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Ronald Ridenhour, 52, Veteran Who Reported My Lai Massacre

By JOHN H. CUSHMAN JR.



Ronald L. Ridenhour, the Vietnam veteran who in 1969 first disclosed the My Lai massacre of Vietnamese civilians by United States Army troops, died yesterday in Metairie, La. He was 52.

The cause apparently was a heart attack while playing handball, said his companion, Mary Howell.

Mr. Ridenhour was horrified by the stories he heard from comrades who had been at My Lai, where on March 16, 1968, a company of the 23d Infantry (Americal) Division killed 175 to 400 civilians and committed other atrocities.

Mr. Ridenhour, who first heard about the massacre from other soldiers about a month after it happened, investigated it on his own. Home from his tour as a helicopter gunner in Vietnam, he wrote a 1,500-word letter to President Richard M. Nixon, Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird, and members of Congress, including his Congressman, Senator Morris K. Udall, Democrat of Arizona.

The letters, delivered a year after the killing, sparked an Army investigation that led to indictments, the public disclosure of the massacre, and eventually the conviction of Lieut. William L. Calley Jr., whose platoon had done much of the killing.

The massacre, charges that it had been covered up, and the conviction of Lieutenant Calley but nobody else, became a divisive controversy that badly hurt the Army's reputation and affected the public's view of the war.



In an article published in The New York Times in 1973, Mr. Ridenhour said that he had written the letters disclosing the massacres hoping that "it would show the American people and their Government that the policies of force abroad and deception at home were not only antithetical to the principles of a democratic society but low, mean, stupid, brutal and self-destructive as well."

"The question most often put to me was not why they had done it, but why I had done it," he wrote. "In a word, justice. It was a simple appeal to justice. I was younger and more foolish then."

In 1988, Mr. Ridenhour won a Polk Award for journalism for a yearlong investigation of a New Orleans tax scandal published in City Business, a biweekly newspaper there.

Mr. Ridenhour was born in Oakland, Calif., and grew up in Phoenix. He was drafted in March 1967 when his course load at Phoenix Junior College dropped below the requirement for an educational deferment.

Mr. Ridenhour was in a helicopter that flew over My Lai a few days after the massacre. He said he waited until he was out of the service to blow the whistle because he feared for his life.

Mr. Ridenhour was a stringer for People magazine and co-produced a story on militias for the NBC News program "Dateline."

Correction: May 14, 1998

Because of an editing error, an obituary on May 11 about Ronald L. Ridenhour, the Vietnam veteran who in 1969 disclosed the My Lai massacre of civilians by United States troops, misstated the title held at the time by Morris K. Udall. He was Mr. Ridenhour's Representative, not a Senator.

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A version of this obituary; biography appears in print on May 11, 1998, on Page A00015 of the National edition with the headline: Ronald Ridenhour, 52, Veteran Who Reported My Lai Massacre. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

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