

Varnado Simpson: The My Lai Massacre

March 16, 1968

When lieutenant William Calley and his men raided the small village of My Lai they killed an estimated three hundred and forty-seven people, mostly unarmed civilians. The incident was covered up, but one soldier wrote to government officials repeatedly until they investigated. Many of the soldiers were charged, five were court-martialed, and one, Calley, was convicted on charges of premeditated murder of twenty-two civilians. He was sentenced to life imprisonment, but a federal court overturned the decision. The incident helped turn public opinion against the war.

*Varnado Simpson was a member of Calley's unit. He told his story to Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, authors of **Four Hours In My Lai** (New York: Penguin Books, 1992).*

"That day in My Lai, I was personally responsible for killing about 25 people. Personally. Men, women. From shooting them, to cutting their throats, scalping them, to . . . cutting off their hands and cutting out their tongue. I did it. . . . I just went. My mind just went. And I wasn't the only one that did it. A lot of other people did it. I just killed. Once I started, the . . . the training, the whole programming part of killing, it just came out. . . . A lot of people were doing it. So I just followed suit. I just lost all sense of direction, of purpose. I just started killing any kinda way I could kill. It just came. I didn't know I had it in me. But like I say, after I killed the child, my whole mind just went. It just went. And once you start, it's very easy to keep on. Once you start. The hardest--the part that's hard is to kill, but once you kill, that becomes easier, to kill the next person and the next one and the next one. Because I had no feelings or no emotions or no nothing. No direction. I just killed. It can happen to anyone. . . . I have an image in my mind of it every night, every day. I have nightmares. I constantly have nightmares of the children or someone. I can see the people. I can go somewhere and see a face that reminds me of the people that I killed. I can see that vividly, just like it happened today, right now. . . . You know, I can't forgive myself for the things I did. . . . Yes, I'm sorry, I'm guilty. But I did it, you know. What else could I tell you? It happened. It can happen if you go to war. Because, see, I wasn't the only one that did it. Hung 'em, you know – all type of ways. Any type of way you could kill someone, that's what they did. And it can happen."

Postscript on Varnado Simpson, from a March 15, 1998 article written by Arnold Abrams entitled "Return to My Lai – The Unraveling of a Shameful Episode in U.S. History" in *Newsday* newspaper

"My mind just went," Simpson, who admitted killing about 25 Vietnamese civilians that day, explained to a television interviewer several years ago. "The training came to me and I just started killing. Old men, women, children, water buffaloes, everything. We were told to leave nothing standing. We did what we were told, regardless of whether they were civilians. They was the enemy, period."

Unlike Meadlo [Private Paul Meadlo, another member of Varnado's First Platoon, who admitted to killing several dozen civilians], Simpson remained haunted by what he had done at My Lai. He drank and took drugs, but he never could free himself from a troubled conscience that injected his past into the present and produced an acute case of paranoia.

"He lived alone in a boarded-up house," said Dr. Vince Liberto, 48, the psychiatrist who treated Simpson. "He was in constant fear, believing that revenge-seeking Vietnamese were trying to

sneak up on him."

In 1977, Simpson's 10-year-old son was accidentally killed by a random shot fired by teenage thugs. At first, the father believed Vietnamese attackers were to blame. Then, after he learned the facts from close friends, Simpson's normally troubled face took on an almost placid look.

"This is the punishment for me killing the people that I killed," he told them. If so, there was more to come: His daughter died several years ago after being stricken with meningitis.

Then came Simpson's turn. The 48-year-old former soldier killed himself in May with a shotgun blast to the head.

"He was a decent man," Liberto said of the latest - but probably not the last - victim of My Lai. "Yet he never could overcome what he had done."