

By Fred Kaplan

My Lai—the very words arouse fear and trembling: a village in South Vietnam (as the country was called at the time), site of the most murderous rampage of the Vietnam War, a tableau of pure mayhem and evil. Yet one legacy of this opera called *My Lai* might be to imbue the words with a *trace* of dignity, morality, and courage. There were many villains at My Lai, but also one hero: Hugh Thompson, the opera's protagonist, who stopped the massacre in its tracks and whose action set in motion the crime's widespread exposure—and, with it, the unraveling of support for the war on the home front.

March 16, 1968. It was the peak of U.S. intervention in the war, more than a half-million American soldiers fighting, strafing, and bombing. It was also the time of the Tet Offensive, the massive counter-attack by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army, and, therefore, the peak year for killings on both sides of the fighting.

U.S. Army's Company C, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 11th Infantry Brigade, 23rd Infantry Division—"Charlie Company"—was having a particularly hard time. In the weeks leading up to My Lai, 28 of its soldiers were killed by Viet Cong booby-traps or mines. The men were seething, frustrated, brimming with loathing for the enemy. Revved up to enter a string of villages on "search and destroy" missions, they were told by their commanders that every "gook" they encountered was Viet Cong or a VC sympathizer. It was a "free-fire zone," meaning they should kill anything and everything that moved.

And so, at 7:30 that morning, about 100 soldiers of Charlie Company landed by helicopter and, led by their commanders, commenced with the killing. They lit straw huts on fire, then shot the women and children who came running out. They stabbed women, some holding babies, with bayonets. They pushed people into ditches, then sprayed them with bullets. More than 500 Vietnamese civilians were killed that day. None of them were armed, nor were any hidden weapons found afterward.

In the thick of the killing, Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson, Jr., a helicopter pilot with the 123rd Aviation Battalion, was flying overhead, saw the carnage below, landed his chopper near one of the ditches full of bodies. He approached Lieut. William "Rusty" Calley, a platoon leader, and asked what was going on. Calley said he was "only following orders." Thompson asked a nearby sergeant to help him pull the few survivors out of the ditch. The sergeant snarkily replied, "I'll help put them out of their misery."

Thompson's moment of truth and resistance came when he saw a group of American soldiers headed toward civilians who were hiding in a bunker. In the opera, Thompson intones to his crew, "If those bastards...if those bastards open fire..."—which, according to eyewitness testimony in later trials, is what the real-life Thompson told his crewmen, Lawrence Colburn and Glenn Andreotta: if "those bastards" opened fire on the civilians, they should shoot *them*. And he warned the approaching soldiers as well—they would shoot their fellow American comrades-in-arms.

It was an extraordinary act. Only one other soldier on the scene declined to "follow orders" and did so by shooting himself in the foot and thus taking himself out of the action, but he never reported the atrocities. Thompson not only refused to join the killing spree; he stopped it. He rescued at least 10 civilians and flew them to safety, but indirectly he saved hundreds, perhaps thousands more. When the company commander, Cpt. Ernest Medina, who had joined in the killing, heard about Thompson's act and figured reprisals might lie ahead, he ordered the men to cease fire. Other companies,

which were about to go into other villages and commit similar atrocities, canceled their missions.

But Thompson wasn't lauded when he reported the crimes back at headquarters. His superiors lambasted him, spread lies about his character, and ordered rote investigations that disputed his account—described the deaths as minimal and accidental, the results of “collateral damage” from artillery and air strikes. At least some superiors knew Thompson had told the truth. One sergeant, an eyewitness, wrote Gen. William Westmoreland, commander of the U.S. Army in Vietnam, telling him that there was “a My Lai each month for over a year” during the peak fighting of 1967-68 Westmoreland did nothing.

More remarkable, among the hundreds of American soldiers who took part in those dozen or more My Lais, Thompson was the *only* one who so much as filed a complaint. Two years passed before journalist Seymour Hersh wrote his expose of the massacre, which sparked a more honest investigation and 36 military trials. But Lt. Calley was the only one found guilty—all the others, of higher and lower rank, were acquitted—and President Richard Nixon commuted Calley's life sentence, on charges of premeditated murder, to three-and-a-half years under house arrest. For long after, Thompson's story was widely disbelieved; his testimony at the inquest was decried; a member of Congress denounced him as a traitor.

Not until March 1998, thirty years after the fact, were Hugh Thompson, Lawrence Colburn and (posthumously) Glenn Andreotta awarded a medal—the Soldier's Medal, the Army's highest honor for bravery not involving direct conflict with the enemy. The official statement lauded the three “for heroism above and beyond the call of duty while saving the lives of at least 10 Vietnamese civilians during the unlawful massacre of non-combatants by American forces at My Lai.”

It was a stirring vindication for Thompson, who died of cancer six years later at the age of 62, but it shouldn't give us comfort. We still know little about those dozen other My Lais executed in our names. Nor is this strictly a tale of history. On Mar. 18, 2019, U.S. fighter pilots in a highly secretive unit called Task Force 9 dropped two bombs on a crowd of women and children huddled against a riverbank in Syria, killing at least 70. Official reports covered up the strike until the *New York Times* exposed it two-and-a-half years later. It turned out Task Force 9 frequently evaded “rules of operation,” which barred air strikes on civilian targets, by falsely claiming that they'd acted in “self-defense.” On Aug. 29, 2021, a U.S. drone strike killed 10 civilians, including seven children, in Afghanistan. It took five months, not 30 years, for the Pentagon to admit the error, but until then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff praised the operation as a “righteous strike” against ISIS terrorists. Even after the admission, an apology, and a cash payment to relatives, the Pentagon spokesman said the mistake was due to “a breakdown in process...not the result of negligence, not the result of misconduct, not the result of poor leadership.”

These weren't My Lais, but the similarities are clear. Both incidents took place in the heat of desperate battle. Task Force 9 was given a license to kill at the peak of the war to crush the ISIS Caliphate. The Afghan attack, the final U.S. drone strike in America's 20-year war, occurred during the mayhem of evacuation; three days earlier, an ISIS suicide bombing at the airport had killed almost 200 people, including 13 U.S. troops, and commanders were eager to find and kill more terrorists before they struck again.

War is a series of desperate acts. The desperation builds as the chaos intensifies, and in the type of long wars the United States has been fighting the last 60 years—insurgency wars, where the enemy “moves among the people like a fish in water”—the chaos is constant. Laws of warfare—the Geneva Conventions, the Nuremberg Principles, the Uniform Code of Military Justice—were written to protect civilians caught in the crossfire and to allow, even to command, soldiers to disobey unlawful orders. Hugh Thompson’s disobedience and armed enforcement of these laws is a stirring moral tale. But it is a tragedy, a source of lingering shame, that his act was so rare.

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