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To friends and neighbors, Hugh Thompson was just an ordinary guy with a quiet life. But there was one man who wanted the world to know what the former soldier had done.

Forgotten HERO *of My Lai*

By TRENT ANGERS
From the book

When Hugh Thompson got home from his job at the Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs one fall day in 1994, he found a package waiting in his mailbox. In it were copies of dozens of letters to government officials and Army brass, all requesting that Thompson receive a medal for bravery.

The letters were the work of a Clemson University professor named David Egan, who had undertaken a three-year letter-writing campaign on Thompson's behalf. Egan had seen a 1989 television documentary that told of Hugh Thompson's heroism at My Lai on March 16, 1968.

Hugh Thompson was flattered, but not optimistic. The My Lai massacre was perhaps the most shameful chapter of the Vietnam War. He felt certain that the Army would not want to rekindle public awareness of the incident.

Day of Shame

On that long-ago day, Warrant Officer 1 Thompson had cranked up his scout helicopter before dawn and lifted off from the base at Chu Lai. On board with him were his gunner, Larry Colburn, and his crew chief, Glenn Andreotta.

Thompson and his crew were assigned to fly to the village of Son My, in central Vietnam's Quang Ngai Province, where they would provide aerial combat support for a ground assault on the village led by Charlie Company.

Career Man – Hugh Thompson served in both the Navy and the Army.

The platoon leaders of the company had told their men that the village was a well-known Viet Cong stronghold, and all villagers were to be considered Viet Cong or Viet Cong sympathizers. My Lai, one of four tiny hamlets that made up the village of Son My, would be the starting point of the attack.

As Thompson and his crew flew on the outskirts of My Lai, artillery fire began raining down on the western part of the village. Women rounded up their children and fled into homemade bunkers under their homes. Workers in the fields ran for cover. Water buffalo, cows, pigs and chickens scattered in all directions.

Troop-carrying helicopters came in and landed, and U.S. soldiers scurried out and took cover, expecting to be fired upon by Viet Cong. No enemy fire came.

After about an hour of reconnaissance activity, Thompson flew back to the base to refuel and then returned to My Lai. He and his crew spotted dozens of bodies – women, children, elderly people – lying in an irrigation ditch. The sight stunned them.

Thompson wondered if these people had been killed by U.S. troops, but he quickly dismissed the thought. This sort of war crime might have been committed by Nazis, but surely not by his fellow American soldiers.

There had to be another explanation. Unsure what was happening, he radioed the gunship behind him: "It looks like there's an awful lot of unnecessary killing going on. Something's not right about this."

Flying on, they noticed a wounded woman. Seeing no weapon near her, Thompson figured she had to be a civilian. He had Glenn Andreotta drop a smoke canister near her to enable ground troops to find her and render first aid. He radioed a request for medical assistance to one of the large Huey gunships.

Thompson hovered near the wounded young woman as a group of three or four soldiers, led by Charlie Company commander Capt. Ernest Medina came toward her. When Captain Medina approached her, she gestured to him. He shot and killed her.

The three in the helicopter shouted out in unison. "She wasn't a threat to anybody," Thompson yelled, infuriated and overwhelmed with guilt. Without meaning to, he had marked the woman for death. He had led the soldiers right to her.

Later Andreotta pointed out a group of seven or eight GIs heading toward a bunker where they could see three Vietnamese hiding. By now it was clear what was happening on the ground. Thompson made up his mind. "We're going in," he announced.

"We're with you," said Colburn. "Let's go."

Thompson radioed his buddies on the low gunship for backup help. As he landed and got out of the chopper, he took no weapon except his sidearm, which remained in its

holster. Flipping up his visor, Thompson quickly strode to the officer at the head of the squad, Lt. Stephen Brooks, and asked him for help getting the villagers out of the bunker.

"The only way to get them out is with a hand grenade," Brooks answered. Enraged, Thompson told Brooks to keep his men where they were.

Brooks didn't know the lower-ranking man, but the determined look in Thompson's eyes – as well as Colburn's finger on the M-60 – must have persuaded him to comply. He told his troops to stay put.

"I want you to evacuate these people," Thompson pleaded. "If I leave them here they're gonna be killed."

Thompson approached the opening of the earthen, brush-covered bunker, squatted down and held his hand out to a woman. "Come with me," he said. "No one's going to hurt you. Anyone else in there?"

An old man, who was all skin and bones, and another woman came crawling out, accompanied by a small child. Then more people followed, until Thompson found he had about ten frightened souls on his hands.

He radioed the gunship that was circling overhead. "I need some help down here," Thompson pleaded. "I want you to evacuate these people. If I leave them here they're gonna be killed." This was an extraordinary request. A Huey gunship just did not land in enemy territory. But the gunship crew knew that Thompson needed help, and they were quick to respond.

The Huey was on the ground in minutes. In a short while the terrified villagers had been flown to safety, to an open field several miles away.

Thompson and his crew turned to head back to the base. But Andreotta suddenly shouted, "Something's moving down there. Can you swing back around?"

The helicopter looped around and set down, and Andreotta jumped out and ran to the irrigation ditch. He moved one of the bodies aside and there, lying under it, was a small boy, covered in blood and obviously in a state of shock.

Colburn came over to help him, and together they brought the boy back to the helicopter. His eyes were fixed and dilated. When Thompson saw the child's helpless body, it reminded him of his own little boy back at home, and tears stung his eyes.

The helicopter crew flew the boy to the hospital in Quang Ngai City, and Thompson handed him to a nun, who came out to meet them. "Sister, I don't know what you're going to do with him," he told the woman. "But I don't believe he has any family left."

When they arrived back at base, Thompson stormed up to his platoon leader. "These are only sewn on with thread," he shouted, pointing to the emblem on his fatigues. "I'll rip them off and never fly again, because I will not take part in s--- like this!"

The next man to get an earful was Thompson's commanding officer. Soon word of Thompson's protests reached Lt. Col. Frank Barker, the head of the task force. By that time more than 500 civilians had been killed. But Thompson's actions that day led to a cease-fire order and prevented further killing in My Lai.

That night a warm spring breeze blew through the base, and Thompson could hear the crackling of palm branches as they swayed in the wind. Drifting in and out of sleep until nearly dawn, listening to the sounds of artillery in the distance, he mourned and prayed for the people of My Lai.

Hero or Pariah?

Since that day Thompson had lived with a sense of loneliness and isolation. Soon after he returned from Vietnam, he and his wife had divorced. He had few friends left; he'd lost contact with Larry Colburn after the war, and Glenn Andreotta had been killed in combat just weeks after the My Lai incident.

Fellow soldiers seemed uncomfortable around him, and some viewed him as the guy who "ratted out" Charlie Company – the pilot who threatened his own kind in order to save foreigners. He even got insulting letters and calls from strangers who read about his appearance before an Army investigative committee. His testimony helped identify many of those who would later be charged with murder and other crimes, including Capt. Ernest Medina, who was acquitted, and Lt. William Calley, the only one who was convicted.

In November 1983 Thompson retired from military service and moved to Broussard, La., where he settled into a quiet, anonymous life. Then a 1989 documentary on My Lai by British filmmaker Michael Bilton drew the attention of Prof. David Egan.

Honor at Last

On March 6, 1998 – almost 30 years after the My Lai incident – Egan's letter-writing campaign finally paid off. Hugh Thompson was presented with the Soldier's Medal at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

At his side during the ceremony was his old Army buddy Larry Colburn. Thompson had persuaded the Pentagon to award the medal not only to him but also to Colburn and, posthumously, to Glenn Andreotta.

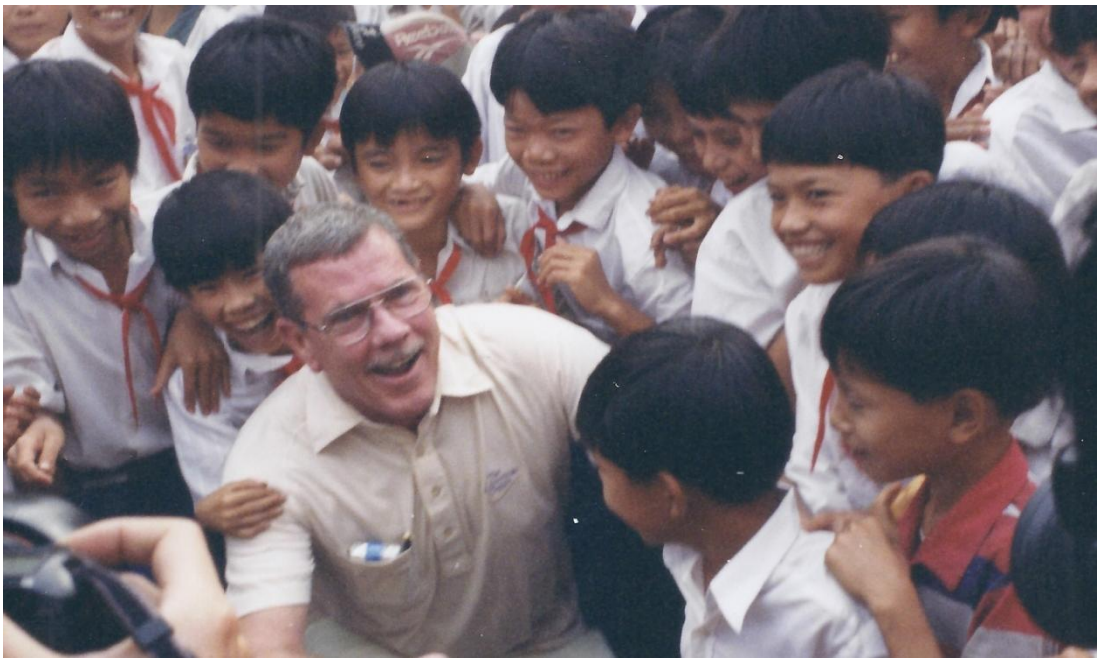
Less than a week after the ceremony, the two veterans left for Vietnam, accompanied by journalist Mike Wallace and a CBS news camera crew. They were returning to My Lai for a ceremony commemorating the 30th anniversary of the massacre.

On Sunday, March 15, Thompson and Colburn met with Pham Thi Nhung, a tiny, frail woman of 76, and Pham Thi Nhanh, 36, whose young daughter clung timidly to her side. They were two of the people the helicopter crew had saved from certain death 30 years before.

As they drank tea outside Nhanh's house and talked about the fateful event that had brought them together, the older woman held Colburn's hand and patted it affectionately.

"Our family is so proud to welcome you here," said Nhanh through an interpreter. "Thanks to your help, I was rescued."

There was a third survivor of the massacre who also wished to speak to Thompson and Colburn: a woman in her early 60s. She had been with others who had been machine-gunned to death on the bank of the irrigation ditch. She was knocked into the ditch unharmed, and managed to survive by remaining still so that the soldiers would think she was dead.



Return to Vietnam – On the 30th anniversary of the massacre, Thompson got a hero's welcome from My Lai grammar school children.

After the formal greetings were over, she asked Thompson why he was so different from the rest of the Americans.

"I wasn't taught to murder," he replied simply. "I can't answer for the people who took part in it. And I apologize for the ones who did."

When Thompson and Colburn returned to the United States after their visit, they found their mailboxes overflowing with expressions of admiration and support. Suddenly everyone wanted to hear their story, to be in their presence.

Both men received honorary doctoral degrees from Connecticut College in the fall of 1998, and that year also traveled to Norway for the Falstad Seminar, a human-rights conference.

Thirty years after My Lai, the extraordinary courage and integrity of the three soldiers had finally been recognized. As one letter to Thompson stated: "The world needs so much more of the likes of you."