

## HUGH THOMPSON

---



On the morning of March 16, 1968, the U.S. Army began a simple mission, based on intelligence reports that had labeled the village of My Lai as a place swarming with Viet Cong. The crew in one of the helicopters flying above realized that there was no enemy fire and that some sort of atrocity was happening. Chief Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson was in command of that one helicopter.

Hugh Thompson is an ordinary man known for an extraordinary act of courage. He was born in Atlanta, Georgia on April 15, 1943. His father, Hugh Thompson, Sr., served in both the Army and the Navy in World War II and was in the Naval Reserves for more than 30 years. After going to high school in Stone Mountain, Georgia, young Hugh joined the Navy in 1961 and was a heavy equipment operator with the Seabees. In 1964, Hugh Thompson got out of the Navy and became a funeral director in Stone Mountain. In 1966, he joined the Army, and by 1967, he was done with flight school and off to Vietnam. After his Vietnam service, Thompson moved to Fort Rucker, Alabama to become an instructor pilot and later got his direct commission. His other military assignments included: Fort Jackson, South Carolina; Korea; Fort Ord, California; Fort Hood, Texas; and points in Hawaii. Hugh Thompson retired from the military in 1983. In 2005, he retired as a veteran's assistance counselor supervisor for the Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs.

After a long letter-writing campaign begun by Professor David Egan of Clemson University, who thought Hugh Thompson was a true American hero who had yet to get the recognition he deserved, Hugh Thompson was awarded the Soldier's Medal in Washington, D.C. on March 6, 1998. This ceremony was days before Hugh Thompson and fellow crewman Larry Colburn were scheduled to return to Vietnam to visit My Lai and some of the people they had saved, 30 years after that dark day in American history.

# MORAL COURAGE IN COMBAT: THE MY LAI STORY

---

Welcome and Introduction, Dr. Albert C. Pierce, Director,  
Center for the Study of Professional Military Ethics

•

Videotape Presentation

•

Lecture by Hugh Thompson

•

Questions and Answers

*This evening was supported through  
the generosity of William C. Stutt, USNA Class of 1949.*

*This is an edited, abridged version of the original lecture transcript.*

# WELCOME

---

## ***Dr. Pierce***

Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of Admiral Rempt, the Superintendent, and all of us at the Center for the Study of Professional Military Ethics, I want to welcome you to the fall 2003 William C. Stutt Ethics Lecture. This lecture is part of a larger series which we at the Ethics Center began in the spring of 1999. Last year, a generous gift from Bill Stutt, Naval Academy Class of 1949, endowed this fall lecture so that we can do one every fall with the support of Bill and Caroline Stutt. While these lectures are open to the whole Naval Academy community, our primary audience is the midshipmen enrolled in NE-203, and I'm delighted to see them here this evening.

Every third class midshipman at the Naval Academy learns about My Lai while taking NE-203, so it's especially appropriate that we have as our speaker tonight Hugh C. Thompson, Jr., one of the only three heroes that day at My Lai. The theme of their heroic actions was captured nicely long before that day in the words of General Douglas MacArthur. "The soldier, be he friend or foe, is charged with the protection of the weak and unarmed. It is the very essence and reason of his being." It is, MacArthur said, a "sacred trust."

To set the stage for Hugh Thompson's remarks this evening, we're going to show a short video segment from *60 Minutes*. Then Hugh Thompson himself will take the podium immediately after the video. He'll talk for 25 or 30 minutes, and then we'll open up the floor to questions.

Because he will come on stage directly after the video, I'm going to say a few words about him now, although you have a fuller biography in your program.

There are many ways to describe Hugh Thompson—a proud son of Stone Mountain, Georgia; a soldier; an extraordinary human being; an ordinary human being who behaved with extraordinary moral and physical courage on the morning of March 16th, 1968. But I think there is no better way to describe Hugh Thompson

than the words of the citation accompanying the Soldier's Medal, which he was awarded almost 30 years after My Lai. I will read you that citation. Soldier's Medal, Hugh C. Thompson, Jr., then Warrant Officer One, United States Army:

For heroism above and beyond the call of duty on 16 March 1968, while saving the lives of at least 10 Vietnamese civilians during the unlawful massacre of noncombatants by American forces at My Lai, Quang Ngai Province, South Vietnam. Warrant Officer Thompson landed his helicopter in the line of fire between fleeing Vietnamese civilians and pursuing American ground troops to prevent their murder. He then personally confronted the leader of the American ground troops and was prepared to open fire on those American troops should they fire upon the civilians. Warrant Officer Thompson, at the risk of his own personal safety, went forward of the American lines and coaxed the Vietnamese civilians out of the bunker to enable their evacuation. Leaving the area after requesting and overseeing the civilians' air evacuation, his crew spotted movement in a ditch filled with bodies south of My Lai Four. Warrant Officer Thompson again landed his helicopter and covered his crew as they retrieved a wounded child from the pile of bodies. He then flew the child to the safety of a hospital at Quang Ngai. Warrant Officer Thompson's relayed radio reports of the massacre and subsequent report to his section leader and commander resulted in an order for the cease fire at My Lai and an end to the killing of innocent civilians. Warrant Officer Thompson's Heroism exemplifies the highest standards of personal courage and ethical conduct, reflecting distinct credit on him, and the United States Army.

Please roll the videotape.

## VIDEOTAPE PRESENTATION

---

### **Segment from *60 Minutes***

#### ***Mike Wallace***

Over the past 30 years, we've reported several stories on one of the most shameful events in American military history. Tonight, we add another chapter about the massacre by American troops of 504 civilians, most of them women, old men, and children. It happened in Vietnam in 1968 in a tiny hamlet called My Lai, and the carnage would have been even worse had it not been for the valor of three men on an American helicopter who put their own lives at risk, confronted their fellow American soldiers, and stopped the killing. We have now learned that, for three decades, these men were treated not as heroes but as traitors. We begin tonight with a story they told us last year.

To try to understand what happened at My Lai, we asked Hugh Thompson, the man on the right—he was the pilot of the chopper, and Larry Colburn, the gunner, to go back with us to Vietnam. The third member of the crew, Glenn Andreotta, was killed in action in Vietnam just three weeks after the My Lai massacre. They told us about that day 30 years ago, flying in their chopper, low over My Lai, trying to draw enemy fire and to protect the American GIs on the ground. What they saw from the air they said sickened them, shamed them.

Young, inexperienced troops who had been told that My Lai was an enemy stronghold were rounding up civilians, not taking prisoners. They burned down huts with their Zippo lighters, and then their leaders ordered them to line up the terrified villagers—gooks or dinks or slopes they were called—and shoot them down in cold blood. The killing went on for four hours.

Later, the Army tried to cover up the fact that the victims, all of them, were unarmed women, old men, children. Even more would have been murdered if Thompson and Colburn had not intervened, landing their helicopter near a rice paddy to rescue some of the villagers.

***Mr. Thompson***

One hundred seventy people were marched down in there, women, old men, babies. GIs stood up on the side with their weapons on full automatic and machine gun fire.

***Mr. Colburn***

There were no weapons captured. There were no draft-age males killed. They were civilians.

***Mike Wallace***

And then, as the chopper hovered, Glenn Andreotta saw a young child still alive in the ditch.

***Mr. Colburn***

Glenn without hesitation went into the ditch and waded over to the child, who was still—

***Mike Wallace***

Ditch full of bodies?

***Mr. Colburn***

Yes, sir.

***Mr. Thompson***

Oh, it was full, sir.

***Mike Wallace***

Full of blood?

***Mr. Colburn***

Yes, sir. Some of the people were still—they were dying. They weren't all dead, and Glenn got to the child and picked him up and—

***Mike Wallace***

It was a boy?

***Mr. Colburn***

I think it was a little boy, yes.

***Mr. Thompson***

I remember thinking that I had a son, you know, that same age.

***Mike Wallace***

As Thompson was recalling the horrors of that day, an elderly woman walked toward us. She said that she had been dumped in a ditch back in 1968 but had survived, shielded by the bodies of the dead and dying.

***Mr. Thompson***

Sorry we couldn't help you that day. Thank you very much.

***Woman***

Thank you very much.

***Mr. Thompson***

Yes, ma'am.

***Mike Wallace***

Why, she wanted to know, were so many villagers killed that day, and why was Thompson different from the rest of the Americans?

***Mr. Thompson***

I saved the people because I wasn't taught to murder and kill. I can't answer for the people who took part in it. I apologize for the ones who did, and I just wish we could have helped more people that day.

***Mike Wallace***

In fact, they did help more people. Thompson and Colburn found 10 villagers cowering in a bunker. They radioed for a couple of choppers, which airlifted all of them to safety.

And we managed to find two of the women they had saved. Mrs. Nhung, who is 73 now, was 43 when she was rescued. Mrs. Nhanh was only six.

***Mr. Thompson***

You were very small then. You were at the entrance. This is Larry. This is Larry. He was with me that day.

***Interpreter***

Thank you very much once again for your great help.

***Mike Wallace***

Didn't you take your life in your hands, Hugh, when you got out and told the American soldiers who had been killing that they better quit and let these people get out of the bunker? If Hugh won't answer that, Larry, didn't he?

***Mr. Colburn***

Yes, sir, he did, and he didn't even take a weapon with him. He had a sidearm. He didn't even have it drawn. He just placed himself in—

***Mike Wallace***

In harm's path.

***Mr. Colburn***

And I was thinking that at that point anything could have happened, and we watched Mr. Thompson go to the bunker and bring the people out.

***Mr. Thompson***

You know, I know the numbers that didn't make it, and it was meaningless for the people that were taking part. There was no value whatsoever on life.

***Mike Wallace***

One of the men doing the shooting that day was Private Paul Meadlo. I talked with him back in 1969.

***Mr. Meadlo in 1969***

Well, I might have killed about 10, 15 of them.

***Mike Wallace in 1969***

You're married?

***Mr. Meadlo in 1969***

Right.

***Mike Wallace in 1969***

Children?

***Mr. Meadlo in 1969***

Two.

***Mike Wallace in 1969***

How can a father of two young children shoot babies?

***Mr. Meadlo in 1969***

I don't know. It was just one of them things.

***Mike Wallace in 1969***

Why did you do it?

***Mr. Meadlo in 1969***

Why did I do it? Because I felt like I was ordered to do it.

***Mike Wallace***

One of the men in charge that day was Captain Ernest Medina. I interviewed him too back in 1969.

***Mr. Medina in 1969***

We had lost a lot of good people that had served their country in Vietnam in a mine field, due to sniper fire, due to mines and booby traps. The entire area was heavily infested with mines and booby traps. When infantrymen approach an area, the women and children will place these things out.

***Mike Wallace***

And that, in effect, was his justification for Charlie Company doing what they did.

***Mr. Thompson***

And I suppose he believes the theory if you don't want those mines and booby traps planted, it's okay to kill every child and woman. I just don't feel that way. We have a different opinion on that, obviously.

**Mr. Colburn**

There is a big difference between killing in war and in murder, cold-blooded murder.

**Mr. Thompson**

What do you call it when you march 100 or 200 people down in a ditch and line up on the side with machine guns and start firing into it? Reminds me of another story that happened in World War II, about the Nazis.

**Mike Wallace**

For more than 30 years, those horrible images have haunted Hugh Thompson. Until our trip to Vietnam, though, he was reluctant to talk publicly about My Lai, and it wasn't until after we broadcast the story you've just seen that we discovered why. For now we have learned that the years after the war were almost as much a nightmare for Thompson as the massacre itself.

In 1970, Thompson was called to testify on Capitol Hill where he feels he was treated like a criminal. Mendel Rivers, he was the Chairman of the House Armed Services Commission.

**Mr. Thompson**

Yes, sir.

**Mike Wallace**

And pro-military.

**Mr. Thompson**

Yes, sir. It was not pleasant going before Congress. The war effort at that time couldn't stand any bad press, so they tried to whitewash it as much as they could.

**Mike Wallace**

In fact, according to a new biography of Thompson, *The Forgotten Hero of My Lai*, Chairman Rivers did everything he could to protect the GIs who were responsible for the massacre.

Let me read something to you that Mendel Rivers said after you testified before the Armed Services Committee. "Thompson," he

said, “gave us no information to lead us to believe that anyone committed a massacre at My Lai.” Right?

**Mr. Thompson**

Yes, sir. That’s what I heard he said, and they had everything classified so you couldn’t say—

**Mike Wallace**

What do you mean they had it classified?

**Mr. Thompson**

It was secret hearings.

**Mike Wallace**

So the American public could not know what went on?

**Mr. Thompson**

No, sir, and I sure couldn’t say anything, because I was one scared little guy at that particular time.

**Mike Wallace**

And then Congressman Rivers went after you personally, no?

**Mr. Thompson**

Well, he tried to get me to say that I had, you know, threatened to kill a lieutenant. It was kind of plain that he wanted me to go to jail. He even made that statement in public.

**Mike Wallace**

What did your buddies in the Army think of you?

**Mr. Thompson**

That I was a traitor—they didn’t know the magnitude of My Lai. Some of them would say, “Oh, that stuff happened all the time.” I’d say, “No, it can’t happen all the time.” I don’t think I could live with myself if I thought that was an everyday thing that I was part of.

**Mike Wallace**

But recently, the military establishment, which had given

Thompson the cold shoulder for 30 years, has been inviting him to give lectures on military ethics. At the U.S. Marine Base in Quantico, Virginia, he told a stunned audience of Marine officers some grisly details about the My Lai massacre.

***Mr. Thompson in lecture***

A lot of the girls didn't scream too much either, because they had already cut their tongues out, and a bayonet can kill two real quick if they're pregnant. Ain't that nasty that they—I personally—I mean, I wish I was a big enough man to say I forgive them, but I swear to God I can't.

***Mike Wallace***

Later, he told these Marine officers what had happened to him as a result of his reporting the day's events to his superiors.

***Mr. Thompson in lecture***

Death threats at three o'clock in the morning, mutilated animals on your doorstep, and I'm sitting here just as confused as hell. What in the world is wrong? What we did was right. What we did had to be done.

***Mike Wallace***

After Hugh Thompson spoke, we were curious to hear reactions from the Marine officers.

***Marine Officer***

I didn't know a lot about the story, and I was devastated when Mr. Hugh spoke. I felt very proud for what he did. Everybody has it in them to be a hero, but the opportunity very rarely comes.

***Marine Officer***

One thing that struck me, sir, was the lack of moral courage in his senior leadership by not respecting the fact that he made the right decision.

***Marine Officer***

It just reinforces what we've been taught, and "never again" is the bottom line. Do our duty, but we owe it to our country and to

the noncombatants and to the Constitution we uphold to never let it happen again.

***Mike Wallace***

How did Hugh Thompson, the traitor, turn into Hugh Thompson, the hero, in the mind of the American military?

***Mr. Thompson***

I don't know. I can't answer that.

***Mike Wallace***

You've been invited to West Point?

***Mr. Thompson***

Yes, sir.

***Mike Wallace***

Annapolis?

***Mr. Thompson***

Yes, sir.

***Mike Wallace***

Now here at Quantico, for the Marines?

***Mr. Thompson***

Yes, sir, Air Force Academy.

***Mike Wallace***

Thirty years after the My Lai massacre, Thompson, Colburn, and Andreotta were finally honored by the Pentagon, awarded the prestigious Soldier's Medal.

***Mr. Thompson***

If I can go somewhere to a group like this or even younger and impress just one person to make the right decision, it will be worth it. It will be worth it.

## LECTURE

---

### *Mr. Thompson*

Thank you all very much. Thank you very much. Big audience. Please, thank you. Thank you again. I'd like to thank Admiral Rempt, Dr. Pierce, Lieutenant Colonel Slyman, and Mr. William Stutt for allowing me here to talk to you all and for making this evening possible.

The video you all just saw brings you up to date on something that happened in our military that was very bad. I won't go into a lot of that. I'll talk for a few minutes, and then we'll have a question-and-answer session, and there is no censorship whatsoever. I'll try to field any and all questions. I talk from the heart. I don't talk from necessarily education or books or anything like that.

I want to talk to you all, tell you my theory of what happened that day. The most important thing that happened or did not happen was a total lack of any positive leadership by our military personnel. Midshipmen, and cadets, if we have any here, don't realize how important positive leadership is in our military forces and also our civilian business in the United States of America. It's the utmost factor that we have to have, and you sitting here, some of you are leaders now, but you midshipmen are going to be our leaders of the future, and we don't need anything like this to ever happen again. We're the United States of America. We ride white horses, wear white hats. We're the good guys. We expect the world really to live up to our standards that we set, so we have to set the utmost highest standards, especially in the military. Leadership is so important, it's just unbelievable. That was one thing that was lacking that day.

Another thing that was very much present was negative peer pressure. There was a lot of that going on. You can't tolerate that as a leader. Positive peer pressure is what we strive for and what we must have. It's like a snowball rolling down a hill. Starts out about this big, and it doesn't take long to get enormous and it's non-stoppable, so as good leaders, you have to be aware of

that and keep the negative peer pressure away from you and out of your command.

Another thing was revenge. This unit had received a briefing the night before, and it was revenge-motivated. You can't start an operation or a daily task with those three negatives: bad leadership, negative peer pressure, and revenge.

This unit had never been in a fire fight. Marine officers and men here will understand that, but a fire fight is when you got the good guys and the bad guys shooting at one another. They had never been in a fire fight. They were new in country. They had received casualties, but they had received most of their casualties by taking shortcuts. Our enemy knew us a whole lot better than we knew them. They knew a new unit would take shortcuts, the easy way out. That's not the way to accomplish a mission. Accomplish it right, it might not be easy at all.

They would go on a patrol or something and walk across the rice paddy dikes, which are high and dry. The rice paddies were kind of dirty—snakes, leeches, human waste. Wasn't pretty, but our enemy knew what a new unit was going to do, so that's where they put the booby traps. That's the kind of casualties this unit had received. The night before, they received a briefing from the commander, who was Captain Ernest Medina, and that briefing was revenge-motivated. He didn't do the right thing and give the briefing and say, "You know, we've lost people because of my stupidity and my bad leadership." It was: "Now is the chance to get even." You don't need revenge. You don't need that revenge.

Prejudice was another thing I think played a part in it, because our training had dehumanized the enemy. They weren't our equals. They were, you know, a lower class than us, so that's not good. Everybody is equal. Nobody is better than you. Nobody is worse than you. We're all human beings. You might outrank somebody, but that doesn't make you any better than him, and I'll tell you when you all graduate from here, every enlisted man and NCO in the military is required to salute you. None of them are required to respect you, and if you don't have the respect of somebody, you're not going to make it long in my military, and all services are my military, I'll tell you.

So those are the things I think to watch for in everyday life. They're all bad things, and they will take you down. Be on the guard for them. You're our future leaders. We have to have the highest standards of leadership. You tell somebody something or tell them to do something, you have to be right. If any good things could come out of what happened that day, it's teaching now and learning and instilling in your minds, your character, to do the right thing. That could be a silver lining to this. I certainly hope so.

Things you have to watch for. You can handle it any way you want to. Hopefully, nobody in this auditorium or anywhere would ever be involved in something like this again. You have to get involved. You can't look the other way. A leader does not look the other way. They get involved to do the right thing. It has something in here. You can call it your heart, your soul, whatever you want to call it. Everybody has a different name. What you're normally being told is the right thing to do. Don't get involved with negative peer pressure and do something. If somebody says, "Hey, why don't we go do this?" And you think: I don't feel right doing that. That should be a big light lit up right there for you to look at. If you don't think it's right, it more than likely is not right, and they're just too chicken to do it on their own. They want to drag somebody down with them when they get caught. So just think. All it is is think. It's a very simple philosophy I try to follow. It's so simple it's weird. It's do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

You're fixing to become members of a very professional organization. It is a very responsible and respectable profession. You're going to be leaders of our military. We can't be let down again. We don't want that. I asked when I was in Norway once, I said, "Who made the United States of America the police of the world?" And this one very intelligent and smart person thought about it, and he says, "We did." I said, "Well, why would you do something like that?" And he said, "Because nobody else would assume the responsibility." We didn't go out here and just say, "Because we're the big boys on the block, we're going to be in charge of everything." That task was actually placed on us by other countries, so we have to set the highest standards. We can't

go pointing fingers at other people for doing bad things if we do the same things. We have to set the example, and how we do that is positive, good leadership.

UCMJ [the Uniformed Code of Military Justice] used to say it's against the law to disobey an order. Because of this, I think it's been changed a little bit and now states it's against the law to obey an unlawful order. So that puts even more responsibility on your backs. We have to have the highest caliber of officers, NCOs, and enlisted people in our service. It's people like you that are going to make the decisions, and you're going to lead our military personnel into combat. Personally, I wish we would never get in another war. A lot of people get hurt in war. You have to do your job ethically, morally, with positive leadership. I could say that word "leadership" or "positive leadership" a hundred times down here tonight. I'm not repeating myself. It's what we need and what we have to have of you. A lot of responsibility is placed on your back.

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

---

### ***Mr. Thompson***

I'd like to have a question-and-answer session, and I'd appreciate if you helped me out here. I'm going to ask you to speak up. I have an interpreter here. I cannot hear. I flew helicopters all my life, so I'm very hard of hearing, and they haven't given me my hearing aids yet. I've come to realize after my last talk that, yes, I probably need them now.

(Laughter.)

### ***Question***

In your military experience, would you ever think that killing an unarmed combatant would seem like the right thing to do?

### ***Mr. Thompson***

The question, as I understand it, was did I ever see in my military career a time when it's okay to kill an unarmed combatant. It would probably be different between an unarmed combatant and an unarmed noncombatant. You have to eliminate the threat. If this person forces a threat upon you or your crew, yeah, I guess you got to take care of them. I'll clarify that a little bit better. If there is a tree line over here and three or four people standing there, and one of them has got a weapon pointing at me, I can live with myself if I take them all out, because I'm not that good a shot probably.

We do have casualties of war. Civilians get killed in war. This was not a few stray rounds killing people. Our United States has not said it was not an incident. It was a massacre, and civilians were murdered, not killed. I mean, that is on the Soldier's Medal that I received or the direct words. Some lieutenant colonel sent me a copy for me to proofread and make sure of the accuracy of it, and I called him back and said, "It's Hugh Thompson; it's not High Thompson. It was March the 16th, 1968, not 1967." Outside of that, Colonel, you don't sugarcoat your words." I mean, this never got a chance. It did pass. I say it wasn't accidental. There was nothing accidental about this. These were not soldiers. They were not military people. They were

hoodlums, renegades disguised as soldiers, and that's what hurt me the most that day, because my job was to save their life, and I'm overlooking, seeing what's going on. It did not make me feel good, but I bore part of the responsibility, and in fact, I was probably responsible for getting some of them [Vietnamese civilians] killed, because when I first started trying to be a nice guy, I'd bring attention to a wounded person, and the next thing I know, that person is dead. If I'd have kept my mouth shut, they might have missed them. They were wounded. They could have lived. So I took a lot of guilt-trip feeling there, because these were my people, my fellow soldiers, my fellow Americans. My job was to save their life that day, the Americans. That's what I was there for. My job was to draw fire from the enemy and let the infantry know where they were to protect them. I didn't like my job at all that day when I was seeing what was going on. I really didn't.

It depends on the threat. If there is a threat, as a military person, you're obligated to take the threat out. If there is no threat, you ain't got to hurt anybody. If Hitler walks out of his bunker with his hands raised, surrendering to you, he is no longer your enemy. He is no longer your threat. He is a prisoner of war and should be treated as such.

### ***Question***

What advice could you give me, as a soon-to-be officer, about how to be ready for a moment like you faced, so that I'll act against the peer pressure and the opinions of the people around me to do what's right?

### ***Mr. Thompson***

I would think the best way to combat it is to be aware it can happen and go with your first instinct right here in your heart. Your decision there is more than likely going to be right. Willing to admit that somebody does not have the moral courage or ethical stamina that you have would probably help too. You have to take a positive action. Don't sit back.

We put, I think, 190 troops on the ground that day. Only 13 to 18 took part in it, in the massacre. Others, the majority of them,

just said, “I don’t want to go over there,” and they would go this side. It was like a tornado going through a town. You could see right where the renegades had gone, because it was total destruction, and I can’t really [communicate] what went on that day, the pain, the suffering that was inflicted on people.

The lucky ones that day took a round through the head, and it was over with. There was a lot of evil, bad stuff done to people on the ground. Five hundred and four people were murdered. No weapons were captured. I forget, I think it was 179 under the age of two or something like that. Ladies and gentlemen, this is not your enemy, and I’m not so naive, because I’ve heard people that didn’t know the facts, didn’t know what happened or refused to believe it say, “Well, don’t you know they’d take a hand grenade and strap it to a little kid and send it into a group of soldiers?” Yeah, I’ve heard that. I haven’t seen it, but I don’t deny that it happened. But my answer to stop something like that from happening is not to kill every three-year-old in the country. There has got to be a better way.

Just be on the lookout and watch out for it. Each person will handle themselves differently. I knew it would never happen here. You’re sitting taking a test next week or a quiz or whatever, and you see somebody over there sitting next to you [cheating], it’s up to you to stop that, because that person is not helping themselves, and he is not helping you, and he is not helping the Academy. He’s not helping anybody. How you handle it is up to you.

Believe me, I never had any intention or never wanted to turn my weapons on Americans, but I was forced into it. I was put in a corner, and I just had to react. I thank God that everybody held their cool right then; nobody started shooting. I really do.

### ***Question***

How long did it take you to make your decision? What went through your head when you first saw what was going on down there, and how did you decide to land the helicopter?

### ***Mr. Thompson***

I did not make a quick decision. We got there the same time the infantry got there. Just as soon as we put them on the ground, I

came off a holding position right over their heads, got out in front of them, because you don't put an infantry unit right up next to the village, because there's a lot of trees and a lot of places the enemy can be. So my job was to get up there real fast, try to get shot at, and let the infantry know where they were. Don't ever think I volunteered—I didn't.

At some time, I would get low on gas, and I would have to go back to our station area and rearm and refuel. That day, there was nothing going on, and when I would go back there, we would bring another team, another scout, and two more gunships out there to protect them. There was nothing going on, so we did not replace my team. I just went back. I was gone about 30, 45 minutes, came back on station. I didn't leave until the infantry got into the village, and nothing was going on. "Hey, guys, I'm going to go get some gas. I'll be back in a little bit." They elected not to bring in a replacement team.

When I came back, I started really seeing the aftermath of something going wrong. A large number of bodies laid around, most of them very young, and I started thinking, "What in the heck went on here? What happened here?" You know, I'm listening to the radio the whole time. They hadn't called in a whole bunch of medevacs, like all heck had broken loose when I was gone. They didn't call for any more people. So I wondered what happened here, and I wanted to run it through my mind, and I said, "Well, these people that we're seeing now ran out of their houses when the artillery was coming in, because the place was prepped with artillery before we put our ground troops in, and they got excited and ran out in the open."

Wait a minute. I know that every house in that village has a bomb shelter in it. Are you going to run out in the open when you're in a bomb shelter? I don't think so. So I said, "Well, that didn't happen." Then I said, "Maybe they took the dead and put them in this big ditch as a mass burial, you know, a mass grave." And then you look closer at the ditch, and you see people are still alive. We don't put the living with the dead to bury them. And this little thing in the back of my head said, "They marched these people down there and shot them. No, no, let's think of something else." I did not want to admit it. I went in denial, I

guess you could say. I was trying to justify this because these are my fellow Americans down here. It looks like they have done something real bad, and I'm part of them.

I saw one girl wounded, flailing around, waving back and forth. I said, "Oh, we got to get some help for this one." Got on the radio. Called the ground troops. Said, "I got a wounded civilian here. Can you all help her out?" I'm sitting at a hover about 10 foot in the air. I backed off when the Americans started coming up there so as not to blow them away with my rotor wash, and this guy walked up to her, nudged her, stepped back—Pow!—put his M-16 on automatic. She's history, and I'm sitting there. My God, he just killed her.

That's when I started getting a little angry, and I said, "Radio communication does not work. This is not what I intended to do." So I go back over, and I set [my helicopter] down, call a lieutenant and NCO over, said, "Hey. There's some civilians over in this ditch. Can you help them out?" I was told, "I can help them out of their misery," and I got a little carried away then, raised my voice, and said some things that I won't say here tonight. But I said, "Quit joking around. Help them out." "Okay, Chief, we'll take care of it." I said okay. Verbally, one on one, I got the point across now.

Leaned back in the aircraft. We started taking off, and as we broke over the ditch, Glenn Andreotta was my crew chief on my left, heard machine gun fire, and anytime you hear machine gun fire, you're going to go like that, because you think you're fixing to get hurt, and Glenn came over the intercom and said, "My God, he's firing into the ditch." That did it for me. I would say always plan your operations and think them completely through. Sometimes you do not have a chance to do that, because I look back on it now and know there is no way I had thought this through, because I saw a bunker right after then that had three faces sticking out of it. They didn't look like a threat to me. One of them was about this tall, holding onto this lady's leg, and the lady, which was the mother I assumed, and then an old man, real old man standing behind her, and I looked over here, and I could see the infantry coming, look at the bunker, and see them. I said, "They got about 15 seconds to live. Well, it ain't going to happen

again. I'm already responsible for killing people. If I'd have kept my mouth shut, they might have missed them."

So we landed. I told my crew chief and gunner, "You all cover me. If those people open up, you open up." I got out, walked over to the lieutenant, screaming, they say, at him, hollering—told him I had some civilians up here. Could he get them out of the bunker? He told me I can get them out with a hand grenade. I said some things to a senior officer I shouldn't have said then. Told him to hold his people right there. I said I thought I could do better, and I've already told my people to kill you if you open up. Walked away from him. Turned my back. Walked over there. Motioned for them to come out. They were very hesitant on coming out. They finally started coming out. I guess they wanted to take their chance with me, because I didn't have my weapon out. Didn't even have a weapon. Well, I had a weapon on, but I didn't have it out. They started coming out. When they started coming out, reality hit me: What are you going to do now, big boy? Because there wasn't three. There was about 10 or 11, and oh, my God, I got a problem.

So I walked back over to the aircraft. They stayed behind me, and I got on the radio to call my gunship. Gunships are there for one reason. They're there to kill. This is probably the first operation where a gunship had performed a medevac. So I called my low gun and said, "I got a little problem down here." "What do you want me to do?" "I'd like for you to land and get these people out of this area." He said, "Okay, sure thing. No problem."

So I received support from my people. There was enough of them there he had to make two trips—got them out. "Where do you want me to take them?" "Get them out of here." Okay, so we stayed there for probably 10 minutes, just in a kind of a standoff, nobody shooting. He came back and got the rest of them, loaded them up. He took off. So I said, "Well, let's make one pass over the ditch again."

Glenn Andreotta—if there was a hero, I don't like that word, but if there was a hero at My Lai—it was Glenn Andreotta, because he saw movement in that ditch, and he fixed in on this one little

kid and went down into that ditch. I would not want to go in that ditch. It's not pretty. It was very bad. I can imagine what was going through his mind down there, because there was more than one still alive—people grabbing hold of his pants, wanting help. "I can't help you. You're too bad [off]." He found this one kid and brought the kid back up and handed it to Larry, and we laid it across Larry and my lap and took him out of there. I remember thinking Glenn Andreotta put himself where nobody in their right mind would want to be, and he was driven by something. I haven't got the aircraft on the ground real stable. He bolted out of that aircraft into this ditch. Now he was a hero. Glenn Andreotta gave his life for his country about three weeks later. That's the kind of guy he was, and he was a hero that day.

We took the kid over to a hospital, an orphanage. In Vietnam, everywhere where there was a hospital, there was an orphanage right next door. A nun came out. I handed her the kid, and on that flight there, I thought—I looked down at the kid, and I had a kid at home about the same size. My God, this could be my son, and gave him to the nun. I said, "I don't know what you're going to do with him, but I don't think he's got any family left."

That was the end of the operation. Went back to our base camp and was very angry, upset, hollering, screaming. I didn't do that. I wasn't that kind of guy. You know, I call a lieutenant "sir." I should have because they outranked me. But I was—they simmered me down. I reported to my commander, and I said, "I'm not going to do this. You cannot make me fly. I can rip these wings off. I won't do this." They settled me down, and then we reported on up the chain of command, and that was it, but it stopped. That operation was supposed to go on for four days. No more briefings. Some people have said they were going to hit another village that afternoon, two the next day, two the next day. Some people have said that it could have been up to 20,000 people that didn't die, because the operation was called off after four hours.

### ***Question***

It took several months for anyone to acknowledge that anything had happened at My Lai. How did you feel during this time?

### ***Mr. Thompson***

It wasn't a few months. It happened on March the 16th, 1968. I don't think it hit the United States publicly—it's very important that I say "publicly"—until December of '69. I had blocked this out of my mind. I reported it that day. I reported it within two days to the brigade commander. He seemed interested. He was taking notes, I remember that.

Our unit and the infantry unit were stationed about 60 to 80 miles apart. In Vietnam, 60 to 80 miles is a lifetime, if not three or four. You just don't get in your car over there. It's not like driving into D.C. from here. I reported it to him. I knew in my mind, being a W-1 and with all my vast military training, that it was not an O-6's [colonel's] job, duty, nor requirement to come report to a little W-1 about what had been done, so I think I thought that something had been done. He didn't need me there to court-martial these renegades.

So you just start blocking it out of your mind. I wasn't thinking about it. I do not ever recall anybody telling me not to talk about it, but it just kind of died out and went away, and when it actually broke, I said, "Oh, my gosh." I had nothing to do with breaking the story in the States. A person that had been in that unit but had gotten transferred out when he got into country started running into some of his fellow soldiers, and they said, "Man, you won't believe what we did at Pinkville [the nickname soldiers gave to My Lai]." "Oh, yeah, what did you do at Pinkville?" "We killed them all." He said, "What? What are you talking about?" "We murdered them all—kids, women, cows, everything. We murdered them all." He said, "Oh, no. This is the beer talking." Well, he ran into somebody else, and they told him the same story. GIs normally can't get a story accurate if two people tell it unless it is true. I tell you, I'll mess up somewhere. Why do you think the police always take two people in the car, one in the front, one in the back?

So he couldn't believe it. He started doing some investigation and said, "Oh, I think this might have happened." He had gotten out of the service by now, and he happened to be a journalist. So he wrote a letter. Well, he wrote one letter and addressed it to about 17 different people. The first address was

1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, and it worked its way down. Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Secretary of the Army, I think Secretary of the Navy, select congressmen and senators.

The photographer that was on the ground that day had two cameras. One of them was his personal camera, which had glossy color pictures. The military camera had black and whites. Well, about the same time that Rod Ridenhour wrote the letters, he [the photographer] decided to sell the pictures to *Life* magazine. All these influential people get this letter, and they're looking at these pictures. They said, "Oh, we might have a problem here." That's when the investigation started. It was about 18 months.

### ***Question***

Do you attribute your ability to see through the moral fog that day, better than those who made the massacre at My Lai happen, to any prior military training or experience?

### ***Mr. Thompson***

No, I don't believe it was any military training, because I had been through the training that everybody else had been. We had a 50-minute class of instruction on the Geneva Convention, a 50-minute class of instruction on the Code of Conduct, and a 50-minute class of instruction on the rules of engagement. I will admit in my personal opinion they were not taught very sincerely, but you had to have those tickets stamped before you could go to war. So I don't think it was anything there.

I was brought up in the country. My mother and father would probably be called abusive now by today's standards. They did believe in corporal punishment. They didn't know what the word "double jeopardy" meant. If I do something wrong, my mother would get me. When my father got home from work, she would tell him, and I'd get it again. But they always taught me to help the underdog. Don't be a bully and live by the golden rule. That golden rule says so much, and it's so simple and so basic. You know, I can't say it was a leadership 405 or whatever. I just think it was my parents, and they taught me right from wrong.

### **Question**

You said you felt a lot of negative peer pressure. While you were acting that day, did you feel any sense of regret?

### **Mr. Thompson**

No, I never felt any sense of regret. When I confronted the lieutenant and trained the weapons on him, I do remember thinking that you're going to spend the rest of your life at Leavenworth, and to me, I guess it was worth it, because I went ahead and did it. It wasn't something I planned to do. It was something I had to do. Believe me, I had tried to help. I tried talking. You know, I tried everything. I felt like a damn animal in a cage, being pressed further in the corner. It was time something had to be done.

After it broke in the United States, I was not a good guy. I was sure not being invited to Annapolis or West Point or any other university that I've been to since, because I was a traitor. I was a communist. I was a sympathizer. I was neither one of those, I didn't think. I was very confused about why I was being treated this way, because how wrong can it be helping a fellow human? And I'm no pacifist either. You know, I'm not one of these peacenik guys. So I was just very confused, and that went on for about 30 years.

I became invisible. When it first broke, people thought everybody was picking on Lieutenant Calley. Believe me, Lieutenant Calley was very guilty. There is no way to get around it. But we, being Americans, we cheer for the underdog, so that's what people were thinking. They thought the establishment was picking on this little guy. The turmoil the United States was in during this time was quite significant. We had demonstrations on every campus in the United States except about three I can think of, and I guarantee they were right outside your gate, because we had been there too long. We were [the demonstrators said] nothing but a bunch of baby killers, you know, and it was just a bad time for America. And Congress came after me real hard. A very senior congressman made a public statement that if anybody goes to jail in this My Lai stuff, it will be the helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson.

I could walk in the Officer's Club after work. Once my name got out, the green side of the Army protected me. They kept my name out of it. The civilian side of the Army and Congress was the one that dropped the dime on me. I went by a nickname then, and I was even asked a couple of times when the name first came out: "Hey, Buck, you know who that Thompson guy is? He any kin to you?" "Oh, no. I don't know him. Uh-uh." I do not like death threats. I don't like mutilated animals on my porch in the morning, so I just kind of went away, went invisible. I didn't talk to anybody about it. After the court-martials, it all died away and went away.

The Army had Lieutenant General William R. Peers conduct the investigation. He conducted a very thorough investigation. Congress did not like his investigation at all, because he pulled no punches, and he recommended court-martial for I think 34 people, not necessarily for the murder but for the cover-up. Really the cover-up phase was probably as bad as the massacre itself, because he recommended court-martial for some very high-ranking individuals. He even recommended court-martial charges against my commander. I guess when a W-1 reports to his platoon leader, his operations officer, his commander, and the brigade commander, that's as far as a W-1 has got to go. My commander holds no ill feelings towards me. I see him all the time, but General Peers went after him. They did not court-martial him, but General Peers conducted a very thorough investigation.

Does that answer your question? Okay, thank you.

### ***Midshipman First Class Eric Ranger***

On behalf of the Naval Academy family, I would like to present you with this gift as a token of our appreciation for you sharing your words of wisdom and experiences here this evening.

(Applause.)

### ***Mr. Thompson***

Thank you very much. Thank you all. Thank you all very much. Please be seated. Thank you all very much.