followed in order by the 1st Squad, the platoon leader with his radio/telephone operator (RTO) and mortar forward observer (FO), 2d Squad, and the medic and platoon sergeant.

   The movement from the LZ to the cement bridge leading to My Khe (4) was completed without significant resistance or casualties. While on the trail south of My Lai (1), a member of the point team reported seeing a dud grenade hurled in the vicinity of the point team (see sketch 7-3). The platoon took evasive action by falling to the ground and firing in the direction from which the grenade was believed to have been thrown. After an unsuccessful search for the grenade, movement toward the bridge continued at a slow pace.

   At or shortly after 0900 hours, the point team reached the western approach to the bridge and LT Willingham transmitted a request to CPT Michles for gunships to support his platoon's crossing. The gunships were rearming and not immediately available, so LTC Barker advised the company to use its mortar in place of gunship fire to support the bridge crossing.

   The FO attached from the Weapons Platoon came forward to adjust 81mm mortar fire into the area across the Song My Khe near the eastern approaches to the bridge. Four or five rounds were fired and the mission terminated because a majority of the rounds were duds. Personnel on a Navy "Swift Boat" off the coast observed two of these rounds impacting "on the beach," which was east of the target area. CPT Michles then instructed
LT Willingham to clear the area across the bridge with a machinegun.

The platoon deployed along the river in order that the majority of its members could cover the far bank of the river. One machinegun was set up near the trail leading onto the bridge, and the area around the far end of the bridge was taken under fire. The point team began crossing the bridge at approximately 0915 hours.

Members of the 1st Platoon heard the explosions of the mines encountered by the 2d Platoon and word of the casualty reports was also passed along. LT Cochran had formerly led the 1st Platoon and the news of his death strongly affected some of the men.

There is some conflicting testimony as to whether the platoon received sniper fire either before or in the process of crossing the bridge. The platoon leader stated that his platoon received heavy sniper fire and was driven back in its initial attempt to cross the bridge. The platoon sergeant and several others testified that a few rounds of sniper fire were received either before or during the crossing. The rifle squad leaders and others present at the scene recalled no sniper fire, and there is no record of any report being made of this alleged enemy contact. The procedures used in crossing the bridge, including the preparatory fires, appear tactically sound whether the platoon received fire or not. Members of the platoon were wary of the area; they would be exposed to enemy fire without available cover while on the bridge; and the news of the casualties suffered by the 2d Platoon added emphasis to their caution.

5. 0945 - 1500 Hours: B Company (-) Movement to Night Defensive Position with C Company

It appears that the heavy casualties suffered by the 2d Platoon before it had even reached its objective area had a demoralizing effect not only upon the remainder of the 2d Platoon but also upon the members of the 3d Platoon, Weapons Platoon, and command group, who were close to the scene and observed both the explosions and the resulting casualties. Whether for morale reasons or because the elimination of the mission to search My Lai (1) left them with no tactical objectives, these elements of B Company had no further activity of any significance before linking up with C Company in the afternoon.

B Company (-) did move several hundred meters to the northeast late in the morning where the 3d Platoon searched the
small hamlet shown on US maps as My Lai (6) (see sketch 7-3). The inhabitants were collected and screened, and several were detained, but in contrast to the actions of other units earlier that day, including those of its own 1st Platoon 1,000 meters to the east, B Company (-) neither harmed the inhabitants nor burned the dwellings in My Lai (6). Later in this chapter it will be noted that CPT Michles had issued an order to the 1st Platoon to insure that women and children were not killed. It is possible that events prompting this order also influenced the conduct of the search of My Lai (6).

Between 1100 and 1200 hours, the reporter and photographer covering the operation for the Brigade Public Information Detachment arrived by helicopter from the C Company area. They stayed with B Company (-) until midafternoon, taking a number of photographs which tend to confirm the complete contrast between the activities of B Company at this time and the actions recorded earlier in the day by the same photographer in My Lai (4) (see exhibits P-18 and 19).

Arriving with the reporter and photographer were LIT (now CPT) Dennis H. Johnson, from the Brigade's attached Military Intelligence Detachment, and his ARVN interpreter. They interrogated some of the detained inhabitants before returning to LZ Dottie at approximately 1700 hours. They were joined at 1500 hours by the TF S2 who arrived with five ARVN soldiers and three National Policemen. The ARVN soldiers and National Policemen had been brought to the field to identify the VC from among the detained inhabitants.

After remaining for several hours in the area of My Lai (6), B Company (less the 1st Platoon) linked up at about 1500 hours with C Company which moved in from the southwest after completing its sweep through My Lai (4) and My Lai (5). The two units established a joint night defensive position. The events which took place in the night defensive position after the link-up of the two companies have been treated in Chapter 6.

6. 0930-1500 Hours: The 1st Platoon in My Khe (4)

The 1st Platoon crossed the bridge over the Song My Khe in single file and widely spaced to limit the number of men exposed on the bridge at one time. All of the men were across the bridge and the platoon was moving out to search the My Khe (4) area by about 0930 hours. Two men (later joined by a third) were ordered to remain at the bridge to secure the platoon's rear and to prevent enemy movement across the Song My Khe.
There is some doubt as to the exact location of the trails leading from the bridge and as to the number and location of the dwellings and other structures in My Khe (4). As previously noted, little trace remains of the terrain features existing in March 1968. On the basis of available evidence, including contemporary maps, it appears that a trail led east-northeast from the bridge for about 200 meters before turning due south parallel to and about 100 meters inland from the coastline (see sketch 7-4). Between the north-south portion of this trail and the South China Sea is a noticeable ridge or rise which prevents observation of the beach and the sea from the trail and vice versa. The 15 to 20 dwellings in My Khe (4) at that time were located on both sides of the trail and extended along it for about 200 meters, beginning about 100 meters south of the point where the trail curves to the south.

The point team with its RTO led the platoon movement along the trail leading from the bridge, followed in order by the 1st Squad (with attached machinegun team), the platoon command group, and the 2d Squad. The platoon moved in single file, staying on the trail to avoid boobytraps. At about 0935 hours, the point team and 1st Squad had approached to within about 75 meters of My Khe (4) at which time they opened fire on the hamlet (see sketch 7-4).

It has not been established whether the lead elements of the platoon opened fire in accordance with a previous plan, upon orders from the platoon leader, in response to sniper fire, or spontaneously. There is evidence to support each of these possibilities. In any case, an intense volume of fire from M-16 rifles and the M-60 machinegun attached to the 1st Squad was directed into and around the hamlet for 4 or 5 minutes. During this period, a radio operator aboard a Navy "Swift Boat" just offshore reported that "there is a lot of small arms fire coming from that direction on the beach." Inhabitants of the hamlet, mostly women and children, were cut down as they ran for shelter or attempted to flee over the ridge of higher ground toward the beach. At about 0940 hours, LT Willingham gave the order to cease fire, and the point team, together with a machinegun team, then moved south along the trail into the hamlet.

At 0955 hours, CPT Michles reported to TF Barker that the 1st Platoon had killed 12 VC with web equipment in My Khe (4). There is no reliable evidence to support the claim that the persons killed were in fact VC.

LT Willingham's order to cease fire prior to moving into the village may have resulted from instructions received
from CPT Michles. At about this time, CPT Michles directed LT Willingham to insure that women and children were not killed. This order may have originated with TF Barker, which was issuing similar instructions to C Company about this time. On the other hand, several RTO's with B Company believe that these instructions were given by CPT Michles either upon hearing the heavy volume of fire in the direction of the 1st Platoon, or in response to LT Willingham's report of killing 12 VC. A number of witnesses testified that CPT Michles continually stressed to his company the importance of safeguarding noncombatants and avoiding indiscriminate firing, and the RTO with the 1st Platoon testified that this order was received before the platoon had even crossed the bridge into the My Khe (4) area.

The 1st Platoon stayed in the general area of My Khe (4) until about 1500 hours. After the initial firing into the hamlet, the point team and the 1st Squad moved down the trail searching and then burning the houses and destroying the bunkers or shelters which each family had constructed in or near their home. The 2d Squad remained to the north of the hamlet. The elements of the platoon searching the hamlet killed an undetermined number of noncombatants in the process.

The destruction of bunkers was accomplished by the point team using one or two pound TNT charges, which would at least collapse the entrances to most shelters if they did not destroy them entirely. Some witnesses alleged that the members of the point team made no attempt to determine if shelters were occupied before throwing explosives into the entrances, and that in some cases unarmed Vietnamese were shot down as they exited from their shelters.

It is believed that only 10 men directly participated in the search and destruction of My Khe (4), and of these two are dead and all the others have either refused to testify about the event or disclaimed any recollection of their observations. For this reason, it has not been possible to establish the facts with any degree of certainty. However, both testimony and circumstantial evidence strongly suggest that a large number of noncombatants were killed during the search of the hamlet.

In response to a request by LT Willingham, a resupply helicopter delivered a case of TNT and additional ammunition to the platoon some time before 1200 hours. At 1025 hours, LT Willingham reported to CPT Michles that the platoon had killed 18 more VC, and at 1420 hours he reported killing an additional 8 VC, making a total of 38 for the day.
No casualties were suffered by the platoon; it made no requests for fire support after crossing the bridge; and it captured no weapons. LT Willingham's RTO testified that he accompanied LT Willingham in a walk down the trail leading through the hamlet later in the morning, and he (the RTO) observed the bodies of about 20 dead Vietnamese -- all women and children.

A Vietnamese woman, Nguyen Thi Bay, claims to have been present in the area of My Khe (4) on 16 March 1968. Although she is classified as a civil defendant by RVN authorities, Mrs. Bay's account of her experiences on 16-17 March was corroborated in some respects by members of the 1st Platoon. According to Mrs. Bay, about 20 US soldiers came into My Khe (4) between 0900-1000 hours on 16 March. There were no VC troops in the hamlet and the US soldiers were not fired upon, but 90 people present in the hamlet were killed, many being shot as they emerged from their shelters. She was hiding in a bunker or shelter with two other women and three children. They were not shot when they came out, but Mrs. Bay claims that she was raped by two soldiers, one of whom also struck her and the other woman with the butt of his rifle. About noontime, she was taken into a hootch where she was shown two spent cartridges tied with a rubber band (perhaps an expended booby trap) and was accused of being a VC, which she denied. Later, she was taken away from the hamlet and made to spend the night in a field with the soldiers. The next morning she was told by the soldiers to take them back to My Khe (4). After doing so, she encountered ARVN soldiers who had come across the bridge.

Testimony from numerous members of the 1st Platoon closely parallels certain aspects of Mrs. Bay's story. A booby-trap consisting of a cartridge rigged with a firing mechanism was discovered during the search of My Khe (4). A woman captured by the point team was used to lead the platoon to its night ambush position a mile north of My Khe (4). The woman stayed in the open with the platoon overnight and the following morning led them back down the trail to the bridge, at which time the other elements of B Company, accompanied by the ARVN soldiers, joined the 1st Platoon. The woman was then turned over to the attached ARVN soldiers.

The above facts concerning the woman used as a point by the 1st Platoon (recalled by many witnesses) tend to corroborate Mrs. Bay's story and lend credence to her account of the killing of 90 noncombatants at My Khe (4) early on 16 March.

The Chief of Co Luy Hamlet (of which My Hoi or "My Khe (4)," is a subhamlet) has stated that 87 people were killed
in the area of My Khe (4) on 16 March 1968. Although he was not present at the time and has not returned to the area since the event, he provided the following breakdown of victims: 15 VC soldiers; 20 VC cadre; 25 VC guerrilla and supply personnel; 13 VC female cadre; and 14 civilians. It should be noted that the hamlet chief's analysis of the casualties is based primarily on Communist affiliation rather than sex or age. For example, the category of "VC female cadre" included mothers of VC soldiers.

7. 1500-1800 Hours: Displacement to Night Defensive Position

Sometime after 1500 hours the platoon moved north approximately 2,000 meters from My Khe (4) and established its night defensive position. A Vietnamese female, tied with a rope, probably Mrs. Bay, walked in front of the platoon as point (see sketch 7-5). It was assumed she would know if the trails were mined and, if so, lead the platoon safely around them.

After the platoon arrived at its night defensive position on 16 March, Navy "Swift Boats" caused six sampans to beach near the 1st Platoon's position. These boats were manned by men and young boys. There were approximately 20 persons on board and they were detained until an interrogation team arrived. After interrogation, approximately five of the detainees were evacuated to Duc Pho for further screening. The others were released. There were no significant activities reported during the hours of darkness.

C. OPERATIONS 17 MARCH

1. 0730-0930 Hours: Company Links Up

By 0730 hours, B Company had begun moving for link-up with the 1st Platoon just north of My Khe (4) (see sketch 7-6). The order of march from the company night defensive position west of My Lai (1) was the 3rd Platoon, company command group, Weapons Platoon, and 2nd Platoon. An ARVN interpreter and several ARVN soldiers, who had been brought to the field by the TF 92, were attached to and moving with B Company. They moved south to Route 521 and followed it to the east. Concurrently, the 1st Platoon was moving south along the coast. The female apprehended in My Khe (4) was still in their custody and continued to walk in front of the 1st Platoon as point.

During the course of crossing the Song My Khe, one man from the 1st Platoon was wounded at 0810 hours from a
booby trap detonated near the eastern end of the bridge. After his evacuation and a thorough check of the bridge for mines, the 3d Platoon began crossing at approximately 0835 hours. At this time the company received sniper fire from the vicinity of My Khe (4). This fire was suppressed by company elements supported by two helicopter gunships that made strafing passes from north to south over the village. The sniper fire caused no US casualties and no enemy casualties were reported from the ground and gunship fires.

2. 0900-1800 Hours: Company Searches Co Luy Hamlet

After crossing the Song My Khe, CPT Michles assigned missions to each platoon (see sketch 7-7). The 2d Platoon moved south near the seacoast while the 1st Platoon followed the inland trail through Co Lay (1), Co Lay (2), and Co Lay (3).

The 3d Platoon secured the bridge across the Song My Khe and sent one squad north approximately 1,000 meters to establish a blocking position across the peninsula (see sketch 7-7). The Weapons Platoon positioned the 81mm mortar at the bridge in the 3d Platoon area in order to cover the movements of the company.

While the company was between My Khe (4) and Co Lay (1), 1LT (now Mr.) John E. Mundy, the company executive officer, arrived by helicopter. He was accompanied by 2LT Michael L. Lewis, a newly assigned officer. LT Lewis was assigned to the 2d Platoon and joined his platoon on the beach north of Co Lay (1) where they halted for lunch. When the company commenced moving after lunch, hooches in Co Lay (1) were destroyed by burning.

Shortly after lunch, members of the 2d Platoon sighted two Vietnamese males. The Vietnamese began running and were engaged by small arms fire. One was apparently hit and seen dropping to the ground. The area was searched, but a body was not located. Nevertheless, this action was recorded in the TF Barker Journal at 1320 hours as "Co B-20 element engaged 2 VC Vic 742781, 1 VC KIA."

The subhamlets of Co Lay (1), Co Lay (2), and Co Lay (3) appeared to have been recently vacated, and the company did not encounter a sizable number of inhabitants. These subhamlets were searched and most of the hooches destroyed by burning. Demolition of most bunkers and tunnels was accomplished by the 1st Platoon's point team. The two attached engineer demolition specialists were instructed to destroy only two bunkers.
The two platoons and command group returned north along the trail to an area near Co Lay (1) and went into position for the night (see sketch 7-8). The Weapons Platoon displaced from the 3d Platoon area and closed into the company position.

All that day, the 3d Platoon had secured the area near the bridge and maintained a blocking position to the north. There was no activity in these areas. Members of the platoon did not visit My Khe (4). Toward evening, as the perimeter was being pulled in, a female body with a neck wound was discovered along the ridge near the sea. She was buried in a shallow grave the next morning.

D. OPERATIONS 18 MARCH

1. 0730-1000 Hours: Company Deploys to Ky Xuyên (1)

The primary company activity on 18 March was searching the upper peninsula. Operations on this date exhibited a stark contrast to the previous days' activities. Destruction was discontinued; burning and demolition did not occur; and the entire attitude seemed to be benevolent. The inhabitants of the upper peninsula were collected in the vicinity of Ky Xuyen (1) and a MEDCAP team was dispatched to this area in the afternoon.

Movement north from the company night defensive position had begun by 0730 hours. When the company reached the 3d Platoon's position north of My Khe (4), CPT Michles had the Weapons Platoon emplace its mortar to cover elements of the company moving toward Ky Xuyen (1). The 2d Platoon remained there to provide security for the Weapons Platoon. These platoons are believed to have begun moving north prior to 0930 hours.

The company reported its location at 0955 hours as Ky Xuyen (1). There were no engagements or other significant events recorded during its movement to this location (see sketch 7-9).

2. 1000-1700 Hours: Company Searches Upper Peninsula

Two rifle platoons continued along the shore beyond Ky. From this position, one of the platoons moved inland and together they began searching the area and directing inhabitants west toward Ky Xuyen (1). The company's other rifle platoon searched and collected the inhabitants of Ky Xuyen (2) while the Weapons Platoon joined and remained with the company command group.
At 1135 hours, TF Barker notified the 11th Infantry Brigade that it was sending a MEDCAP team to B Company's location. The Task Force reported that there were approximately 1,000 people in B Company's area and that the people did not appear to be VC.

Medical treatment and screening of the inhabitants for VC suspects were performed in the vicinity of Ky Xuyen (1) that afternoon. The three rifle platoons spent the day searching the upper peninsula and sending the inhabitants to the Ky Xuyen (1) area. There were no reports of finding enemy equipment and no casualties. Approximately seven Vietnamese were detained overnight.

3. 1700-2000 Hours: Night Defensive Position Secured

The night defensive position was established several hundred meters up the shore line from Ky Xuyen (1) (see sketch 7-10). Before dusk, the artillery observer with the company fired in marking rounds. Later that evening, the Vietnamese brought to the company position a female who apparently had been wounded by the artillery adjustment. A dust off was requested at 1900 hours and completed at 1925 hours.

E. OPERATIONS 19 MARCH

1. 0130-0600 Hours: Company Position Attacked

At 0130 hours, 60mm mortar rounds began impacting within the company perimeter. Enemy personnel manning the mortar were positioned from 300 to 400 meters northeast of the company position and succeeded in "walking" six to ten rounds through the position. A machinegunner from the 1st Platoon was killed when a mortar round impacted in his foxhole. Five other men were wounded, one of whom died later. All but one of the casualties were from the 1st Platoon.

Personnel on guard observed the muzzle flashes at the enemy mortar position. The company opened fire with small arms all around the perimeter. Countermortar concentrations were fired by the company's 81mm mortar and the artillery located at LZ Uptight. There were some men who believed the company position received small arms fire from the north in conjunction with the mortar attack.

A dust off and an accompanying light fire team were requested by the company at 0143 hours, followed by a casualty report at 0146 hours. Later, LT Willingham had one of his men...
illuminate an open area along the beach with trip flares, which may have been for the purpose of identifying the company position to the dust-off pilot. Evacuation of the wounded was completed at 0244 hours and the helicopter light fire team remained on station over the company until 0300 hours. Instructions to "really dig in" were issued in preparation for an expected major attack.

Prior to the departure of the light fire team, an AC-47 ("Spooky") had been requested through the 11th Infantry Brigade. This aircraft arrived in the area at 0325 hours and remained there until 0600 hours. Radio communication was established with the "Spooky" and the company location was identified to the crew by using a flashlight. The area to the northeast of the company was intermittently "hosed down" by the miniguns of the "Spooky".

Two additional mortar rounds were received at 0440 hours. There were no casualties or reports of observing the muzzle flash.

2. 0630-1030 Hours: Search Operations

At daylight, a squad patrol from the 1st Platoon began searching for the mortar position. They were successful in locating the firing site but nothing more. During this search, two Vietnamese who had been held overnight in the company position walked point for the patrol. The patrol leader, a close friend of the man killed during the mortar attack, began beating one of the Vietnamese with his weapon. He was physically restrained by another member of the squad. Failing to find the mortar and concluding that further search would be useless, the patrol returned to the company command post.

During the morning, an American assisted by an ARVN interpreter interrogated detainees held in the company position. A field telephone with leads attached to various parts of the body to produce electric shocks was one technique being employed to obtain information. Knife wounds were inflicted across the back of the hand of one detainee who was then taken to the beach where salt was rubbed in the flesh wounds. These wounds were probably inflicted by the same American using the field telephone. The detainees were also being kicked and severely beaten by the ARVN interpreter.

One of the detainees promised to show the interrogation team a tunnel entrance leading to a weapons cache. CPT Michles, the ARVN interpreter and three ARVN soldiers, and the 1st Platoon followed the detainees. En route to the supposed
tunnel location, one of the detainees broke and ran. He was not immediately fired upon and escaped (see exhibit P-215). Thereafter, the other detainees either declared they had no knowledge of a tunnel entrance or refused to lead their captors to its location. The platoon returned to the company position and then prepared for extraction.

3. 1050-1340 Hours: Company Returns to Base Camp

Extraction of the company began at 1050 hours and was completed at 1342 hours. The 1st Platoon was extracted first and taken to LZ Uptight, and the remainder of the company was taken to LZ Dottie. B Company's return to LZ Dottie on 19 March concluded TF Barker's operation in the Son My Village area.

During the operation, B Company reported killing a total of 39 VC, of which all but one were reported killed in My Khe (4) on 16 March. Although the number killed may be substantially higher than reported, and the total certainly included women and children, there is no indication that the Task Force and other higher headquarters ever became aware of the actual results of the attack on My Khe (4). In the afternoon of 16 March, CPT Michles reported to TF Barker that there were no women and children among the 38 VC reported as killed. Additionally, the fact that some of the victims were apparently killed in bunkers or shelters may have further assisted in concealing the actual number of persons killed from both the men on the ground and anyone flying over My Khe (4). It should nevertheless be noted that although 39 VC KIA were reported, no weapons were reported captured, no casualties were suffered, and there were no other indications that the 1st Platoon was engaging an armed force. These circumstances should have prompted inquiries from higher headquarters, but apparently none was made.

Although there was some subsequent talk among the men in B Company concerning the people killed by the 1st Platoon in My Khe (4), they recalled no inquiries or investigations about B Company's participation in the operation.
FLIGHT PATH FROM LZ UPTIGHT
16 MARCH 1968

SKETCH 7-1
COMPANY
PLANNED MOVEMENTS
16 MARCH 1968
VICINITY OF
MY LAI (I), MY LAI (6) AND
MY KHE (4)

METERS 500
COMPANY MOVEMENTS

16 MARCH 1968

VICINITY OF MY LAI (1), MY LAI (6) AND MY KHE (4)

0930 HRS - MINE DETONATED 3 - WIA
0845 HRS - MINE DETONATED 1 - KIA 4 - WIA

2 DUD GRENADES VICINITY OF POINT TEAM

SKETCH 7-3
1st PLATOON ELEMENTS
0935-0945 HOURS
16 MARCH 1968
MY KHE (4)

15-20 Hootches within this area

NAVY SWIFT BOAT NEARBY
1600 HRS - 6 SAMPANS BEACHED BY U.S. NAVY SWIFT BOATS

1B/4-3

DEPART MY KHE (4) APPROX 1500 HRS

1st PLATOON MOVEMENT TO NDP
16 MARCH 1968 VICINITY OF MY LAI (1) AND (2)

MY LAI (1)
MY LAI (2)
MY KHE (4) (MY HOI)
CO LAY (1) (XUAN DUONG)
0810hrs - mine detonated
1 - WIA

Sniper fire from My Khe (4)

Sketch 7-6
COMPANY MOVEMENTS
17 MARCH 1968
VICINITY OF
COLAY (1), (2) AND (3)
AND MY KHE (4)

DAYLIGHT POSITION
FOR SQUAD
FROM 3d PLT

3B/4-3

B(-) 4-3

2 VC ENGAGED

CO LAY (1)
(XUAN DUONG)
BURNT

1B/4-3

2B/4-3

MY KHE (4)
(MY HOI)

CO LAY (2)
(XAM TUAN)
BURNT

CO LAY (3)
(XAM CUA)
BURNT

SKETCH 7-7
COMPANY NIGHT DEFENSIVE POSITIONS
17-18 MARCH 1968
VICINITY OF CO LAY (I) AND MY KHE (4)
INHABITANTS OF UPPER PENINSULA ASSEMBLED FOR MEDCAP

COMPANY MOVEMENTS
18 MARCH 1968
SEARCH OF KY XUYEN (1)
KY XUYEN (2) and AN KY

0 METERS 1000
COMPANY NIGHT DEFENSIVE POSITION
18-19 MARCH 1968
VICINITY OF KY XUYEN (1)
Chapter 8

SIGNIFICANT FACTORS WHICH CONTRIBUTED TO THE SON MY TRAGEDY

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief discussion of some of the major factors which appear to the Inquiry to have contributed to the tragedy of Son My.

A. GENERAL

In reviewing the events which led up to the Son My operation of 16 March 1968 and the military situation that existed in the area at that time, certain facts and factors have been identified as having possibly contributed to the tragedy. No single factor was, by itself, the sole cause of the incident. Collectively, the factors discussed in this chapter were interdependent and somewhat related, and each influenced the action which took place in a different way.

Undoubtedly, there were facts and circumstances beyond those dealt with in this chapter which could be said to have had a major influence upon the event. The discussion which follows is not intended to be exhaustive, nor a definitive explanation of why Son My happened. Such an effort would be clearly beyond the competence of this Inquiry. Consideration of the following factors does, however, tend to highlight the differences between the Son My operation and numerous other operations conducted throughout South Vietnam over a period of years. It also points up the potential dangers inherent in these operations, which require constant vigilance and scrupulous attention to the essentials of discipline and the unique responsibilities of command. Consideration of these factors also may assist in understanding how the incident could have occurred.

B. PLANS AND ORDERS

There is substantial evidence that the events at Son My resulted primarily from the nature of the orders issued on 15 March
to the soldiers of Task Force (TF) Barker. Previous chapters of this report have described the content of the different orders issued by LTC Barker, CPT Medina, CPT Michles, and the various platoon leaders and have indicated the crucial errors and omissions in those orders. The evidence is clear that as those orders were issued down through the chain of command to the men of C Company, and perhaps to B Company, they were embellished and, either intentionally or unintentionally, were misdirected toward end results presumably not foreseen during the formative stage of the orders.

The orders derived from a plan conceived by LTC Barker and approved by several of his immediate superiors. There is no evidence that the plan included explicit or implicit provisions for the deliberate killing of noncombatants. It is evident that the plan was based on faulty assumptions concerning the strength and disposition of the enemy and the absence of noncombatants from the operational area. There is also evidence to indicate widespread confusion among the officers and men of TF Barker as to the purpose and limitations of the "search and destroy" nature of the operation, although the purpose and orientation of such operations were clearly spelled out by MACV directives in effect at that time. The faulty assumptions and poorly defined objectives of the operation were not explored nor questioned during such reviews of the plan as were made by MG Koster, BG Lipscomb, and COL Henderson. LTC Barker's decision and order to fire the artillery preparation on portions of My Lai (4) without prior warning to the inhabitants is questionable, but was technically permissible by the directives in effect at that time. The implementing features of that decision were inadequate in terms of reasonable steps that could have been taken to minimize or avoid consequent Vietnamese casualties from the artillery preparation. The orders issued by LTC Barker to burn houses, kill livestock, destroy foodstuffs (and possibly to close the wells) in the Son My area were clearly illegal. They were repeated in subsequent briefings by CPT Medina and possibly CPT Michles and in that context were also illegal.

While the evidence indicates that neither LTC Barker nor his subordinates specifically ordered the killing of noncombatants, they did fail, either intentionally or unintentionally, to make any clear distinctions between combatants and noncombatants in their orders and instructions. Coupled with other factors described in this report, the orders that were issued through the TF Barker chain of command conveyed an understanding to a significant number of soldiers in C Company that only the enemy remained in the operational area and that the enemy was to be destroyed.
C. ATTITUDES TOWARD THE VIETNAMESE

TF Barker had some men who had been law violators and hoodlums in civilian life and who continued to exercise those traits, where possible, after entering the Army. It appears from the evidence, however, that the men were generally representative of the typical cross-section of American youth assigned to most combat units throughout the Army. Like the men in those other units, the men of TF Barker brought with them the diverse traits, prejudices, and attitudes typical of the various regions of the country and segments of society from whence they came.

There has been testimony to the effect that a "dink" or "slope" complex may have existed among many of the men of C Company. These terms were in fact used frequently by C Company witnesses in referring to Vietnamese in general. For some, the terms were apparently used in the same context in which "Kraut", "Jap", and "Gook" were used in referring to the enemy in past wars. For others, its use evidently suggested subordination (in their view) of the Vietnamese to an inferior status. For still others, the use of these terms appears to have been simply a case of going along with the majority, using the terms used by most of the other men, to describe Vietnamese (whether friendly or enemy). The available evidence does not indicate that the use of the term "dink," "slopes," or "gook" by the men of C Company signified any widespread subliminal classification of Vietnamese as subhuman, however distasteful such terms might be. In fact, some of the men were fond of the Vietnamese nationals. Many indicated a dislike for and, on a recurring basis, mistreated Vietnamese civilians. Many of the men accepted Vietnamese noncombatants on a neutral basis prior to the Son My operation. Additionally, there is evidence that a substantial number of the men in C Company did not trust the Vietnamese. Part of the reason for this lay in previous experiences during which Vietnamese villagers had failed to warn them of the presence of mines and boobytraps which, when subsequently detonated, wounded and killed many of their fellow soldiers. Several of the men apparently felt, with some justification, that if the Vietnamese involved had been truly "friendly" they would have warned the soldiers about the mines and boobytraps. Whether the various commanders in TF Barker had detected this general feeling of mistrust and had attempted to prevent it from developing into a dangerous tendency to categorize all Vietnamese, not specifically identified otherwise, as being the "enemy" is not clear from the testimony available.

While it is impossible to judge the matter with precision, it is considered likely that the unfavorable attitude of some
of the men of TF Barker toward the Vietnamese was a contributing factor in the events of Son My.

D. CASUALTIES FROM MINES AND BOOBYTRAPS

A significant number of witnesses testified concerning the effect of mine and boobytrap casualties on the morale and attitudes of the soldiers of TF Barker. Besides the generally demoralizing effect which these incidents had upon the men, it is apparent from the evidence that they also served to aggravate a feeling of frustration among the men which derived primarily from their previous failures to come to grips with the enemy.

The men of C Company had specifically been subjected to such frustrations during the previous operations conducted by TF Barker in Son My. While employed outside the principal area where solid enemy contacts were developed by other TF elements (on 13 February and again on 23 February), C Company sustained, during the same time frames, a total of 15 casualties from enemy mines and boobytraps. It had suffered another five casualties from enemy boobytraps 2 days before the Son My operation. The company had not encountered identifiable enemy forces during either period of time.

It is evident that the enemy's extensive use of mines and boobytraps had a considerable effect upon the men and contributed significantly to the events of Son My.

E. PRIOR FAILURE TO CLOSE WITH THE ENEMY

One of LTC Barker's major frustrations was the past failure of the TF to come to grips with, in his words "to do battle" with, the VC 48th Local Force (LF) Battalion. These failures had been highlighted by BG Lipscomb in previous after-action critiques, and were underscored again by COL Henderson in his remarks to TF personnel on the afternoon of 15 March. Given the competitive nature of command assignments and the general tendency to evaluate command performance on the basis of tangible results, it appears that LTC Barker and his subordinate commanders probably viewed the Son My operation as a real opportunity to overcome their past failures (or lack of opportunity) to close effectively with and defeat a major identifiable enemy force. Whether this factor had an effect on the lack of discrimination shown in their planning and orders is not clear from the evidence.

As indicated previously, past failure or lack of opportunity to fight an enemy force had also had a significantly frustrating effect on the morale and attitudes of the soldiers of C Company.
Rather than the continuation of essentially nonproductive reconnaissance-in-force operations with attendant high casualties from mines and boobytraps, the Son My operation offered them the opportunity to fight what was (described to them as) almost certainly the 48th VC Local Force Battalion, under conditions and at a time favorable to them. Given their past failure or lack of opportunity to do battle with the enemy and the information which they were provided by CPT Medina, the evidence is clear that many of them also considered the Son My operation as a tangible chance to alleviate some of their past frustrations.

F. ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEMS

In previous chapters, this report has provided an examination of the organizational difficulties which confronted the Americal Division and its subordinate elements at the time of the Son My operation. To attach undue importance to this fact would involve ignoring similar organizational difficulties faced and successfully resolved by other US Army divisions in Vietnam and in other wars. Nevertheless, it is apparent from the evidence and testimony made available to the Inquiry that the Americal Division's organizational process, coupled with other factors, detracted from the ability of key personnel to properly supervise to insure that combat operations were being conducted in the appropriate manner. This was most evident in the apparent demands placed on the time available to the various commanders who had direct or indirect responsibilities for supervising the preparation and execution of the Son My operation, and in the evidence which indicates that during the post-Tet 1968 time frame there was a lack of any positive enforcement (by means of disciplinary action) of the provisions of division and brigade directives dealing with the treatment of noncombatants.

A commander at the battalion (task force), brigade, or higher level normally depends heavily upon his staff to assist him in planning, coordinating, influencing, and supervising his subordinate units and the men in those units. At the 11th brigade level, creation of TF Barker apparently resulted in a weakening of the brigade staff because of the loss of the former 83/XO, LTC Barker, the former S1, MAJ Calhoun, and several other officers and noncommissioned officers. Coupled with the brigade change of command which occurred on 15 March, these factors probably contributed to a decline in the proficiency and supervisory capability of the 11th Brigade headquarters.

TF Barker was organized with an austere staff and had no individual who performed exclusively as the TF executive officer. The evidence indicates that the austere staffing of the TF may have had some influence on the Son My operation,
particularly in terms of the adequacy of the planning phase, and that a disproportionate amount of LTC Barker's time and effort may have been spent on matters which, under ordinary circumstances, would have been handled by the staff.

It is evident that the organizational problems involving the Americal Division and subordinate elements contributed to inadequate supervision of the planning phase for the Son My operation and, in that sense, played a part in the events which followed.

G. LACK OF COMMAND RAPPORT WITHIN TF BARKER

There is substantial evidence that LTC Barker did not have a close personal relationship with his company commanders. This may have been Barker's chosen method of operating as TF commander. A more tangible factor was the apparent necessity for Barker to devote a disproportionate amount of his time and effort to matters which an adequate staff might otherwise have been capable of handling.

From LTC Barker's vantage point, his was solely a tactical mission. The majority of the routine administrative and logistical support for the rifle companies still came from their parent battalions. The evidence indicates that such an arrangement probably had a detrimental effect on the morale of the soldiers and their commanders, and may well have caused the company commanders and their men to feel that they were a transient element in a temporary organization.

Whatever the cause, the evidence suggests that the lack of command rapport within TF Barker may have given rise to a void in communications between Barker and his subordinates. This void was apparently filled in part by the TF S3, MAJ Calhoun. Given the interim nature of the TF, the demands on Barker's time in order to overcome difficulties arising from the austere staffing of the TF, and the understandable loyalties of the three company commanders toward their parent battalions and battalion commanders, Barker's detachment from his subordinates may have been more apparent than real. Of more significance is the probability that the absence of a close personal relationship between Barker and his subordinates may have given rise to a lack of understanding on his part as to the professional capabilities of each of his company commanders, and an uncertainty on their part as to what he specifically expected of them and their companies. Ultimately the lack of personal rapport and contact between LTC Barker and his company commanders may have influenced the general breakdown in discipline, restraint, and control which were evident on the first day of the Son My operation.
The general policy and attitude of Vietnamese officials toward the Son My area has been described elsewhere in this report. The Army, Republic of Vietnam forces were, during the post-Tet period, reluctant to conduct sustained operations in the area. This fact, coupled with GVN treatment of the area as a free fire zone and the automatic, perfunctory clearances by GVN officials to fire ordnance into the area, were generally known by key members of the TF. It is evident that GVN officials considered Son My as long-standing VC-controlled territory and that its inhabitants were considered as low priority and of little immediate consequence to GVN interests at that time. These general attitudes were well known by key members of the 11th Brigade and TF Barker and undoubtedly affected their feelings toward the area and its people.

1. NATURE OF THE ENEMY

While the Communist forces had achieved a substantial psychological impact on the American public during the Tet offensive of 1968, they had also taken substantial losses in men and equipment. Time to refit, recruit, and retrain their forces was of critical importance to their future staying power. To provide the requisite time, their forces were, during the post-Tet period, seeking to attain sanctuary and protection by melting into the populace and by retreating into their base areas. In the initial phase of the stepped-up level of actions by US forces, taken to deny the communists needed time and concealment, there was a consequent and unfortunately high level of civilian casualties throughout most of the Republic of Vietnam.

The Communist forces in South Vietnam had long recognized our general reluctance to do battle with them among the civilian populace and had used that knowledge to our tactical and strategic disadvantage throughout the history of the war in Vietnam. Exploitation of that reluctance by Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) ground forces caused a distortion of the classic distinction between combatants and noncombatants. (It is important to bear in mind that the old distinctions have been distorted by Communist, not US, forces). In a war replete with instances of VC women bearing arms and killing US soldiers and children of VC serving as boobytrap specialists and would-be assassins, it became a life and death matter for US soldiers and their commanders to make and adhere to distinctions between combatant and noncombatant, primarily on the basis of whether the individuals in question were armed, were committing hostile acts, or were otherwise endangering the lives of allied troops, rather than on the basis of sex or age. (Such distinctions must, of course, exclude helpless persons such as babies from the list of combatants.)
The Son My area was populated principally by VC, their sympathizers and supporters, and their respective families. It had been controlled by the VC for years and most of the men in TF Barker were aware of this fact. They were also aware that the 48th VC LF Battalion was a tough, well disciplined guerrilla unit which had not only played a major part in the Tet offensive but reportedly had also fought well against TF Barker elements in two previous contacts in the Son My area. It is apparent from the testimony of these soldiers that the entire area and its population were considered as belonging to the enemy, and that they had little apparent understanding of the probability that a significant part of Son My's unarmed population were dominated by the VC because the VC represented the only continuing presence in the area.

The tactical difficulties involved in ferreting enemy forces out of populated areas, the practical difficulties involved in clearly identifying friend from foe, and a generally widespread knowledge of VC control of the Son My area unquestionably played a major role in the events of Son My.

J. LEADERSHIP

During the latter stages of this Inquiry, it became apparent that if on the day before the Son My operation only one of the leaders at platoon, company, task force, or brigade level had foreseen and voiced an objection to the prospect of killing non-combatants, or had mentioned the problem of noncombatants in their preoperational orders and instructions, or if adequate restraining orders had been issued early on the following day, the Son My tragedy might have been averted altogether, or have been substantially limited and the operation brought under control. Failures in leadership appear, therefore, to have had a direct bearing on the events of Son My.

COL Henderson had served with the 11th Brigade as the Deputy CO or Acting CO from the time of the brigade's activation in Hawaii until his assumption of formal command on 15 March 1968. Perhaps more than any other single individual, he should have recognized the strengths and weaknesses of the key personnel and operating procedures within the brigade. He testified that his job as Deputy CO under BG Lipscomb was basically administrative in nature and did not allow him as much time as he would have liked to learn the various operational areas assigned to the brigade and the subordinate commanders who were subsequently to serve under him. This is not an uncommon predicament for a second-in-command. It also should have emphasized to him the necessity and importance of going over LTC Barker's plan in detail. There is always a balance to be struck in the amount of latitude and authority to be vested in a subordinate commander when weighed against the commander's overall responsibility for what hap-
pens or fails to happen in his unit. In COL Henderson's case, the evidence is clear that he elected during the initial phase of his command to vest maximum latitude in Barker, and in so doing, he treated superficially an operational plan which deserved detailed examination.

The testimony available indicates that LTC Barker was considered by BG Lipscomb and by COL Henderson to be an outstanding officer. His selection to command the TF was reportedly based on their evaluation of his excellence in having performed as the brigade S3 and executive officer. His performance as TF commander up until the time of the Son My operation appears to have been creditable in terms of reported results achieved.

It is apparent that LTC Barker was highly motivated and enthused by the prospect of coming to grips with what was believed to be the same enemy force which had previously fought against and inflicted casualties upon TF elements. His frustrations from previous failures by the TF, his decision to fire the artillery preparation on a part of My Lai (4), and the nature of his orders have been noted elsewhere in this report. In assessing other aspects of his leadership which had an influence on the events of Son My, the evidence indicates that his assumptions, plans, decisions, and orders reflected a degree of incompetence, including an inability to make the kind of distinctions required of successful commanders in the Vietnam war.

CPT Medina was older than most company commanders in Vietnam (his early 30's), and, as a former noncommissioned officer, had gained broad experience in dealing with soldiers. From the evidence developed, it is clear that he was almost unanimously respected by his men and by his superiors and was, in their opinion, an outstanding company commander who held the welfare of his men as one of his primary concerns. His no-nonsense approach to his mission and single-mindedness of purpose in achieving that mission caused him to be the object of respect, but in some cases fear, by some of his men and by his platoon leaders. The evidence indicates that Medina was a strict authoritarian concerning most matters involving his men and exerted an extraordinary degree of influence over them. There was also testimony to indicate that he adopted a condescending and sometimes disparaging manner in dealing with his platoon leaders. The evidence indicates that his principal leadership weakness prior to Son My was in not exercising firm control over the actions of his men toward Vietnamese. The evidence indicates that callousness was not a part of his attitude toward his own men, whose welfare was apparently of primary concern to him.

While most of the men of C Company respected CPT Medina, the evidence indicates that similar feelings of respect apparently did not exist toward the platoon leaders. Any assessment of the
C Company platoon leaders, however, must take into account their relative inexperience and the influence exerted over them by CPT Medina. Perhaps the most revealing aspect of testimony concerning the platoon leaders is that each, with the exception of LT Calley, was considered a "nice guy" by many of his men. The implications of this classification are substantiated by evidence which indicates that each lacked any real internal system for control and discipline of his platoon. What control and discipline did exist emanated from the company commander. It is also apparent that each platoon leader was, to an extent, fearful of his men and hesitant in trying to lead. Instead, they attempted to become "buddies" with their noncommissioned officers and men and, in more than one instance, allegedly joined with their men in immoral and illegal acts against Vietnamese prior to the Son My operation. It should also be pointed out that most of the noncommissioned officers in C Company were young and, in general, had no more combat experience than the men themselves. The general lack of experienced leadership for the men of the platoon was not uncommon in other Army units at that time.

CPT Michles was regarded by his men as a good officer and a scrupulous person. From the evidence developed, it is apparent that he was genuinely concerned with the welfare of his men. While it is clear that he was also mission-oriented, he was not regarded by his men as a harsh disciplinarian and was not held in the same light of awe and fear as CPT Medina. The indications are that he was a conscientious career officer who enjoyed the respect and esteem of most of his men.

The available testimony suggests that CPT Michles' relationship with his company officers was unstrained and, while they did not regard him as unapproachable, they clearly respected his position. There is no evidence to suggest that any of the B Company platoon leaders were particularly weak or strong as combat leaders. At the time of the Son My operation, the B company platoon leaders apparently commanded a reasonable degree of respect from their men and had the fortitude to discipline them when required.

The evidence indicates that there was a high degree of competitiveness between CPT Michles and CPT Medina, and a portion of this feeling was undoubtedly communicated to their respective platoon leaders and men and probably played a part in the attitudes of their men toward the forthcoming operation.

Americal Division leaders, down to and including the TF level, failed to supervise properly the planning of the Son My operation. This gave rise to a loosely conceived plan with a poorly defined purpose. These failures resulted in the issuance of ambiguous, illegal, and potentially explosive orders by LTC Barker and CPT Medina, and possibly CPT Michles, who failed,
either deliberately or unintentionally, to provide in their plans and orders for the possibility that noncombatants might be found in the objective areas. Implementation of these orders ultimately became the task of generally weak and ineffective leaders at the platoon level and below. Collectively, these factors had a pronounced impact on the results of the Son My operation.

K. PERMISSIVE ATTITUDE

The evidence developed during this Inquiry strongly indicates that a dangerously permissive attitude toward the handling and safeguarding of Vietnamese and their property existed within elements of the 11th Brigade chain of command prior to the Son My operation. Evidence also indicates varying degrees of concern by MG Koster, BG Lipscomb, COL Henderson, and LTC Barker concerning the subject, but in the light of the mistreatment, raping, and indiscriminate killing of Vietnamese known to have occurred prior to Son My, and in view of the events at Son My itself, it is evident that if such concern did exist, it had not been communicated effectively to the soldiers of TF Barker. There had been little in the way of positive enforcement by responsible commanders (in the form of disciplinary action) of the provisions of division and brigade directives dealing with the treatment and safeguarding of noncombatants and their property prior to Son My.

While COL Henderson was officially the brigade commander at the time of the Son My operation, the evidence indicates that BG Lipscomb, the previous brigade commander, may have contributed to the attitude of permissiveness which existed within the brigade. This assumption is warranted in that the attitudes of the 11th Brigade soldiers who characteristically mistreated Vietnamese nationals did not develop overnight nor did they come into being concurrently with the change in brigade commanders. Evidence of scattered incidents involving the mistreatment, rape, and possibly the murder of Vietnamese by 11th Brigade soldiers prior to the Son My operation, indicates that a permissive attitude existed, and was not uncovered and corrected, under BG Lipscomb's command.

The fact that both COL Henderson and LTC Barker were both relatively new in their command assignments may have contributed to some uncertainty among their subordinates as to exactly what was expected of them and their soldiers in the handling of Vietnamese noncombatants, but did not relieve either from the command responsibility for the actions of their units.

The evidence indicates that a number of C Company soldiers were involved in the illegal acts against Vietnamese prior to the Son My operation. These acts may have mirrored a permissive and callous attitude by CPT Medina, or they may have resulted from
the fact that the company was essentially a one-man show run by CPT Medina who was, regardless of his intentions, incapable of exercising single-handed control of 100-plus soldiers. The evidence is inconclusive in this regard, but suggests the latter situation. As indicated previously, the reticence and lack of leadership among the platoon leaders of C Company also contributed to the general permissiveness which existed in the company at the time of the operation.

There was no evidence developed to indicate the existence of a permissive attitude among key members of B Company. To the contrary, the evidence indicates that CPT Michles neither condoned nor tolerated mistreatment of Vietnamese by B Company soldiers prior to the Son My operation.

It is evident that the generally permissive attitude which existed in some of the units of the 11th Brigade prior to Son My was brought into sharp focus for the men of TF Barker by the orders issued on 15 March by LTC Barker, CPT Medina, and possibly CPT Michles, and significantly influenced the events of the following day.

L. LACK OF AFFIRMATIVE COMMAND AND CONTROL

A variety of factors, which became evident during the Inquiry, collectively indicate that there was a general lack of affirmative command and control throughout the 11th Brigade, and particularly in TF Barker at the time of the Son My operation.

The evidence of previous mistreatment of Vietnamese by soldiers of the 11th Brigade and TF Barker, testimony concerning previous scattered destruction and burning of Vietnamese homes, the method in which earlier TF operations were conducted, the austere staffing of the TF and the superficial treatment of plans for the Son My operation all point to the lack of an effective system of controlling combat operations.

The evidence indicates that LTC Barker visited his company infrequently while they were operating in the field. It is also evident that the facilities and equipment provided or made available to his interim organization were marginal at best. This was particularly true with respect to the communications facilities used in his command and control helicopter, and in his tactical operations center (TOC). This equipment had been drawn from other organizations of the brigade at the time that the TF was established.

A general pattern which emerged during this Inquiry was that some Americal commanders failed to get on the ground with
operating units. This was most pronounced on the day of the Son My operation when not a single commander above company level landed in the Son My area to personally communicate with the ground forces despite clear indications that unusual events, of a nature requiring command attention, were taking place on the ground. This is brought into even sharper focus by the fact that this was, on the face of it, the most successful operation ever conducted by an element of the 11th Brigade.

M. LACK OF EMPHASIS IN TRAINING

Early in the Inquiry, there was a suspicion that the manner in which the 11th Brigade was activated, trained, prepared for overseas movement, and deployed to Vietnam might have had some impact upon the events of Son My. Investigation revealed that this was the case to a limited extent.

11th Brigade elements underwent an accelerated training program, received a substantial input of replacement personnel shortly before deploying, and eventually deployed earlier than originally had been scheduled. Shortly after arriving in Vietnam, planned makeup training was effected by another infusion of replacements (to overcome a projected rotation "hump") and by early commitment of brigade elements to active combat operations.

As a net result of these actions, the evidence indicates that, at best, the soldiers of TF Barker had received only marginal training in several key areas prior to the Son My operation. These areas were (1) provisions of the Geneva Conventions, (2) handling and safeguarding of noncombatants, and (3) rules of engagement.

The problem of training and instruction having to do with identification of and response to "illegal" orders is addressed elsewhere in this report. The evidence indicates that training deficiencies in this area, together with deficiencies in those training areas described above, played a significant part in the Son My operation.

M. PSYCHOLOGICAL BUILDUP

In the case of B Company, no firm conclusions can be drawn as to either the nature or effect of any preoperational psychological buildup that may have been given to the men. CPT Michles did not personally brief his company, and there is some evidence that the content of the briefings given by the platoon leaders was not uniform throughout the company. All the men apparently were told that the area was populated entirely by "VC and VC..."
sympathizers" and that the mission was to "clean the place out," but there was no suggestion made of getting revenge for previous friendly casualties. Any attempt to evaluate the psychological preparation given to B Company is complicated by the fact that (a) the main elements of B Company suffered heavy casualties and had their principal mission aborted almost immediately after the combat assault, and (b) the separated 1st Platoon knew about those casualties (including the death of their former platoon leader) before entering My Khe (4). Undoubtedly, the casualties suffered early on 16 March had a psychological effect upon B Company. Those effects may have influenced, possibly in different ways and to a greater extent than preoperational factors, the subsequent actions of various elements of the company.

The men of C Company who participated in the Son My operation testified, without exception, that their actions in and around My Lai (4) were "different" from anything they had ever been involved in before and from anything that they were ever involved in afterwards. From their testimony it is clear that a large part of the difference derived from their understanding of the nature and purpose of the operation. Their understanding and the attitudes that prevailed before the operation appear to have been primarily a product of the factors previously described in this chapter. These factors were apparently brought to a sharp focus by the briefing which they received on the day before the Son My operation.

In retrospect, it is clear that in his preoperational briefing to the men of C Company, CPT Medina "painted the picture" too vividly, and exercised no discrimination and little restraint in his implementing orders. He may also have drawn some erroneous conclusions from LTC Barker's briefing, or simply twisted certain elements of Barker's briefing to suit his own undiscriminating purposes. CPT Medina, like his commander, issued illegal orders to burn and destroy property in the target area, failed to provide in his briefing for the possibility that noncombatants might be found in the area, and further influenced the events to follow by failing to make any distinctions in his orders concerning the treatment to be accorded armed combatants, suspected (but unarmed) sympathizers, and outright noncombatants. CPT Medina's effectiveness in getting his men psychologically "up" for the expected fight is quite clear from the evidence presented to this Inquiry.

Up until the time of the Son My operation, the men of C Company had participated in largely unproductive operations and had suffered significant casualties from enemy mines and boobytraps. During the course of those previous operations, several of them had participated in the mistreatment, rape, and possible murder of Vietnamese, with no apparent retribution. They were told by
their company commander that they were going to face an enemy battalion the following day in the Son My area. They were told that an artillery preparation would be placed on the target area before they arrived and that the landing zone (LZ) would probably be "hot." They were given the impression that the only people left in the area would be the enemy and that their mission was to destroy the enemy and all his supplies. They were told that the best way to prevent the enemy from recovering weapons from the battlefield was to close with the enemy aggressively. They were reminded that some of them would probably become casualties in the operation and were enjoined to look out for each other. They were reminded of their past losses to enemy boobytraps and their failure to get revenge for those losses. They were told that the forthcoming operation would provide the opportunity to obtain that revenge. They were not told of any restrictions of any kind that would be imposed on them in accomplishing the assigned mission.

0. SUMMARY

The factors described in this chapter are considered relevant to the purpose of this Inquiry to the extent that they assist in understanding what happened at Son My, and, to a lesser extent, why it happened.

In the time available to this Inquiry, there was no attempt to analyze the factors in depth, nor to evaluate psychological aspects of what happened. This is considered a task that can be best performed by a team of highly qualified research analysts with the technical talents and experience necessary to do justice to the subject.