Hugh Thompson and the My Lai Massacre: Turning Tragedy into Triumph

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Historical Paper
Word Count: 2500 Words
As the bloody and exhausting Vietnam War escalated, tragedy struck on the eastern coast of Vietnam in 1968. Charlie Company tore through the village of My Lai, killing, raping, burning and beating hundreds of innocent citizens. As the horrors unfolded, Chief Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson Jr. disobeyed orders of “search and destroy,” and saved the lives of several civilians. After the senseless violence ended, Thompson triumphantly shed light on the barbarity despite attempts of a cover up, inspired generations of soldiers to come, and cemented his place as a hero in a dark hour of history.

The Vietnam War

The Vietnam War started in 1955. America would enter the battle ten years later in 1965. The conflict started as a power struggle over Vietnam between two leaders: Ho Chi Minh, who pledged to a communist Vietnam, and Ngo Dinh Diem, who opted for a capitalist government. The communist forces occupied Northern Vietnam, and the capitalist fighters inhabited South Vietnam. America entered the civil war under the “domino effect” theory. This idea stated that allowing communism to fester in one place would start a chain reaction in the surrounding countries. America, which had recently been inserting itself in communism driven conflicts such as the Korean War, started supplying aid to South Vietnam. By the year 1968, over 19,000 Americans had been

killed. Even though America had only been in the war for three years, many casualties occurred, and they were felt throughout the armed forces\(^5\).

**Charlie Company**

Deployed from Hawaii, Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 11th Infantry Brigade touched down in Vietnam on December 1, 1967, only 3 months before the massacre\(^6\). Deployed with Charlie Company, Hugh Thompson Jr. was set to be a helicopter pilot during their missions. Thompson had a modest upbringing in Stone Mountain, Georgia\(^7\). Thompson’s father, Hugh Thompson Sr. had served in the Navy during World War II. Thompson’s older brother served in the Air Force. Inspired by his father’s and brother’s service, he joined the Navy in 1961\(^8\). Three years later, Thompson was honorably discharged. In 1966, Thompson felt the need to serve his country once again and enlisted in the Army. Following his completion of the Warrant Officer Flight Program, Thompson was assigned to Charlie Company. Charlie Company’s work mainly consisted of practicing mission strategies and making trenches\(^9\). The light workload allotted lots of time to the soldiers to patronize local shops and relax. If the company did take on a mission, it was usually a low risk, routine sweep of a village\(^10\).

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However, despite the “good times” at the camp in the southern Quang Ngai Province, death and destruction was not a foreign concept to the new arrivals. In the coming months, the brigade would experience casualties within their ranks, almost all due to landmines and booby traps\textsuperscript{11}. The terrors of bloodshed were only miles outside camp. Furthermore, leaders in the platoon were often undertrained and resented\textsuperscript{12}. Lieutenant William Calley was one such leader. Calley had only gone through basic training and a six month junior officer training program. He often didn’t have the respect of his soldiers and was even openly teased by the company captain, Ernest Medina\textsuperscript{13}. Three of the four lieutenants that commanded Charlie Company platoons had little more training than the soldiers they ordered around. Calley, specifically, had a lot to prove - it was reported that he couldn’t even read a map or compass properly\textsuperscript{14}. Calley was also described as incompetent and lacking common sense, making him one of the most despised superiors in the company, so much so that soldiers under his command thought about “fragging” him, intentionally killing him using a grenade to make it look accidental\textsuperscript{15}. As the realities of the violent conflict loomed over the helmet-clad heads of Charlie Company soldiers, anger, indignation, and grief was rife. An almost picture-perfect army deployment filled with easy tasks and plenty of time to fraternize turned into a harsh environment populated with heavy hearts\textsuperscript{16}. Basecamp’s mental health took a turn for the worst, and the volatile emotion festered. The toxicity was bound to boil over. And so

\textsuperscript{15} Hersh, Seymour M. “The Massacre At My Lai.” The New Yorker.
it did. The atrocities that a rageful Charlie Company would leave in their wake was unimaginable. The environment was poison, and it spilled out of basecamp.

**The Massacre**

On the morning of March 16, 1968 members of an embittered Charlie Company move towards a hamlet, My Lai 4. The sweep of the village was conducted under suspicion of Viet Cong inhabiting the area. In February and early March of 1968, American soldiers had fought intensely to regain control of the nearby villages. The VC had reportedly been established in My Lai for some time. Company leaders, being in an almost stalemate with the VC in the area, gave aggressive orders of “search and destroy.” Earlier in the week, multiple soldiers and a sergeant were killed by booby traps set up in the vicinity of My Lai. William Calley used the deaths as revengeful fodder for his soldiers, amplifying the already zealous orders. His rallying call reeked of bitterness, anger, and vengeance. Even further up the command chain, Captain Medina ordered, while briefing soldiers for the operation, that anything “walking, talking, or growing” when entering My Lai should be shot. Multiple briefings about the operation implied that whoever was found in the villages would be VC and that civilians would be gone. Specialist Four Lawrence Congleton stated that, following a briefing,

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20 Hersh, Seymour M. “The Massacre At My Lai.” *The New Yorker*.
“There was a general conception that we were going to destroy everything.” When the massacre began troops entered the village, and found nothing more than women, children and older men finishing their breakfast. No hostility was ever directed toward the soldiers.

And then the atrocities started. Soldiers from Lt. Calley’s Platoon began shooting people working in the rice patties. Then, the company moved into the village where they herded many villagers into a common area and began killing them. Several women and children began praying on their knees at a temple and were shot in the head. Throughout the killings, women and children as young as 12 were reported being raped and mutilated before being killed. Lt. Calley stood with his soldiers firing at innocents randomly and in groups. At certain points, a grenade launcher was used to fire into ditches of bodies and also at civilians walking in the general area of My Lai. All the while, houses were set on fire, livestock was killed, and wells were polluted. The massacre continued for hours, briefly stopping so the platoon could eat lunch.

Although some soldiers did not participate in the murdering of the innocents, they did nothing to stop or merely question what was happening. Throughout the vile genocide,

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23 Hersh, Seymour M. “The Massacre At My Lai.” *The New Yorker.*
27 Hersh, Seymour M. “The Massacre At My Lai.” *The New Yorker.*
28 Hersh, Seymour M. “The Massacre At My Lai.” *The New Yorker.*
29 Hersh, Seymour M. “The Massacre At My Lai.” *The New Yorker.*
30 Peers Inquiry, Report of the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the My Lai Incident. Library of Congress Call Number DS557.8.M9 U54 1974 and OCLC Number 1646516 (Volume I only, declassified and released); OCLC Number 248718242 (Complete collection, comprised of volumes I through IV)).
Calley continued to shout at his soldiers to continue shooting. At some points, groups of
more than 70 people were killed at once in irrigation ditches. “I had to climb over so
many bodies... I was crying so much,” recalled one of the survivors of the massacre who was
grouped with other civilians in a ditch. Some people were randomly stabbed with
bayonets. Captain Ernest Medina was seen kicking a woman and then shooting her in
the head because he supposedly thought she had a hand grenade. This was later
disputed, as only one weapon was ever recovered from the entire operation, away from
the village. Mothers would try to shield their children from the gunfire, and once they
were killed, the child would subsequently be murdered. Villagers who were herded into
groups could be heard yelling “No VC,” but their cries did not deter the soldiers.

As the horrors unfolded on the ground, Chief Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson
was providing close air support in his helicopter along with his two gunners, Specialist
Four Glenn Andreotta and Specialist Four Lawrence Colburn. As Thompson flew over
the villages, he noticed hoards of wounded civilians. He radioed in multiple times,
attempting to get help for the injured. What Thompson didn’t realize initially was that
many of the people he saw were already dead. Thompson eventually landed his
helicopter near a ditch filled with dead and mortally wounded civilians. Thompson asked

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31 Peers Inquiry, Report of the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the
My Lai Incident. Library of Congress Call Number DS557.8.M9 U54 1974 and OCLC Number 1646516
[Volume I only, declassified and released]; OCLC Number 248718242 (Complete collection, comprised of
volumes I through IV)).

32 Maresca, Thomas. “50 Years after My Lai Massacre, Survivors Remember: ‘I Had to Climb over so Many
Bodies’.” USA Today, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 16 Mar. 2018,


Sergeant David Mitchell if he could help get the people out of the ditch, to which the
sergeant replied that he would “help them out of their misery.” Thompson returned to
his helicopter, and as he took off, he could see Sergeant Mitchell shooting into the ditch.
Thompson, understandably, was appalled. As he flew above My Lai, he spotted a
group of soldiers approaching a bunker full of civilians. Thompson landed and instructed
Specialists Colburn and Andreotta to fire upon the soldiers if they try to shoot at the
bunker while he attempted to rescue the defenseless group. As Thompson tried to
persuade the dozen or so villagers out of the bunker, a lieutenant stated that Thompson
should use a grenade to get them out. Thompson responded by telling the lieutenant to
stop his men from advancing. The group that was found in the bunker was then
evacuated from the village via Thompson's helicopter. After the initial rescue,
Thompson rescued a few more of the civilians. “We saw a young girl about twenty
years old lying on the grass. We could see that she was unarmed and wounded in the
chest. We marked her with smoke because we saw a squad not too far away. The
smoke was green, meaning it's safe to approach...Captain Medina came over, kicked
her... and finished her off... When we saw Medina do that, it clicked. It was our guys
doing the killing,” Specialist Colburn recalled. In a staunch defense of the Vietnamese

40 Hersh, Seymour M. “The Massacre At My Lai.” The New Yorker.
41 Peers Inquiry, Report of the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the
My Lai Incident. Library of Congress Call Number DS557.8.M9 U54 1974 and OCLC Number 1646516
[Volume I only, declassified and released]; OCLC Number 248718242 (Complete collection, comprised of
volumes I through IV).
2018.
civilians’ human rights, Thompson directly challenged Calley over his sadistic treatment of the powerless inhabitants of My Lai. The executions didn’t cease until Thompson and his crew would report the murders back to Lieutenant Colonel Barker, the leader of Charlie Company. After Barker talked to Captain Medina, the massacre finally stopped. In the end, over a dozen war crimes were committed and an estimated 504 innocent children, women, and old men were killed. Thompson’s valiant and triumphant actions were the only thing standing between the bloodthirsty army forces and the innocent Vietnamese civilians’ human rights.

Cover Up and Investigation

Attempts to conceal what happened at My Lai began almost immediately. Initial reports of the operation stated that 128 Vietcong fighters had been killed and that the “fight” was a victory. Thompson was one of the few people to submit a formal complaint about the massacre. Predictably, Thompson’s report did little to rouse suspicion. Near to nothing was done in the months following the mass killing.

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However, former Specialist Five Ronald Ridenhour knew something was wrong ever since he flew over My Lai in the days following the massacre. Ridenhour began asking questions to members of Charlie Company, and soon felt that something sinister had transpired. Ridenhour wrote letters to multiple members of Congress, the Pentagon, and the President. Only three congressmen responded to the letter. They urged the Pentagon to open a formal investigation into the matter. Meanwhile, Thompson was receiving military awards to buy his silence. Independently, Seymour Hersh, an investigative journalist, interviewed William Calley and broke the story in November of 1969, more than a year after the massacre occurred. The My Lai incident quickly gained steam in the media, with multiple large publications publishing stories and graphic photos of the mass murder. The revelation of the massacre fueled anti-war sentiment in America and increased hostility against those involved. This anger even found its way directed at Thompson, despite his obvious courageous actions to defend the vulnerable villagers. It wasn’t until mass outrage from the public was expressed that a formal investigation and subsequent inquiry took place. Lieutenant General William Peirce was designated to preside over the inquiry by the Secretary of the Army. The investigation, although it did confirm the tragedy that took place in My Lai, sought to blame officers who had died in the war. One thing that it did help to uncover, however,

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52 Hersh, Seymour M. “The Massacre At My Lai.” The New Yorker.
55 Peers Inquiry, Report of the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the My Lai Incident. Library of Congress Call Number DS557.8.M9 U54 1974 and OCLC Number 1646516 (Volume I only, declassified and released); OCLC Number 248718242 (Complete collection, comprised of volumes I through IV)).
was the more widespread and undoubtedly racially charged killings of Vietnamese innocents. Evidence from Peirce's investigation led the Office of Provost Marshal General of the Army to court martial 25 army personnel involved in My Lai. Hugh Thompson testified against fellow soldiers on trial, despite the immense amount of pressure to keep quiet. The cover up was a government wide effort, from the soldiers at My Lai, to President Nixon himself. Nixon, while telling the public that he endorsed the idea of legal action against those involved in My Lai, created a task force of other government higher ups to ensure no Americans faced any consequences for their actions. Despite Thompson's attempts, only Lt. Calley was charged with any wrongdoing. All of the other soldiers that had been court martialed were acquitted. Sadly, Calley was supposed to serve life in prison for premeditated murder, but ended up only serving a paltry three years before being paroled.

**Legacy**

After the trials, Hugh Thompson retired to a quiet life as a flight instructor and a pilot for oil companies. The war had damaged him - he became an alcoholic and

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56 Peers Inquiry, Report of the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the My Lai Incident. Library of Congress Call Number DS557.8.M9 U54 1974 and OCLC Number 1646516 [Volume I only, declassified and released]; OCLC Number 248718242 (Complete collection, comprised of volumes I through IV)
divorced several times\textsuperscript{62}. It wasn’t until an avid university professor started trying to get Thompson the recognition he deserved that he broke his silence. In 1988, the Clemson University professor’s work ended up getting Thompson awarded the Soldier’s Medal, the most prestigious army award given as a result of a non-combat situation\textsuperscript{63}. The award was also given to Thompson’s gunners, Lawrence Colburn and, posthumously, Glenn Andreotta. Just days after receiving the award, Colburn and Thompson visited My Lai and talked with survivors\textsuperscript{64}. It was then, Thompson started to give lectures about moral obligations in war, at places such as the US Naval Academy and West point. He educated students not on battle strategies, but on compassion and courage. He spread a triumphant message of rising above the corrupt “powers that be,” and leading with your heart\textsuperscript{65}. Hugh Thompson would give these lectures almost annually until he passed away on January 6, 2006, aged 62\textsuperscript{66}.

Conclusion

Hugh Thompson persevered through the heinous and terrifying tragedy that was the My Lai Massacre. He witnessed his fellow soldiers commit the most repugnant crimes imaginable, and he chose to take a stand for the common good of those in need. Thompson made an undeniable difference, not only in the Vietnam War, but in the


generations of soldiers following. The My Lai Massacre was one of the lowest points in army history, and Thompson distinctly rose above it, defying the coercion from all levels of the army, including the president. He turned devastation into a message, immorality into vigilance, and tragedy into triumph. Thompson quietly became a hero in the face of darkness, did his part to educate others and made the world a more aware, conscious, and better place. Thompson, without asking for any recognition or awards, broke the confines of peer pressure, coverups, and intimidation, forever solidifying his place as a triumphant hero in a time of great need.
This photograph shows a woman in red crying hysterically. Behind her, a woman buttons her shirt, presumably after being sexually assaulted. On the left, a terrified child can be seen screaming. Moments later, the group was killed.

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Bodies and houses of Vietnamese civilians being burned.

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A dead man lying in a ditch, his murdered son next to him.

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Hugh Thompson (right) and his gunner Lawrence Colburn (left) revisiting My Lai on the 30th anniversary of the massacre. They met with survivors they saved and visited the My Lai memorial site, in addition to visiting schools and talking with locals about how the war influenced their lives.

Primary Sources


This article told of William Calley’s apology that he gave more than 40 years after the mass killing. This story added a level of depth to his actions that wasn’t there before, and helped me better understand why Calley acted the way he did on March 16, 1968.


This article gave me more insight into how the trials for the participants in the massacre were conducted, and more importantly, the outcome of William Calley’s trial and what he was convicted of.


This collection of statements from Richard Nixon and his staff to the public regarding the My Lai Massacre highlight the hypocrisy of the president. These conflicting public statements, which conflict with what Nixon said in private, add much more depth to the massacre cover up.

Quotes from this article gave a more individual perspective of the massacre. They also illustrated personal experiences during the killings and highlighted the pain, confusion, and pure horror.


This article by Seymour Hersh was the first account to ever break the My Lai story. This article was extremely long and packed full of quotes, anecdotes, and had tons of information about the coverup of My Lai. This was one of my favorite sources due to the amount of content it had, and the variety of interviews and first-hand accounts of the massacre.


This lecture, directly from Hugh Thompson himself, is an excellent example of how Thompson influenced and taught generations of soldiers and educated them on their moral duty. It also gives personal insight from Hugh Thompson about what happened in the village of My Lai.
Peers Inquiry, Report of the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the My Lai Incident. Library of Congress Call Number DS557.8.M9 U54 1974 and OCLC Number 1646516 [Volume I only, declassified and released]; OCLC Number 248718242 (Complete collection, comprised of volumes I through IV))

The Peers Inquiry has tens of thousands of pages of testimonies, interviews, maps, photos, and other miscellaneous sources. It was obviously a gold mine of information for me. Not only was I able to gather individual sources and testimonies from the inquiry, but I was able to examine how the document was presented as a whole, to look at how it factored into the coverup and investigation.


This article written by the original journalist who broke the My Lai story includes interviews of soldiers involved and really captures the emotional side of the massacre, and how it changed everyone involved.


This website listed and directly quoted war crimes, according to the Geneva Convention. After reviewing the crimes, it was clear that Charlie Company’s actions had violated a superfluous number of the laws. I think knowing that Charlie Company’s decisions transcended national law strengthened the idea of how horrible and violent the massacre was.

This article was another one of my favorite sources, specifically because it focused on Lt. Calley’s actions during the massacre. Knowing what he had done and looking over some of the interactions he had with his fellow soldiers, it was fairly easy for me to grasp the idea of Calley feeling like he needed to “toughen up” to prove himself. This idea of Calley trying to strengthen his image through the massacre was perfectly captured by this article.
Secondary Sources


This source told me about an essential part of Vietnam War history: agent orange. Learning about the horrific effects it can have on the soldiers helped paint the picture of what life was like in combat.


This Oxford University Press article and timeline gave a general outline about how the My Lai Massacre and the events following it progressed.


This source really dissected Charlie Company’s actions in the lead up to the massacre. It also explained the dynamic at the company’s basecamp, which was helpful in understanding the terrible conditions the soldiers had to face and how it affected their actions.

This source examines some of the worst massacres and wrong doings perpetrated by United States Military Forces. I was able to compare and contrast them. This helped me determine, at least in terms of casualties, that the My Lai Massacre was the worst mass killing ever committed by a branch of the military.


The Vietnam War started due to the conflicting views between two leaders in Vietnam, and this article helped me to understand, in depth, what those views were, how they were very different, and how it set the stage for the bloody war.


This source was vital to learning about Hugh Thompson’s work of lecturing Naval Academy students. It also gave me more insight into Thompson’s personal life and what his motivations were.


This source was enriching and deepened my understanding of the My Lai Massacre. It helped me, specifically, with getting familiar with the original plans of the operation.

The My Lai Massacre was a new and slightly confusing topic for me. This article was a great place for me to start and helped me understand the fundamental elements that played into the massacre.


This source introduced me to how President Nixon factored into the coverup of the My Lai Massacre. Learning this added a whole new level to the story of the coverup. I thought Nixon’s role in concealing the genocide further enforces the triumph of Hugh Thompson’s defiance.


This article on the Tet Offensive guided me through a very influential event during the Vietnam War, the Tet Offensive. This operation was a large blow to American forces and their mental health.


This New York Times article was critical to my understanding of the complex coverup of the My Lai Massacre. It also went over the inquiry and investigation in the matter and how it brought about several court martials.

After I had a basic understanding of what happened in My Lai, I was able to learn more from this source about specifics of the immediate cover up, investigation and failed prosecution.


The Vietnam War, predictably, has many layers to its story. I knew it would be challenging to unpack the intricacies of My Lai without understanding the Vietnam War first, and this article was a great place to start.


I used this source for its brief yet thorough overview of the conflict in Vietnam. It helped me understand the power dynamic that existed between South Vietnam, America, Cambodia and North Vietnam.


With so many notable events during the Vietnam War, it can be hard to keep track of when they happened and for what reason. This timeline helped display in an easy-to-understand manner when, where and why certain events happened.

This timeline illustrated the pacing of the Vietnam war, and helped me understand how the events interacted with each other.
Pictures


I chose to use this photo in my appendix because I think it shows the chaos that was felt that day. It exemplifies the disregard for human life at the center of the massacre.


I wanted to use this photo from Hugh Thompson and Lawrence Colburn’s return to My Lai to show how the event impacted their lives. I think it perfectly exemplified how honored they were to be the ones to help the civilians in need and how, even after 30 years, they still felt a connection to the village.


I wanted to include this picture to represent the brutality and indiscriminate killing of innocents. I felt that it was incredibly moving. It gives you the feeling that you want to look away, which perfectly encapsulates the vial massacre.

Similar to the picture of the dead man and his child, I felt this picture was an amazing way to show another side of the massacre: fear. The child’s and the woman’s faces are those of pure terror and make a powerful statement.