

The Forgotten Hero of My Lai: The Hugh Thompson Story

Hugh Clowers Thompson, Jr.



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| Born | April 15, 1943 Atlanta, Georgia, United States |
| Died | January 6, 2006 (aged 62) Pineville, Louisiana, United States |
| Place of burial | Lafayette, Louisiana, United States |
| Allegiance | United States of America United States Navy |
| Service/branch | United States Army |
| Years of service | 1961–1964 (Navy), 1966–1983 (Army) |
| Rank | Warrant Officer, retired as Major US Army |
| Unit | 161st Aviation Company (Assault Helicopter) |
| Awards | Distinguished Flying Cross Soldier's Medal Bronze Star Medal Purple Heart Air Medal |
| Other work | Louisiana Department of Veterans Affairs |

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Hugh Clowers Thompson, Jr. (April 15, 1943 – January 6, 2006) was a United States Army helicopter pilot during the Vietnam War. He is best known for his role in stopping the My Lai Massacre, in which a group of US Army soldiers tortured and killed several hundred unarmed Vietnamese civilians, mutilating their bodies after they had been murdered. Although initially ill-treated in some quarters for their intervention, Thompson and his crew, Glenn Andreotta and Lawrence Colburn, were recognized and decorated many years later for their heroism at My Lai. Andreotta had died in combat three weeks after the massacre, and so was honored posthumously.

Early life

Hugh Clowers Thompson, Jr. was born on April 15, 1943, in Atlanta, Georgia. He grew up in rural Stone Mountain, Georgia, raised by his strict parents. After dropping out of Troy State University, he volunteered for the United States Navy in 1961 and served with a Seabee construction unit from 1961 to 1964. After this, he returned home to Georgia and ran a funeral home.

Military career

Having always wanted to fly, Thompson joined the US Army in 1966 and trained to become a helicopter pilot at Forts Wolters and Rucker. He arrived in Vietnam in late December 1967 and joined the 161st Aviation Company (Assault Helicopter),¹ which was reorganized and expanded into the 123rd Aviation Battalion of the 23rd Infantry Division (Americal) in January 1968. Known as an aggressive and exceptional pilot, **Warrant Officer** Thompson flew a Hiller OH-23 Raven observation helicopter as part of Company B (the 'Warlords'). On March 16, 1968, he and his crew were supporting Task Force Barker (a battalion-sized element of the Americal) in a reconnaissance capacity. Serving as one door-gunner was his crew chief, Specialist Glenn Andreotta; the other door-gunner was Specialist Lawrence Colburn.

My Lai Massacre



Thompson flew an OH-23 Raven at the time of the My Lai Massacre

In the early morning of March 16, 1968, Thompson's OH-23 encountered no enemy fire over My Lai 4. Spotting two possible Viet Cong suspects, he forced the Vietnamese men to surrender and flew them off for a tactical interrogation. Thompson also marked the location of several wounded Vietnamese with green smoke, a signal that they needed help

Returning to the My Lai area at around 0900 after refueling, he noticed that the people he had marked were now dead. Out in a paddy field beside a dike 200 metres (660 ft) south of the village, he marked the location of a wounded young Vietnamese woman. Thompson and his crew watched from a low hover as Captain Ernest Medina (commanding officer of C Company, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment) came up to the woman, prodded her with his foot, and then shot and killed her.

Thompson then flew over an irrigation ditch filled with dozens of bodies. Shocked at the sight, he radioed his accompanying gunships, knowing his transmission would be monitored by many on the radio net: "It looks to me like there's an awful lot of unnecessary killing going on down there. Something ain't right about this. There's bodies everywhere. There's a ditch full of bodies that we saw. There's something wrong here."¹

Movement from the ditch indicated to Thompson that there were still people alive in there. Thompson landed his helicopter and dismounted. David Mitchell, a sergeant and squad leader in 1st Platoon, C Company, walked over to him. When asked by Thompson whether any help could be provided to the people in the ditch, the sergeant replied that the only way to help them was to put them out of their misery. Second Lieutenant William Calley (commanding officer of the 1st Platoon, C Company) then came up, and the two had the following conversation:

Thompson: What's going on here, Lieutenant?

Calley: This is my business.

Thompson: What is this? Who are these people?

Calley: Just following orders.

Thompson: Orders? Whose orders?

Calley: Just following...

Thompson: But, these are human beings, unarmed civilians, sir.

Calley: Look Thompson, this is my show. I'm in charge here. It ain't your concern.

Thompson: Yeah, great job.

Calley: You better get back in that chopper and mind your own business.

Thompson: You ain't heard the last of this!

Thompson took off again, and Andreotta reported that Mitchell was now executing the people in the ditch. Furious, Thompson flew over the northeast corner of the village and spotted a group of about ten civilians, including children, running toward a homemade bomb shelter. Pursuing them were soldiers from the 2nd Platoon, C Company. Realizing that the soldiers intended to murder the Vietnamese, Thompson landed his aircraft between them and the villagers. Thompson turned to Colburn and Andreotta and told them that if the Americans began shooting at the villagers or him, they should fire their M60 machine guns at the Americans: "Y'all cover me! If these bastards open up on me or these people, you open up on them. Promise me!" He then dismounted to confront the 2nd Platoon's leader, Stephen Brooks. Thompson told him he wanted help getting the peasants out of the bunker.

Thompson: Hey listen, hold your fire. I'm going to try to get these people out of this bunker. Just hold your men here.

Brooks: Yeah, we can help you get 'em out of that bunker—with a hand grenade!

Thompson: Just hold your men here. I think I can do better than that.

Brooks declined to argue with him, even though as a commissioned officer he outranked Thompson.

After coaxing the 11 Vietnamese out of the bunker, Thompson persuaded the pilots of the two UH-1 Huey gunships (Dan Millians and Brian Livingstone) flying as his escort to evacuate them. While Thompson was returning to base to refuel, Andreotta spotted movement in an irrigation ditch filled with approximately 100 bodies. The helicopter again landed and the men dismounted to search for survivors. After wading through the remains of the dead and dying men, women and children, Andreotta extracted a live boy named Do Ba. Thompson flew the survivor to the ARVN hospital in Quang Ngai.

Upon returning to their base at about 1100, Thompson heatedly reported the massacre to his superiors. His allegations of civilian killings quickly reached Lieutenant Colonel Frank Barker, the operation's overall commander. Barker radioed his executive officer to find out from Captain Medina what was happening on the ground. Medina then gave the cease-fire order to Charlie Company to "knock off the killing".

After the massacre

Thompson made an official report of the killings, and was interviewed by Colonel Oran Henderson, the commander of the 11th Infantry Brigade (the parent organization of the 20th Infantry). Concerned, senior American officers cancelled similar planned operations by Task Force Barker against other villages (My Lai 5, My Lai 1, etc.) in Quang Ngai Province, possibly preventing the additional massacre of hundreds, if not thousands, of Vietnamese civilians.

Initially, commanders throughout the American chain of command were successful in covering up the My Lai Massacre. Thompson quickly received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions at My Lai. The citation for the award fabricated events, for example praising Thompson for taking to a hospital a Vietnamese child "*caught in intense crossfire*". It also stated that his "*sound judgment had greatly enhanced Vietnamese–American relations in the operational area.*" Thompson threw away the citation.

Thompson continued to fly the observation missions in the OH-23 Raven and was hit by enemy fire a total of eight times. In four of those instances, his aircraft was lost. In the last incident, his helicopter was brought down by enemy machine gun fire, and he broke his back in the resulting crash landing. This ended his combat career in Vietnam, and he was evacuated to a hospital in Japan and began a long period of rehabilitation. He carried psychological scars from his service in Vietnam for the rest of his life.

When news of the massacre publicly broke, Thompson repeated his account to then-Colonel William Wilson and during their official Pentagon investigations. In late 1969, Thompson was summoned to Washington DC and appeared before a special closed hearing of the House Armed Services Committee.

There, he was sharply criticized by Congressmen, in particular Chairman Mendel Rivers (D-S.C.), who were anxious to play down allegations of a massacre by American troops. Rivers publicly stated that he felt Thompson was the only soldier at My Lai who should be punished (for turning his weapons on fellow American troops) and unsuccessfully attempted to have him court-martialed. As word of his actions became publicly known, Thompson started receiving hate mail, death threats and mutilated animals on his doorstep.

After his Vietnam service, Thompson was assigned to Fort Rucker to become an instructor pilot. His other military assignments included, Korea, Fort Ord, Fort Hood, and bases in Hawaii. He retired from the Army with the rank of Major in 1983.

Recognition for actions at My Lai

Exactly thirty years after the massacre, Thompson, Andreotta, and Colburn were awarded the Soldier's Medal (Andreotta posthumously), the United States Army's highest award for bravery not involving direct contact with the enemy. "*It was the ability to do the right thing even at the risk of their personal safety that guided these soldiers to do what they did,*" then-Major General Michael Ackerman said at the 1998 ceremony.

The three "set the standard for all soldiers to follow." Additionally on March 10, 1998, Senator Max Cleland (D-Ga.) entered a tribute to Thompson, Colburn and Andreotta into the record of the U.S. Senate. Cleland said the three men were, "*true examples of American patriotism at its finest.*"

In 1998, Thompson and Colburn returned to the village of My Lai, where they met some of the villagers they had rescued, including Thi Nhung and Pham Thi Nhanh, two women who had been part of the group that was about to be killed by Brooks' 2nd Platoon. They also dedicated a new elementary school for the children of the village.

In 1999, Thompson and Colburn received the Peace Abbey Courage of Conscience Award. Later that year, both men served as co-chairs of STONEWALK, a group who pulled a one-ton rock engraved "Unknown Civilians Killed in War" from Boston to Arlington National Cemetery.

In a 2004 interview with *60 Minutes*, Thompson was quoted referring to C Company's men involved in the massacre: *"I mean, I wish I was a big enough man to say I forgive them, but I swear to God, I can't."*

At the age of 62, after extensive treatment for cancer, Thompson was removed from life support and died on January 6, 2006, at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Pineville, Louisiana. Colburn came from Atlanta to be at his bedside. Thompson was buried in Lafayette, Louisiana, with full military honors, including a three-volley salute and a helicopter flyover. On February 8, 2006, Congressman Charles Boustany (R-La.) made a statement in Congress honoring him, stating that the "United States has lost a true hero, and the State of Louisiana has lost a devoted leader and dear friend."

In 2010, the Hugh Thompson Foundation was chartered, in memory of Thompson's courage in halting the massacre.

His biography *The forgotten hero of My Lai: The Hugh Thompson story* was included in the U.S. Army Chief of Staff's professional reading list.

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