

# The Selling of the Mylai Massacre

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## Joe Eszterhas

Ronald L. Haeberle really hoped the pictures wouldn't cause anybody any trouble.

He was a photo major at Ohio University, an average upper-middle-class nice guy, essentially apolitical, not the type to plan very far ahead, but confident that somewhere up the road was a split-level life in the suburbs, a wife active in the PTA, children going to Sunday School.

When he got drafted, after basic training he found that instead of making him a photographer, the army was making him an engineer. He did not like the prospect of being an engineer, especially with a war going on, and he launched a campaign of flattery. He took pictures of his officers and their wives and girlfriends in his spare time, presented the pictures to them as gifts (of a Trojan nature, as it turned out), and hoped that his true talents would be recognized. The campaign finally paid off in Hawaii, in the nick of time, three weeks from engineer status in Vietnam. He was made an official army "combat" photographer.

Not the medal-of-honor sort, he spent most of his time in Vietnam shooting sugar-and-molasses-barracks public relations photos: GIs handing Vietnamese kids Hershey bars; bloodied medics saving blond, blue-eyed Nebraskan lives. But two weeks before his Vietnam tour was to end, bushwhacked by some stray Robert Capa-esque notion of journalistic heroism, no *Man* magazine tales to tell in front of the suburban hearth, he and a friend, Jay Roberts, an army combat correspondent, volunteered for a mission they understood would be a "hot one." He took two cameras: an army Nikon with black-and-white film, and a personal black market Nikon with color film. He and Roberts took their little early-morning helicopter ride.

He knelt next to GIs firing tracer bullets into babies, watched heads pop off like jumping beans, snapped sequences of the clumps of bodies, ate lunch a few miles down the road, flew back to his base, and handed over the rolls of film taken with the army camera. He kept the color films. It was a good day for photography: the light was fine, the sun was perfect, the shadings were excellent.

Two weeks later, his whopping war story encapsuled in memory, he ended his tour of duty, left Vietnam, and went back to Ohio. The son of a mid-management steel company executive, he toured the Ohio Kiwanis and Lions Club noonday circuits and presented his slide spectacular after lukewarm roast beef dinners.

"VIETNAM: AS ONE VETERAN SAW IT!" was the way the Kiwanians advertised his lectures. He showed the slides of the GIs handing Hershey bars to the kids, the medics saving lives, and the clumps of bodies at Mylai. He explained at each luncheon that the clumps on his screen were the result of an American search-and-destroy mission. The Kiwanians either acted like they hadn't heard him or walked away muttering, "War is hell." There were no questions, but a few complimented the quality and composition of his photographs and assured him he'd have a great future.

He stayed in Fairview Park, the white upper-middle-class suburb where he was born, sharing a bachelor's apartment with a friend, concerned about the usual things: parties, pregnancies, money, the boss. There was a sleek candy-apple-red Corvette at a lot near his apartment he fell in love with. He was doing all right, gaining weight, making a little money, and the memory of that day at Mylai did not bother him at all. The slides were stashed in a back drawer of his bedroom chest, not far from a box of Trojans. He had lost one slide somewhere—he wasn't even sure where—probably in Hawaii with a girlfriend.

1.

He noted his singular experience of war had not changed him much. The only change: he found himself humming, a new and annoying habit. He especially hummed when he was nervous, and, strangely, could not remember humming like that before the day he was helicoptered into the village in question.

He worked as an industrial supervisor at Premier Industrial Corporation, a manufacturing firm near downtown Cleveland, and, one day in August of 1969, he

got a call at the plant from two men who identified themselves as army CID agents. They understood, they said, that he had pictures of something that had happened in Vietnam one day. They said they were investigating whatever it was that had happened. Ron said that he had turned in his black-and-white pictures right after the "incident." The CID men said they understood that, but somehow the black-and-whites had gotten "lost." Could he meet them? Could he come to their hotel that night?

He met them at the Holiday Inn with his slides. The two agents had a slide projector with them, and the clumps of bodies were flashed against the bright pink Holiday Inn walls. They invited him to the bar to have a drink.

The agents told him it was his patriotic duty to give them the slides. Ron told them he'd be happy to give them duplicates. Ah, they said, but they really needed the originals. Ron said he was sorry and the CID settled for the duplicates.

He and one of the agents kept drinking. Near the end of their evening, half-stiff, the agent looked at him bleary-eyed, a southern jaybird, and said: "You were right, kid. Don't give those slides to anybody. You can sell that shit for a million bucks."

Ron thought about that, but only in his daydreams. In September he was more concerned that the army still hadn't paid him the \$10.46 slide-duplicating costs and he decided to send them another bill. Then, in October, Seymour Hersh of the Dispatch News Service started writing about the alleged massacre in the place called Mylai, and Ron Haerberle started thinking more seriously about the million bucks the CID agent had told him about. He didn't want to cause anybody any trouble, but the way he figured it, he wouldn't be the one blowing the whistle. Sy Hersh had already done that. It wasn't like he'd be ratting on anybody.

2.

I got a call one afternoon at my desk at the *Plain Dealer* from Ron Haerberle, who said he thought he might have a story for me. He said he wanted to come up to the office to talk about something too private for the phone. I figured he was a crank. I said that was fine, except I didn't have time to chitchat. I was right on deadline, doing a story about a Czech Apache.

He called me back the next day. He said he had gone to school with me at Ohio University and had admired my "real courage" in putting out the school newspaper. He especially liked, he said, my campaign to boycott a Norman Luboff concert in favor of a Bob Dylan appearance and my crusade to oust a student

government president named Buck Fetters, nicknamed Duck Feathers.

"If you could go after old Buck Fetters like that," he said, "you'll print the story I've got to tell you." He told me he had these war pictures and I said, "Sure, bring them over, we'll have a drink."

He brought his pictures over and I looked at them and we went to have our drink and talked about old Buck Fetters. "Well, I've got to check on this," I said, back in the office, and sat Haerberle down, a bit high, on the rewrite desk.

I took his army serial number and his dates of service and called the Pentagon. I wanted them to confirm that a guy named Haerberle had been in the army, in Vietnam, and at a place called Mylai. The colonel in charge of public information said it would take a few weeks to confirm all that. "That's a real mouthful," he said.

I told Ron we'd be held up for a few weeks.

"There's an easier way," he said. "This guy named Daniels, Captain Aubrey Daniels, has been calling me all the time. He's some kind of a prosecutor. Why don't you call him and ask him about me?"

"Why does he keep calling you?"

"To make sure I don't give the pictures to anybody."

I called Captain Aubrey Daniels in the Judge Advocate's office at Fort Benning and told him in front-page cigar smoke tones that I had all these massacre pictures and was going to run them in the paper the next day.

"You can't do that," he said.

"Why not?"

"You're going to violate the rights of a lot of guys who were over there," he said. "Besides that, Haerberle was there as an army photographer and those are army pictures."

"So you're confirming that he was there," I said.

"What?" Daniels said. "What? You're putting words into my mouth. That's not fair."

I told Ted Princiotto, my night managing editor, a hard-nosed, alley-tough guy typecast by Jack Webb, that we had a world scoop.

"Aww," he said, "fuck the scoop. We've got a moonwalk tomorrow."

After a while he tore himself away from his maps of the moon and came into the photo studio and looked at those technicolored clumps of bodies.

"Jesus Christ," he said. "Fuck, man, this is great stuff."

"Well," I said, "what about the moonwalk?"

"Fuck the moonwalk," he said, "it's just a routine moonwalk."

3.

The *Plain Dealer*, in its unflinching quest for a Pulitzer

Prize or a mention in *Time's* press section, didn't pay even pennies for information—though it did deduct pennies from the paychecks of temporary summer employees who charged too much for mileage. The *Plain Dealer* turned down an exclusive account of the Pueblo incident, offered for one thousand dollars. Tom Vail, its publisher, is a peripatetic, periscopic guy. *Newsweek* once said he looked more like F. Scott Fitzgerald than a publisher. His use of "terrific" has gained national attention. He endorsed Richard Nixon, albeit reluctantly, and enthusiastically endorsed the Nixon kitchen: "The food is super and under President Nixon we are back to the best French wines."

Considering all the *Plain Dealer's* inbuilt handicaps, Ron and I mapped out a plan. Let the *Plain Dealer* carry some of the pictures and the story, and the million bucks would be sought elsewhere. The *Plain Dealer* would be a showcase for the rest of the vampirish journalistic netherworld. Others would see the pictures, suffer scoop spasms, and the price would rise. The *Plain Dealer*, understandably, after some high-level deliberation, was only too happy to accept the arrangements and its role.

(A year later, to his credit, Vail, talking to reporters about some of the jelly-on-the-knee failings of his newspaper, said: "You know, I couldn't understand why, after they saw those pictures, they had to call me and ask if we should really get involved in running them.")

The way the executives finally figured it, the story could very well mean the Pulitzer Prize, maybe even the coveted mention in *Time's* press section. And ever since *Esquire* gave the *Plain Dealer* its journalistic dubious achievement award in 1965, the frustrated upper echelon was looking for *Time* or the Pulitzer to wash the blood away. In 1965, an obscure hirsute *Plain Dealer* copy editor named Robert Manry, who didn't much like talking to his colleagues on the desk, took a sailboat across the Atlantic Ocean. Before he left, short of cash, needing repairs for his little boat, he offered the *Plain Dealer* his exclusive account for three hundred dollars. He was summarily and sternly turned down; a con man and a kook who had no business gallivanting across the ocean when he should have been working on the desk. When half the world's press started writing about his trip, three *Plain Dealer* staffers were assigned to Falmouth, England to cover Manry's joyous and celebrated arrival. At the same time, the other daily in Cleveland, the *Press*, nationally noted for its inquisition of Dr. Sam Sheppard, alleged wife-killer, started carrying daily front-page, mid-oceanic interviews with Manry, done by a Scripps Howard reporter who rented a boat and met Manry at sea. The first day the *Press* interviewed Manry at sea, the *Plain Dealer* wrote about the

death of his pet turtle.

Desperately grasping for shards of global glory, the *Plain Dealer* chartered a plane to parachute Manry a sweatshirt that said: "PLAIN DEALER, OHIO'S LARGEST DAILY NEWSPAPER." The plan visualized Manry landing in Falmouth in the glare of the world's press as a sunburst *Plain Dealer* promotion. Instead, Manry took the sweatshirt from the water, wrapped his garbage in it, and threw it to the sharks.

Looking at Haeberle's slides, I wasn't sure, I told our pratfallen executives, most of whom had been promoted since the Manry "incident" that the pictures would get us the Pulitzer Prize, but I thought the mention in *Time's* press section was practically assured. They were very pleased and characteristically generous. They offered me, on the spot, a cornucopia of benevolent paternalism.

Some immediate problems had to be ironed out. The story, I pointed out, would have to wait a day—to appear on the morning of November 20th. Until then, we needed to make black-and-white prints of the slides. That would be very difficult, an editor told me, because we couldn't trust our photographers. One of them would be sure to make prints himself and pirate the massacre at beer-money rates. The editor suggested I take the slides to an old photographer in our commercial department who usually took pictures of party dresses and gourmet meals. The old man hadn't taken news photos since his drinking days with Elliot Ness. This photographer, I understood, didn't read the paper, dreamed of retiring in the desert to craft Indian jewelry, and wouldn't know the significance of the slides he was reproducing. Just to make sure, though, it was suggested I stand next to the photographer in the studio as he worked and wait until he finished. "You never can tell," the editor said. The old aspiring Indian jeweler performed his task splendidly. He asked no questions and, when he finished, continued taking pictures of a Thanksgiving Day meal complete with cranberry juice.

A more serious problem was keeping the black-and-white prints in a safe place overnight. Since some word would certainly filter around the office, intense security precautions were in order. But the editor said there was not much we could do about that. "We don't have a safe," he said. "We never had a need for it." He said the black-and-white prints would be placed, overnight, in a back drawer heaped with rejected job applications. "No one ever looks in there," he said.

Then, the next day, the 19th, we would have to guard the black-and-white prints from the staff members in the office. The prints would have to travel a long and dark road—from the city room to the composing room. The editor assured me that problem, at least, was easy to solve. An assistant city editor would be assigned to

gumshoe the prints around the city room. The man would not mind body-guarding the clumps of bodies. And after some deliberation we concluded we were reasonably sure the man wouldn't steal them himself.

4.

The road from journalism school to massacre dealer is not as dark a road as the one from the city room to the composing room. In many ways it is a well-lighted and direct one. A journalism prof once told me he didn't really feel like a reporter until working for a midwestern daily, he was assigned to poke his hands into the wounds of slain gangsters to verify the coroner's accuracy. A hyperthyroid old-timer who won the Pall Mall Big Story Award for his coverage of a Dillinger jailbreak once said you weren't a real hardnose until you watched an autopsy while eating a cheeseburger.

I began my journalistic metamorphosis boycotting Norman Luboff as a senior at Ohio University. I won the William Randolph Hearst Memorial Foundation Award as the nation's outstanding college journalist. William Randolph Hearst, Jr., in yellow-striped tie and shirt, patted my cheek and called me "Kid!" Lyndon Johnson was supposed to give me a gold medal but was too busy on the ranch that weekend. Hubert filled in for him. Hubert said that, as a Hungarian refugee, I was a fine example of America's greatness. Typically Humphrey-esque, he mispronounced my name and showed me a portrait of Dolly Madison on his office wall. "Do you know who that is, son?" Hubert asked. I was even interviewed by Radio Free Europe.

After that kind of beatification, I worked for a while in Dayton, Ohio, the cleanest town in America. It says so right on the wastebaskets. I didn't last long there. I was assigned to do a home-is-the-hero piece about the son of the president of the Chamber of Commerce, a returning Vietnam veteran. The Vietnam vet had an ear on his key chain. He asked me to feel the ear and said it was Charlie's ear. He said he'd killed Charlie outside Saigon one day and cut his ear off with a bayonet. He said he'd bottled the ear in an empty One-A-Day Vitamin vial before he put it on the key chain. I couldn't do the story and, tarred and feathered, left the cleanest town in America.

I was lucky the *Plain Dealer* hired me. The *Plain Dealer* could not have been anxious to hire Hungarian refugees. In 1943, a Hungarian refugee shot and killed the business manager of the *Plain Dealer* in his office. The refugee said he wanted to become the William Randolph Hearst of the ethnic penny press and needed some money. Poor man, like most ethnics he was taught that in America the streets are paved with gold. The

business manager paid for the *Plain Dealer's* historic stinginess and Hungarians paid for the refugee's marksmanship.

Nevertheless, with the ghost of this mad Magyar killer peering over my shoulder, I prospered. The editors, pulling puppet strings, gave me good play: a five-year-old boy watched his little brother killed by an intruder; an eighty-one-year-old Greek immigrant was beaten to death; two boys fell in a mudhole and died; a man shot a boy setting off firecrackers; a twenty-three-year-old honor student, wanting to publish her first book, robbed a bank with a toy pistol; twenty-six skydivers died when they parachuted into polluted Lake Erie; fifty-two people died when the bridge they were on collapsed during rush-hour traffic. As the years went by, the front-page bodies given public burial under my byline increased. But Mylai was the biggest body count I had ever worked on.

I did not feel very un-American writing about an American massacre. When I was a kid, I almost died in the cellar of a Hungarian house because Americans were firebombing all the civilian population centers. Curtis LeMay was in charge of those bombings. But there were no pictures of any of that. No photographers were around to take pictures of those civilian dead. The Kiwanians never asked questions, and Curtis LeMay was transmogrified into a vice-presidential candidate.

Where were you then, Ron, where were you?

5.

Ron told his story matter-of-factly. It was March 16, 1968, and he and his friend, Jay Roberts, assigned to the 31st Public Information Brigade at Duc Pho, volunteered for the mission at Mylai 4 to catch an inning of war.

"We came in on the second lift, which came about a half-hour after the first. We landed in the rice paddies and I heard gunfire from the village itself, but we were still on the outskirts. There were some South Vietnamese people, maybe fifteen of them, women and children included, walking on a dirt road maybe a hundred yards away. All of a sudden the GIs opened up with M-16s. Besides the M-16 fire, they were shooting at the people with M-78 grenade launchers. I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

"Off to the right, I noticed a woman appeared from some cover and this one GI fired at her first, then they all started shooting at her, aiming at her head. The bones were flying in the air chip by chip. I'd never seen Americans shoot civilians like that. As they moved in, closer to the village, they just kept shooting at people. I remember this man distinctly, holding a small child in one arm and another child in the other, walking toward

us and pleading. The little girl was saying 'No, no' in English. Then all of a sudden a burst of fire and they were cut down. They were about twenty feet away. One machine gunner did it.

"There was no reaction on the guy doing the shooting. That's the part that really got me—this little girl pleading and they were just cut down. I had been on the ground maybe forty- five minutes at this point. Off to the left, a group of people—women, children, and babies—were standing around. The machine gunner had opened up on all those people in the big circle and they were trying to run. I don't know how many got out.

"There were two small children, a very young boy and a smaller boy, maybe four or five years old. A guy with an M-16 fired at them, at the first boy. The older boy fell over to protect the smaller boy. The GI fired some more shots with a tracer and the tip was still burning in the boy's flesh. Then they fired six more shots and just let them die. The GIs found a group of people, women, babies, and some girls. This one GI grabbed one of the girls, in her teens, and started stripping her, just playing around. They said they wanted to see what she was made of and stuff like that.

"I remember they were keeping the mother away from protecting her daughter. She must have been around thirteen. They were kicking the mother in the ass and slapping her around. They were getting ready to shoot those people and I said—Hold it. I wanted to take a picture.

"They were pleading for their lives. The looks on their faces, the mothers crying, they were trembling. I turned my back because I couldn't look. They opened up with two M-16s. On automatic fire, they went through the whole clip, thirty-five or forty shots, and I remember actually seeing the smoke come from their rifles. The automatic-weapons fire cut them down. I couldn't take a picture of it. It was too fucking much. One minute you see people alive and the next minute they're dead.

"I came up to a clump of bodies and I saw this small child. Part of his foot had been shot off and he went up to this pile of bodies and just looked at it, like he was looking for somebody. A GI knelt down beside me and shot the little kid. His body flew backwards into the pile.

"I remember thinking: What's going on here? I mean, what the fuck?"

6.

His friend, Jay Roberts, said:

"I was a senior combat correspondent attached to the 31st Public Information Brigade at Duc Pho and I was the editor of *Trident*, the brigade newspaper. Until that day, I hadn't seen any combat. The army wasn't

interested in combat, they just wanted features. Ron and I filed more hometown hero stories and I filled *Trident* up with all kinds of topical stuff about road clearings and shit. The only time I ever got shot at was by a sniper who couldn't hit anything. When the rounds started hitting about twenty yards away I suggested to Ron that we should get out of there.

"At seven-thirty ayem, right on schedule, the choppers swept over Landing Zone Dolly and picked Charlie Company up. As the choppers got close to the area we could see a lot of smoke on the ground and lots of gunships in the air. They were like guppies. The squad we were assigned to was getting its combat orders by walkie-talkie from Captain Ernest Medina. Medina had a reputation of being a damn good soldier. Some of the guys called him 'Mad Dog' Medina because he was such a hard disciplinarian.

"About halfway across the rice paddy to the village we noticed a small group of people running down the other side of the road. Our men open-fired and pushed across the field. No fire was returned. When we got to the road we saw a dead woman on the other side. A little kid was standing by her. I got back to that area a couple of minutes later, we were wandering around, and I saw the kid was dead too. Two guys came out of the paddy nearby. They were both killed. I know because I saw one guy's head fly off.

"We went into the village and met Medina at the outskirts. That was around nine o'clock. He told us there were eighty-five KIA so far. We went on into the village. There were guys killing cows and pigs and others burning the hooches. Some seemed eager, others were just doing a job. I saw one guy with a ninety-pound pack cutting down cornstalks one by one. I know that you've got to destroy the enemy's resources. It's an old tactic and a good one. Sherman's March to The Sea. You've just got to.

"One GI was digging for buried weapons. One was chopping down corn. One was interrogating an old man and two children. I understand the old man was killed later but I didn't see him killed. God, those cows die hard. They had them in small pens, the size of a desk. They'd shoot them paff paff paff and the cow would just go moo. Then paff paff paff moo. They shot and stabbed all the animals, which were in effect support units of the VC. They didn't seem to like to kill cows and pigs.

"A couple of GIs brought out three women—one old woman, a younger, middle-aged one, and a teenager. Real pretty girl. They started hassling the teenager, shouting, 'VC Boom Boom.' The old lady moved in scratching and shouting and kicking between the girl and the soldiers, trying to protect her. The soldiers were shouting at the girl, tearing her clothes. Then one of

them turned around and noticed Ron taking pictures. And they left off, sort of turned away as if everything was normal.

"We turned around and I heard one of the guys ask, 'Well, what'll we do with them?' And another guy said, 'Kill 'em,' I heard an M-60 go off, a light machine gun, and when we turned back around all of them and the kids with them were dead. We walked through the village and noticed bodies burning on a front porch. The bodies were lying in a straw hut that had been pulled down from the road. Then we saw them dragging this guy from a hooch. He was dead. They threw him down the well to poison it.

"The thing that shocked Ron and me most though was a young kid. He couldn't have been more than six or seven years old. His face was bloody. His nose and mouth were fleshy and bloody and his arm was practically coming off. And the kid wasn't shouting or crying or anything. Ron moved in to photograph him, getting real close for some close-ups. He was about three feet away from the kid, focusing. Along comes a GI with an M-16, takes careful aim, and shoots the kid three times. Ron watched the kid being knocked back across his camera frame from each shot. I guess the guy would have claimed that it was a mercy killing. I mean that kid probably would have died from exposure or something. But we were an arm's length from the kid's face.

"There was M-16 and M-1 and M-60 fire going off all the time, sort of sporadically. All the time we were there, they were setting fire to the hooches. They were doing it on orders from the officers in the area. You got to remember that all this happened about the time the word 'destroy' was being taken out of search-and-destroy operations by General Westmoreland.

"And it was just about this time that they found the old man with the pants coming off. The interpreter was asking him questions and the old man didn't know anything. He just rattled something off. Medina was there at the time and somebody asked him what to do with the man. Medina said: 'I don't care,' and walked off. He was busy making sure the place was destroyed and giving orders. After a moment I heard a shot and the old man was killed. They weren't taking any prisoners, you know.

"About thirty meters outside the village there was this big pile of bodies. This really tiny kid wearing only a shirt—he only had a shirt on, nothing else—he came over to the pile and held the hand of one of the dead. One of the GIs behind me in the village dropped to a kneeling position thirty meters from this kid and killed him with a single shot.

"Ron and I left by chopper before noon to go over and see how Baker Company was doing. We had lunch with

them. How could we eat lunch? Hell, I've seen soldiers eating their lunch sitting on top of corpses.

"None of the soldiers seemed bothered about it. I remember telling some of my buddies in the PIO about it. They acted like they didn't believe us. Ron and I thought about it a lot, but neither one of us is very much of a banner carrier.

"Back at Duc Pho I wrote about it for the brigade paper, *Trident*. I said a hundred twenty-eight Vietcong had been killed in a furious battle. I played it up like it was a big success. For one thing, Ron and I didn't think we'd done anything wrong. We didn't want to go to a military jail either. We were scared of the army. Besides, there was always the feeling we might hurt the country a little bit.

"For what? To make a few bucks?"

7.

Ron and I were going over details, closeted in a *Plain Dealer* conference room with a tape recorder, coffee, cigarettes, and a wallful of front pages. I turned the tape recorder on and Ron started describing the little boy shot back into the pile of bodies. The tape recorder was supposed to act as a poor man's lie detector and spot conflicting details. Its value was minimized, though, by Princiotto, the night managing editor. "What the hell," he snorted. "We're not saying this thing happened. We're saying this guy *says* this happened. How do we know if he's lying? We can't send people there to check it out."

A photographer came in and told Ron to make some hard-hitting faces so we'd have our art to illustrate his art. Ron twisted his face, pushed his eyebrows up, made sweeping gestures. The photographer asked him to cover his eyes and look morose. Ron looked morose. The photographer told Ron to relax and speak normally.

"You got a fisheye lens?" Ron asked.

"I don't think it would work here," the photographer said.

"I wish I'd had a fisheye that day," Ron said. "That would have been something, huh?"

The photographer had his Nikon inches from Ron's face.

"The automatic-weapons fire cut them down."

*Click-click.*

"I couldn't take a picture of it."

*Click-click.*

"It was too much."

*Click-click-click-click-click.*

"I couldn't believe it."

"Okay," the photographer said, "that's great."

8.

I thought about *Life* magazine when I thought about the million bucks. I remembered their exclusive big-money account by the girl who was taken into the Pennsylvania woods by a mad-dog hermit. I knew they had turned Abraham Zapruder's 16mm. camera to gold. I knew they owned the astronauts.

I told the *Time* magazine stringer in Cleveland that we had seventeen slides of the Mylai massacre in perfect color taken by a trained photographer. "Are you sure the quality is good?" he asked. "They don't run any stuff unless the quality is good." Assured, he called a friend—the *Time* stringer in Detroit. The *Time* stringer in Detroit called the *Time* bureau chief in Chicago. The *Time* bureau chief in Chicago called the *Life* bureau chief in Chicago. The *Life* bureau chief in Chicago called the *Life* national affairs editor in New York. Gerald Moore, the national affairs editor, called me. The entire Rube Goldberg process took forty-five minutes.

Gerald Moore said he wanted Haeberle and me on the next plane to New York. I asked if I could bring my wife. "Bring all your relatives," Moore said. I asked if the expenses would be paid. "Everything will be paid," he said.

I called Ron and told him they wanted us up in New York right away.

"Shit," he said, "I can't go tonight. I've got a date."

"What about the million bucks?"

"If it looks good," he said, "call me and I'll go up tomorrow."

I called my wife, a former police reporter, told her about the massacre, and said I had a surprise—a free trip to New York. She was overjoyed.

"Will they wire the money?" she asked.

"They'll pay us back up there."

"What do you suggest we use for cash?"

"Well," I said, "I suppose we'll have to cash a check."

"We can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because it will bounce."

I thought about that a while and said: "Well, we'll borrow some money."

"It's too late tonight," she said.

And since it was too late to borrow any money, it meant we couldn't fly up that night.

I called Moore back, told him Ron had a bad cold and that I couldn't make it up that night. What could I tell him? How can you explain about borrowing money when you're going to ask a guy for a million dollars?

"Why not?" he asked.

"Ah, personal reasons," I said.

"Are you a white-knuckled flyer?"

"No, no, nothing like that," I said.

"We could wire the money," he said.

"No problem," I said, "no problem."

Late that night, thinking things over a bit, grasping for perspective, I talked to Ron again:

"Listen, man, I think a million is a bit excessive. What do you say about a hundred grand?"

"Well, all right," he said, "if you're sure."

9.

The first bid for the massacre at Mylai was made by Associated Press picture editor Hal Boyle before the pictures appeared in the *Plain Dealer* before we ever got to New York's Gotham Hotel.

William M. Ware, executive editor of the *Plain Dealer*, called Hal Boyle in New York and told him the Associated Press could put no pictures of the Mylai massacre on the national wire because of copyright restrictions. Boyle didn't like it and asked to talk to me.

Assured of the pictures' photographic quality—"You're sure they'll reproduce?"—he offered \$20,000 "on the spot." I said it was not enough.

"Twenty-five," he said. Still not enough.

"Listen," he said, "what do you think this is? You can't sell those pictures for more. What happens if the Pentagon releases those pictures and you don't make a cent on it?"

"Try and convince them," I said.

"Well," he said, "I warned you."

That he did: for the next ten days, the Associated Press, making no further bids, was pounding on the Pentagon's door, trying to convince the generals that the best way to get even with those un-American money-makers (us) was to give the pictures to the AP for free.

10.

My wife and I got to New York the next afternoon—six hours before the November 20th edition of the *Plain Dealer* would carry the pictures; the penny pony players lined up in the newspaper's lobby would become some of the first Americans to see the carnage at Mylai. We checked into the Gotham Hotel, where reservations had been made for us by *Life* magazine.

I had been musing over our \$100,000 demand on the plane, wondering how I would couch the demand, hoping the words would come without a bob of the Adam's apple. It is not easy to ask for \$100,000 when you are worried about a tip for the cabbie. The seventeen technicolor slides were in a black briefcase which I hugged to my lap and which I had used, in my days at Ohio University, as a lunchbox.



Half an hour later, I was in Gerald Moore's office in the Time-Life Building as Moore wordlessly lifted each slide to the light, shook his head, and reached for the next one.

We walked the slides over to their photo art section where *Life* Assistant Managing Editor Phil Kunhardt asked for them and, after three slides, paled.

"My God," he said, "I presume you want to sell these."

"Well, yes."

"How much did you have in mind?"

"One hundred thousand dollars," I said, as firmly and evenly as I could, feeling very weak.

Kunhardt gave me a long and fixed look and his pale face reddened and then turned a medium purple. He looked away before he spoke and his eyes caught on the slides.

"It's, ah, too late tonight, of course," he said. "Come back and we'll discuss it in the morning."

"By the way," Moore said, "don't sell it to anyone else until we talk to you."

"Will Haeberle be here?" Kunhardt asked.

What could I say? That he had a date and couldn't come? That he would rather not get involved?

"I'm not sure," I said, "he's pretty busy."

"Well, I really think he should be here," Moore said. "After all, he is the photographer."

I went back to the Gotham to call Ron and caught him before he went out.

"Listen," I said, "it looks pretty good."

"Oh, yeah, how much?"

"Well, I threw the hundred thousand at them and they didn't say no."

"Huh, you don't think we could get more than that?"

"Well," I said, "I don't know. I think you'd better come up."

"Can't you handle it?"

"I think they want to ask you more questions."

"What for?"

"They want to hear more details from you," I said.

"Ah, hell," he said. "Well, all right. But I can't come up tonight. I'll take the first plane in the morning. And listen, I've been thinking about our security."

"Security?"

"Yeah, we're in a funny position. What if the word gets out that we're selling this stuff and the army tries to do something. Or the CID or the FBI or the CIA? What if this phone is tapped?"

"I guess I never thought about that," I said.

"I mean," he said, "they do have assassins, like the Beret that rubbed out that counterspy, you know?"

We agreed he would fly up under a phony name and I'd make a reservation for him at the Gotham under still another name.

"I don't trust those guys," he said. "Maybe the guys at *Life* can get us private dicks or something."

Hoping the phone wasn't tapped, with the door bolted, the windows shut, and the shades pulled, I called the *Plain Dealer* to make sure none of the black-and-white prints had been stolen.

The city editor laughed. None of the prints had been stolen but we had another problem.

The printers, belonging to an adjunct of the Teamsters Union, angry about four men they claimed were being harassed by one of S. I. Newhouse's recently imported overseers, had walked off the job.

The *Plain Dealer* was in this fateful position:

For one of the few times in the quotidian rag's history, it had a story of international significance which could, conceivably, die stillborn on the city desk.

Looking at it in retrospect, as far as the greening of the massacre is concerned, a strike would have been a godsend. As it turned out, the *Plain Dealer's* appearance on the streets the next day would cost us \$70,000.

# 11.

The printers went back on the job forty-five minutes before the penny pony players paid a dime for a look at the Mylai massacre.

There, at the top of the page, six columns wide, was the clump of bodies. The cutline said: A CLUMP OF BODIES ON A ROAD IN VIETNAM. A glaring headline next to it said: EXCLUSIVE!

"This photograph will shock Americans as it shocked the editors and staff of the *Plain Dealer*. It was taken during the attack by American soldiers on the South Vietnamese village of Mylai, an attack which has made worldwide headlines in recent days with the disclosures of mass killings allegedly at the hands of American soldiers. This photograph and others on two special pages are the first to be published anywhere of the killings. This particular picture shows a clump of bodies of South Vietnamese civilians which includes women and children. Why they were killed raises one of the most momentous questions of the war in Vietnam."

The other headlines on the page said:

CAMERAMAN SAW GIs SLAY 100 VILLAGERS  
SENATE OK's DRAFT REFORM, LOTTERY EYED  
FOR JANUARY  
GUNMEN BLIND TELLERS WITH TEAR GAS  
CONRAD, BEAN START ON SECOND MOONWALK

# 12.

Ted Princiotta, once praised for his reporting by J. Edgar Hoover, has never been overwhelmed by fame.



Thanks to that, the *Plain Dealer* easily shrugged off the first serious attempt to assassinate the credibility of the pictures.

The first salvo came a few minutes before midnight, less than an hour after the strike threat had been averted, less than halfway through the first press run. The caller said the pictures were phony and, in the national interest, begged Princiotta to stop the presses.

"Listen," Princiotta said, "I don't have time to talk to you right now. We're on deadline."

The caller said that in his esteemed opinion there was no relationship between the photos—that "a photo of soldiers marching through the paddies has no connection to the village scenes or bodies."

"The pictures don't prove that anything took place," the man said. "You're doing a disservice to America." He said he had some experience with photographs and it appeared to him "the whole thing is a hoax." Princiotta, in his characteristic way, got rid of him as gently as his nature, on deadline, permitted.

The caller was internationally known combat photographer David Douglas Duncan—in Cleveland that day promoting his latest book—a retired U.S. Marine Corps lieutenant colonel, and the only photographer to have unlimited access to the President of the United States.

13.

Less than an hour after the residents of Cleveland got their sneak preview of the massacre at Mylai, the telephone in Room 801 of the Gotham started ringing. (Not for nothing is the *Plain Dealer* known as "The Starter.") It didn't stop ringing for three days.

All the *Plain Dealer* reporters stringing for the *National Enquirer* and *Midnight* magazine and the London *Daily Telegraph-Sun-Times-Mirror* made breathless offers—congratulations and pittances.

The *Plain Dealer's* criminal courts reporter, a friendly soft-underbellied Canadian, who keeps his family's linear sword on his suburban walls, stringing for one of the London tabloids, called to say:

"I have spoken to my superiors in London and they have empowered me to make you an offer of twenty-five hundred dollars for exclusive world rights."

"Shit," I said.

"It's a very fine offer," he said in his best Toronto cockney. "I would advise you, speaking now as a friend, to accept it. You never know, the price might go down."

James M. Naughton, a friend, formerly the *Plain Dealer's* politics editor, a recent addition to the *New York Times'* Washington Bureau, called hoarse-voiced to say that his national editor had just gotten him out of bed.

"Look, Eszterhas," he said, "do me a favor. I know you guys are interested in *Life*. I know the *Times* won't offer any money, but, for God's sake, will you talk to them? As a favor to me? They'll send someone over."

Messrs. Simor, Goulacci, Tsudo, Palotelli, Lucentini Hauser, and Blythe—whom Ron would refer to as the SS—representing most of the major European magazines, all made bids and all seemed personally affronted by the \$100,000 price tag.

"I demand to speak to Mr. Haeberle," one heavily accented gentleman said. "Who are you? Are you keeping Mr. Haeberle away from his public? Can you be trusted? Mr. Haeberle is an international figure now. You must permit the press of the world to speak with him. You have aroused the curiosity of the world. You must live up to that responsibility."

At two in the morning, I met in the hotel bar with a young reporter from the *New York Times*. The reporter asked that the *Times* be allowed to run the pictures, "if you have some handy," and tried his best to conduct an interview concerning Ron's actions at Mylai that day.

"When Mr. Haeberle gets here," he said, "we will of course want to speak to him too, but right now we're on deadline."

The *Times* man seemed personally affronted when I told him the exclusive pictures and account would be sold as a package and that, therefore, I couldn't tell him anything.

"But these are basic questions," he said, "and, after all we are the *Times*. Certainly you won't hold us to that."

Still unsuccessful, he got angry: "This is absurd. You're not a journalist. You can't be a journalist and treat the *Times* this way. You are a public relations man."

At seven in the morning, my friend Naughton called from Washington again.

"They just got me out of bed again," he said. "The guy we sent over said you insulted him. Do me another favor. Gene Roberts, our national editor, wants to talk to you. Can you go over there and talk to him?"

"We're going to be pretty busy," I said. "I don't know."

"Oh, all right then," he said. "I'll see if he can meet you at your hotel sometime."

At ten to eight, Ron walked into the hotel lobby, red-eyed and wearing wraparound sunglasses, going past a *Daily News* reporter in a trenchcoat who was haranguing the desk clerk about Mr. Haeberle's room number.

Ron had shared a coach seat on his flight with a man who, reading the front page of the *Plain Dealer* adorned with his picture, fumed to him and said:

"They shouldn't let the newspapers get away with all this shit."

We walked over to the Time-Life Building, passing the

trenchcoated *Daily News* man again, taking great care crossing at intersections. Ron was still talking about the CID, the CIA, and the FBI.

"They better give us the dicks," he said.

When we got to the Time-Life Building, a bevy of mini-skirted secretaries was paying homage to a television set. Astronauts Charles Conrad and Alan Bean were walking around on the moon. Conrad was humming. His humming was off-key. Ron was humming along with him.

"Whoopee," said Conrad. "Man, that may have been a small one for Neil but that's a long one for me."

"Hey, that's neat, I don't sink in too far. Dum-de-dum-dum, dum-de-dum-dum," Conrad hummed. "Man, I feel like Bugs Bunny."

14.

While Bugs Bunny cavorted on the moon, patriots and character assassins cavorted in Cleveland.

After the pictures appeared, the readers of the *Plain Dealer* did not care that Tom Vail had once slept in Lincoln's bed at the White House. It did not matter that he had once chatted with President Johnson in his pajamas.

The *Plain Dealer* got more telephone calls that day than ever before in its history. It was terrible. To editors who view three negative phone calls to a story as incontrovertible evidence that a reporter is incompetent, the phone calls meant prolonged stupors of melancholia. They were forced to twist their sterile pieties to our defense.

Some even appeared on television, talking in *Columbia Journalism Review* terms about the story. You understand, the hierarchical party line held, the *Plain Dealer* does not say this happened. The *Plain Dealer* says a photographer alleges that this happened.

One sealed envelope was personally delivered to a news editor. In it, final proof was offered of Haeberle's sinister un-Americanism. Damning, self-condemning words appearing under his signature, an invitation to an office party. "We promise a good time for all at next week's party, especially chicks, guaranteed." Haeberle holding an orgy, inviting his company's virginal pink-cheeked secretaries.

Clevelanders never mince words. The fact the *Plain Dealer* had endorsed Carl Stokes, a black mayor, was bad enough. But these pictures, to many of them, were the work of communists or communist dupes.

Dear Editor:

*I firmly believe that a newsman will sell his soul and lives of GIs for a byline in the Plain Dealer. This confirms that truth is stretched more than rubber. Integrity among newsmen is far more rare than virtue among prostitutes.*—J.L.R., Youngstown, Ohio.

*The exposure and publicity given the story of supposed American atrocities in Vietnam was ill-advised at a time when negotiations are underway. The Plain Dealer through gaining national attention has offered the enemy another opportunity for propaganda. This reporting is not in the interest of the peace we seek.*—H.C.A., Cleveland Heights, Ohio.

*I strongly object to the placement of a picture of war dead or any other equally sordid material on the front page of the Plain Dealer. While such a picture is certainly newsworthy, I feel it can do a great deal of harm in such a conspicuous position of the home-delivery edition. To a young child whose perspective about life is limited, and to whom everything is immediate and close to home, the concentration of impending doom and death can be severely damaging.*—G.A.G., Cleveland Heights, Ohio.

*Whatever the motives, the Plain Dealer, by publishing the picture of civilians killed in Vietnam, became a highly rated candidate for an award for betrayal of our dead in Vietnam.*—J.R.S., Cleveland Heights, Ohio.

*Just what does Ronald L. Haeberle think war is, a picnic? Sure civilians get killed, what else does he expect? I think it's pretty ridiculous to make such a fuss over the killing of Vietnamese civilians.*—Mrs. R.D., Alliance, Ohio.

*I think the Plain Dealer staff is sick for printing the picture of the dead Vietnamese. How many mothers, fathers, and wives have lost their loved ones in Vietnam? Put that in your Plain Dealer.*—C. K. Parma, Ohio.

Later that day, there was some good news. The vice-president had alerted newsmen in Washington that he would have some things to say about the news media. The *Plain Dealer* hoped for a vice-presidential mention. Maybe, besides the Pulitzer Prize and the mention in *Time's* press section, the *Plain Dealer* would be immortalized by a defamatory vice-presidential panegyric. But, alas, the *Plain Dealer* was not singled out and Tom Vail would call his general attack a "great service."

Question: The vice-president denied any intent to intimidate the news media, but is there intimidation implicit when the number two elected official of the nation makes a statement or speech such as he made last night?

Vail: I do not feel that Mr. Agnew is threatening anything. I do feel that the news media does overreact and that it is terribly sensitive about itself, maybe all businesses are this way, but I feel the vice-president is doing a great service in getting the media to examine itself, and we are trying to produce, as far as the *Plain Dealer* is concerned, a very balanced report. Whether it is always perfectly balanced, I doubt.

15.

I was sitting in Gerald Moore's office at *Life*. Moore had his feet up on his desk, inches from the slides, and was rambling on about a turquoise Indian watchband he was wearing. He was killing time. For some reason, we were being stalled.

We were taken on a tour of the building. Finally, after great deliberation, Moore explained that in other parts of the building, frantic phone calls between executives were deciding the price tag to be put on the slides.

Some time around eleven, with Ron returned from a tour of their photographic facilities, Moore told us *Life* was interested in "some kind of an arrangement."

Over lunch, we asked if our names could appear on the cover of the issue that would carry the pictures.

"Well, ah," Moore said, "we usually don't do that unless it's someone like Mailer or Hemingway."

"I don't know," Ron said. "I mean, no one else took any pictures."

Two martinis later, Moore told us:

"Guys, I'm going to give you some advice. You have to be cool about all this. Your actions in the next few hours will determine whether or not you're going to pick up a great deal of money—more money than you'll probably ever make at one time again."

We listened and didn't say much. When Moore left, we talked about what he had said. We had a tactical problem. Was Moore a friend or was he a point man on some camouflaged assault team? I thought we could trust him. Ron said he thought it was a con.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I figure they are trying to knock the price down and he's trying to soften us up. So I don't think we should give it to them unless we get the price. I think we should get tough."

We had an hour to kill, Moore told us, before Dick Pollard, *Life*'s photo editor, would make the concrete offer.

"Men," Pollard said, an hour later, "after a great deal of deliberation, we have decided we don't want to act, in the eyes of the public, as brokers for massacre pictures. Therefore we've decided to make an offer which will give us exclusive rights to the pictures. We will decide

whether we will sell the pictures to anyone else and we will decide whether we will run the pictures ourselves. You'd be yielding all rights if you agree to these terms."

"What amount were you thinking of?" Ron said.

"Seventy thousand dollars," Pollard said.

We asked for a huddle and went into a corridor, followed by a hundred secretarial eyes. Everyone in the building seemed to know what was going on.

"What do you think?" Ron said.

"I think the money's good," I said, "but I don't know about all this talk of not running the pictures. If they don't run the pictures, you probably could have gotten a better price from the CIA."

"Yeah, I know," he said, excited, "but I figure we can get much more than that. Hell, if they're willing to give seventy, just like that, they can give more."

"I don't know, man," I said. "I think Moore was trying to tell us something over lunch."

"Shit, no one else has the pictures. No one else is going to run them, let's go for higher."

When we went back into the room, Ron said:

"Well, I figure you can go higher than that."

"What were you thinking?" Pollard asked.

"Around a hundred and twenty thousand," Ron said.

Pollard whistled. "That's a lot of money," he said. He said he had to make some phone calls and we left the room.

When we came back in, after another huddle and another debriefing concerning Moore's prophetic-or-cunning martini advice, Pollard said:

"We can't make a decision on that kind of money. Hedley Donovan is at a board meeting in Chicago. He'll be here tomorrow. However, we can make a final offer of ninety thousand dollars."

We went back to the corridor again. Ron hummed.

"Nah," he said, "if they get up to ninety thousand like that, then they can go up to one-hundred. If they don't do it, then we can get it from some of the other guys we talked to."

When Pollard heard it was no deal, he grinned. He seemed pleased.

"Hell," Ron said, "if you people really want the pictures, then let's get Donovan here tonight. He can fly in. Tell him to come in tonight from Chicago."

Pollard seemed incredulous. "We can't, ah, tell Mr. Donovan something like that," he said.

"We'll give it to someone else then," Ron said.

"Listen," Pollard said, "we've played the game fair with you guys. What difference does another night make? We'll give you five thousand dollars for an option to expire at noon tomorrow. We can talk tomorrow. That doesn't obligate you to sell to us, just to give us till overnight."

"You'll give us the five tonight?" Ron asked.

"Well, a letter of agreement."

"Cash?" Ron asked.

Pollard said it was a little late and he didn't think they could drum up that much cash in the office, but they could give us a few hundred dollars in advance.

"Well, all right," Ron said, "until noon."

When we got back to the hotel, Gene Roberts, the national editor of the *Times*, and John Morris, the picture editor, were waiting for us in the bar.

"You have to understand," Roberts began, "that running the pictures in the *Times* will help you. It will authenticate your pictures. So far, they have only appeared in the *Plain Dealer*, and who cares about the *Plain Dealer*? If we run them in the *Times*, then it will be a matter of historical record."

The day was getting long on bullshit.

"Do you want to buy the pictures?" I asked.

"The *Times*," Roberts said, "doesn't want to be in the position of buying massacre pictures. We want to help you sell them, though."

"Fuck the *Times*," I said. "I'm really getting fucking tired of hearing about the *Times*."

"Joe," Roberts said, "I think you're being very unreasonable about all this. I'm surprised. I've been looking around for a while for another reporter on our national staff and your name came up. You guys have to understand you're dealing with the *Times*. You can't deal with us the way you deal with the others. We're talking about certifying the accuracy of these pictures historically."

"We're talking about a historical steal," I said.

Morris turned to Ron.

"Who is this punk?" he asked, pointing to me. "What is he, your agent? You can't listen to him. Don't you have a mind of your own? Does he run your life?"

"Oh, I can run my life all right," Ron said.

"Look, guys," Roberts said, "there is no reason to get upset about all this. We'll pay your travel expenses and your expenses here."

We laughed at him. In a few hours, the price had gone from a million to \$100,000 to \$70,000 to \$90,000 to \$120,000 to travel expenses.

"We'll do this, though," Roberts said. "We'll fix you guys up with the best broker in the world. That way we won't get mixed up in selling the pictures and at the same time you'll do all right."

When we finally rejected the *Times*' offer and got rid of them, Roberts shook his head and said, "Joe, I'm disappointed, very disappointed."

We hurried to the room, two guys sunstruck in the Big City Desert, and reached for the gin.

At 2:30 that night, Jeremy Blythe, an unctuous

Englishman, calling for the *London Daily Mail*, said he was trying to put together a consortium of magazines willing to buy the pictures.

"The price is one hundred thousand is it, Joe?" he said.

"It's gone up, Jeremy. It's one-twenty."

"Dear," he said, "that will be more difficult."

He called back at six o'clock and said he had arranged the package of bidders willing to pay \$120,000.

We had agreed to meet in Dick Pollard's office at noon. High noon in the desert sun, I figured, would bring the magic offer. The \$5,000 option would expire and we'd get a \$120,000 check.

16.

Other things happened that day, lost in flashes and humming, the quick-takes of phantasmagoria in the glare of international attention:

Lines formed that day at the *Plain Dealer's* Washington Bureau in the National Press Club building for copies of the paper. But the lines formed for nothing, because the bureau chief and his three reporters spent a good part of each morning vying for that day's two *Plain Dealers*, and the visiting reporters had to content themselves with just a quick look.

Finally, when the South Vietnamese embassy, for the first and only time in its history, called the bureau for extra copies of the *Plain Dealer*, more were ordered.

"Are you taking these papers to Saigon?" a reporter asked an embassy official.

"Oh, no, nothing important," the official said. "Just for our interest."

The same reporter, later Thursday, talked to a Pentagon official who had heard the massacre pictures had appeared in the *Plain Dealer* that day.

"Have you seen them?" he was asked.

"Christ no," the official said, "I don't give a shit about what appears in the *Plain Dealer*. Who sees that? It's *Life* magazine we're worried about."

There were, too, during time-outs at Time-Life, shadowed dealings with the journalistic netherworld.

One call was from a man representing one of Japan's largest newsmagazines.

"We want to buy your pictures, yes?" the man said.

The inevitable question: How much?

"Five hundred dollars."

The inevitable reply: No.

"It would be very wise of you, sir, very wise, to sell us the pictures for that amount because if you do not sell them, we will steal them."

This, evidently, was a different kind of bidder.

"Steal them?"

"Of course."

"We'll sue you," I said.

"But, ah, it would take, oh, thirty years in the Japanese courts for the case to come to trial."

"How could you steal them?"

"Very easy, sir. We would copy pictures that were in the *Plain Dealer* newspaper."

I couldn't bring myself to believe all this and turned him down.

"Very well then," he said, "we will steal them. Pleasant talking to you."

(He wasn't kidding. The pictures were more widely circulated in Japan, it turned out, than any other country—including the United States.)

Another call was from a genial Italian who said he represented a newspaper in Bologna and was offering \$30,000 for the pictures and a story with a "special slant."

"For Italian rights?"

"But no, for Bologna," he said.

"How can a paper in Bologna offer thirty thousand dollars for the pictures?"

"You see, I have friends."

"What do you mean, friends?"

"Friends, signore. How can I say it? Friends from behind the curtain."

"The curtain?"

"The other side, you know, the Iron Curtain."

The Iron Curtain rights were turned down.

That afternoon in Cleveland, a jet landed at Hopkins International Airport. One man got off. He took a taxi to the *Plain Dealer*. He told the people at the *Plain Dealer's* promotion department he had come all the way from London to pick up fifty copies of the issue with the famous pictures. The *Plain Dealer* promotion people, very happy they worked for such a famous organization, smiled and basked in their importance. The man got back in the cab and the jet with his fifty *Plain Dealer*. Impressed that he had come from so far so fast, the promotion people didn't even charge him the \$5.00.

Thanks to his efforts, the pictures of the Mylai massacre appeared in England faster than anywhere else. English piracy would scoop the Japanese buccaneers.

Thursday night, while the selling of the massacre was delayed by a \$5,000 option and Hedley Donovan's alleged board meeting continued in Chicago, the massacre was being stolen.

17.

Friday did not look like it would be a propitious day. That morning's *Times* had reported the sale by Paul Meadlo a Mylai veteran, of a dramatic interview for the sum of \$10,000—all of which would go to Seymour

Hersh's Dispatch News Service. Here we were in New York, with sales being made as far inland as Indiana, and the pictures still unsold.

At breakfast with the *Times* hit men Roberts and Morris, Gene Roberts began the spiel again as Morris glared. They were like two robbery-squad ticks—Roberts the nice guy, Morris the blackjack man. The meeting ended on a much harsher note than the last one. "Fuck yous" were exchanged and we all rushed from the coffee shop—Roberts and Morris to their Times Square hideout, Ron and I, we thought, to the bank.

At 11:30, after another time-killing tour of the Time-Life Building, Gerald Moore ushered us into Dick Pollard's office.

"Listen, guys," Pollard said, "we've weighed all the considerations and we've decided we aren't interested in bidding for world rights. We're interested in U.S. rights only."

We grinned, confident that at noon Jeremy Blythe and the consortium would hand over their \$120,000.

At 11:45, deadpan, Dick Pollard said:

"Bad news, guys. I hear the *New York Post* will be on the streets in a few minutes running Haeberle's pictures on the front page."

"How can they do that?" I asked.

"I don't know," Pollard said. "I presume they photographed them from the pages of the *Plain Dealer*." "Isn't that illegal?"

"I don't know," Pollard said.

He called Ted Majeski, the picture editor of the *Post*, and asked if it was true.

Majeski told Pollard they had copied the *Plain Dealer* pictures and it was legal because "his right [Haeberle's] to the pictures is dubious because he was an army photographer," and "national interest" demanded the pictures.

At noon, Jeremy Blythe appeared, pale-faced, without the \$120,000.

"Everything is falling apart, lads," he said. "The *Post* is running the pictures and I hear that most of the London papers will have the pictures in their evening editions."

"We'll sue them," I said. "They can't do that."

"I don't know, lads," he said, "I don't know. That will be very difficult. You'll have court costs and it probably won't get to court for four or five years."

"How did they get the pictures?" I asked.

"Well, the only way, I presume, is that they took pictures of the pictures in the *Plain Dealer*."

(We would hear about the mysterious Englishman who got the fifty papers much later.)

"What can we do?" I asked.

"Not much, boys, but you have to count me out. With

the pictures appearing all over the world, no one wants to pay any money."

Ron and I huddled in our corridor again.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"I think we got fucked."

"Shit, shit, shit" he said.

He was facing the wall, tapping it with his hand.

Inside, the secretaries had taken a typing break again and were grinning at us.

We decided we needed a lawyer. I called the *Plain Dealer* and the assistant to the publisher suggested a firm: "The best one you can get." Royall, Moegel, Rogers, and Wells. The lawyer recommended was named Caesar Petaskie. (We did not know until much later that the law firm's Rogers was William P. Rogers, Secretary of State.)

I called Caesar and told him it was an emergency. Unless we acted fast, the massacre would be completely stolen. Caesar said he would send telegrams to the major New York papers and newsmagazines advising them the pictures were copyrighted.

"What else can we do?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said.

"So what do we do now?" Ron said.

"Fuck them, let's go home. They're going to have to pay if they want to run the stuff. I think they're playing a game."

"Shit," he said.

We went back into Pollard's office. Pollard suddenly looked like he was very busy and didn't have much time.

"Are you people still interested in buying them?" Ron blurted.

Pollard looked out his window, then back at us and after a long pause, said, "Yes, we are. We are prepared to give you twenty thousand dollars for U.S. rights."

"Okay," Ron said.

A letter of agreement was quickly typed up and signed. We waited for the phone calls with other offers, but the phone was silent. Finally, *Der Stern* and the *London Sunday Times* called and offered \$6,000 and \$3,000 which were quickly accepted.

"You know you guys made one very serious mistake," Pollard said. "You had those pictures run in the *Plain Dealer* and you didn't think anyone would use them."

"You mean steal them," I said.

"Yes, I suppose you can say that," Pollard said. "But look at it this way: chalk it up to experience. That money would have gone into the air fast anyway. We gave some guy a lot of money, about sixty thousand for some footage a few years ago. So what happens? The guy gives up his store and goes to Miami and blows it on the ponies. His whole life was ruined. It's probably better for you that it all happened this way."

*Der Stern* sent a reporter over armed with pearl-handled walking stick and the manner of a storm trooper. He insisted Ron answer his questions about the "German angle"—Were you ever in Germany? Do you have any relatives there? Are you sure?

We finally got away from the storm trooper and ate at Mamma Leone's. It was a funereal meal.

"God," Ron said, "we could have made ninety thousand dollars."

I was drinking five-minute shots of scotch and wished for the first time in my life that I was back in Ohio, working on a hearts-and-flowers dog story.

"That fucking German," he mumbled. "He was more interested in my German relatives than in the goddamn massacre."

He didn't know then that among the rewards for his efforts connected with the massacre would be just that: the discovery of a German relative!

*Dear Mr Ronald Haeberle*

*I have read your name in the German newspapers and I suppose you are son of my nephew, Charles Haberle, who was with Sunshine Newspapers in New York. My father and your grandfather would then be brothers. If this is so, I would like to hear from you. I am pensionary and my wife and myself are living in the Black Forest. I wish you Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year from the Black Forest.*

*Albert Haberle*

*Wittenschrand*

*West Germany*

18.

While *Life* magazine had paid \$20,000, it turned out the next day that some of their editors still suspected the pictures were phony. Ron and I called it the "David Douglas Duncan influence."

During a six-hour session with Gerald Moore, Ron went over the details again and again as Moore tested his accuracy. Hours after the sale, pictures were sent to *Life* reporters all over the world. They sought out Mylai veterans and asked them if they remembered separate scenes. Their editors' fears would finally be laid to rest by a veteran in Mississippi who, shown the pictures, took them to his grandmother and sobbed: "This is what we did in Vietnam." The old woman collapsed.

But we also had other things on our minds that day. That morning's *Times* carried this auspicious item:

An AP story quoted a Pentagon official at a conference in Brussels saying the Pentagon was seeking ways in which Haeberle could be prosecuted for "hindering the investigation."

Moore told Ron it seemed "unlikely but possible" that

the Pentagon would press charges on anything since he was out of uniform.

That morning's *Times* had also included another of Ron's pictures. Our hit men—the protectors of historical accuracy—had decided on a heist of their own. The *Times* does things with style, though, and their theft was the most brazen of the lot. Beneath the picture of the clump of bodies was the caption, © *Ronald L. Haeberle*.

Late that afternoon we got an emergency phone call from the *Plain Dealer*. The photo chief, an ex-marine who still carried a marine corps lighter and lead pencil, needed help. He wanted, immediately, special delivery the black-and-white prints of Haeberle which the photographer had taken in the conference room at the *Plain Dealer*.

"You're costing us money," he said. "Get them here as quick as possible. A lot of people want to buy his picture."

Thanks to the *Plain Dealer*, Ron's Mylai pictures were stolen all over the world. But thanks to the *Plain Dealer* a market still existed for *his* picture all over the world.

19.

There wasn't much left to do in New York. Ron left early Monday morning, in a new striped shirt and tie, cash in hand ready to buy the candy-apple-red Corvette.

At *Life* magazine, the editors had decided not to put one of the pictures on the cover, fearing newsstand buyers would be repulsed. An antelope went on the cover.

Back at the *Plain Dealer*, everyone was interested in the most relevant question: How much?

The day after Ron bought his Corvette, a radio station headlined: "Ron Haeberle, the massacre profiteer, bought a new Corvette yesterday."

I was overwhelmed by calls from veterans and others who claimed to have evidence of other massacres.

An old woman said she had proof her son had been killed because he refused to take part in the killing at Mylai.

Two men called claiming they had massacre pictures of a massacre in a Montagnard village—"all kinds of pictures of GIs killing"—and of a massacre where GIs allegedly took refugees to sea and dumped them overboard. "How much can you get?" both men asked. Neither man was willing to talk in person.

My telephone calls were divided between massacre tipsters, cranks, and stockbrokers who had read the overblown \$100,000 payment stories. "This is a good deal, Joe, and we can really cash in," they said. An insurance salesman came to the office and castigated me for my irresponsibility when I turned him down.

Ted Princiotto came back from a trip to Japan and, not knowing of the Japanese thefts, was amazed at the progressive nature of Japanese journalism. "They really had that stuff fast," he said.

A columnist in the *Akron Beacon Journal* wrote a column criticizing the *Plain Dealer* for carrying the pictures. The man held that what had happened at Mylai was not really newsworthy. He described how, during the Second World War in the Pacific, he had himself photographed holding several Japanese heads.

There was, too, the personal mail:

A clipped five-column picture of Ron which appeared in another midwestern paper (taken by the *Plain Dealer* photographer). A typewritten message on top of the picture, above the back of Ron's head, which said:

*It's too bad they didn't kill you when you were in Vietnam as they are a bunch of animals—our boys shouldn't be there but you, a gun would be good for you.*

Scrawled with red pencil, with an arrow pointing to his left eye: *cut throat SB you*

Red-penciled onto his right cheek from his sideburns to his nose: *"You will get it."*

A blood-red line went from his right ear, around his throat, to his left ear, where there were the words: *"Dead, you fucker."*

And: *Commie Eszterhas*

*Too bad you couldn't cash in on the photos life magazine has and poured out your venom against our country—by a far shot not yours. It will be very interesting to hear what the authority (FBI) has to say and not some biased, stupid commie. Why don't you go back to your foreign country and run down its government. I have the first article to read of yours that has ever upheld our government, but I suppose that is all you can expect of anyone with a name like Eszterhas. Probably never lived so good until you landed in this country. From someone who loves this country and have had two sons serve it—that is probably more than you ever done, like all our dirty hippies. Most of them would serve Israel though and very eager to send the money they make here over there.—Anon.*

The *Plain Dealer*, meanwhile, wanted to show its appreciation: \$500 checks for Ron and me!

"You don't have to tell anyone else on the staff about it," I was told.

20.

The *Plain Dealer* got neither the Pulitzer Prize nor the good mention in *Time's* press section, but Ron did win the Sigma Delta Chi Photography Award. He won \$500 and a gold statuette. He read about the award in the *Plain Dealer*. He called Sigma Delta Chi officials and asked why they hadn't notified him. They said they'd



been looking for him but couldn't find him. A week later he got the gold statuette. It was broken into little pieces.

21.

Christmas was bountiful. Ron ordered a specially built, souped-up stereo ensemble and a tape deck, along with a plane ticket to Hawaii. He gave a friend a few hundred dollars worth of abortion money. I gave my wife a gold necklace.

The Christmas mail brought, special delivery, a wall-sized poster of the clump of bodies in full color. The poster was put out by a peace group. Underneath, in big red letters, were the words: AND BABIES? AND BABIES. © *Ronald L. Haeberle*.

22.

I saw Ron often in the months after that. His new Corvette was stolen, and he bought another. He went to Switzerland and Hawaii a few times, and I went out West. I was walking down a street in Tijuana one afternoon when I heard the yell: "Hey, Eszterhas," and Ron came out of the shadows, eating a taco.

On that same trip, at the Whiskey A Go Go in Los Angeles, with the Iron Butterfly ripping away, there was a light show. Slides: of John and Yoko; a Chicago cop wielding a billy club; Bonnie and Clyde. And then against a wall and over the ceiling, a slide of the clump of bodies at Mylai. And the band played on.

Ron went back to Premier for a while, viewed by his bosses with envy, but also with a kind of All-American respect: they were massacre pictures, sure, but the kid had made what they thought was \$100,000. For a time, during a truckers' strike, he drove a truck back and forth from Chicago, dodging Teamsters patrolling the highway with shotguns and rocks. Then he tired of the routine at Premier—he was fitting West Coast trips into weekends—and he quit. He was looking for a job. His photographic credentials were, after all, excellent.

He applied first at the *Plain Dealer*. The *Plain Dealer* had acted eternally grateful for his photographs and their international fame and, he figured, they might hire him for \$170 a week. He was wrong. He was told, in the most politic executivese, that all the photo jobs were filled but that he would be put on a waiting list. He figured his pictures had given him a "bad image" and tried to convince the *Plain Dealer* to run another page of his photographs. This would show the other side of the war—the other half of the Kiwanis Club show: GIs handing Hershey bars to the kids. The *Plain Dealer*

refused.

He hunted jobs in Los Angeles New York, Chicago, and Miami. Everywhere he went, it was the same story. No jobs, a place on the waiting list, we'll call you. He noticed too, at each stop, that they were interested until they learned that he was the Ron Haeberle who had taken "those" pictures. He kept his trips down a bit and started looking for any kind of a job.

He spent a night with Jay Roberts, the writer who had been with him at Mylai and who had gone underground. Jay's hair was down to his shoulders, his beard flowing, and he was making himself unavailable to trials and committees, living his life in bits and pieces. Ron debated joining Jay but decided against it. "I'm not a hippie," he said, "I'm not built like that."

One day the rear end of his second new Corvette broke down and he traded it in for a new one.

23.

I went back to holdups and berserk fathers and warm, cuddly front-page puppies. On the afternoon of May 4th, my city editor sent me to Kent State University, where National Guardsmen killed four students. The city editor told me to "get some art."

I walked around Blanket Hill with blood on the pavement and bulletholes in the trees, talking to kids, working my tape recorder, asking about pictures.

I saw Ron a few days after that, walking around with a bagful of shiny Japanese photographic equipment, trying out the new Corvette. He said he was thinking of going down to Kent to do some shooting.

"Man," he said, "I wish I could have been there. No clouds; the sun was up; the color would have been great."

I had heard him say that before, in another context. We stood there, next to each other, not saying anything, avoiding each others' eyes.

Nathanael West wrote: "*Miss Lonelyhearts, I advise you to give your readers stones. Explain that man can not live by bread alone and give them stones. Teach them to pray each morning: Give us this day our daily stone.*"

"Aww, what the fuck," Ron said, "let's get a beer." And after a while we did.

*Born in Hungary, Joe Eszterhas was a reporter in the early 1970s for the Plain Dealer in Cleveland, Ohio; he was also a staff writer for Rolling Stone. The author of Thirteen Seconds: Confrontation at Kent State with Michael D. Roberts, he also wrote the screenplays for Flashdance and Jagged Edge.*