

HUGH THOMPSON:

I'm Hugh Thompson. I was a helicopter pilot that day, and I guess I was invited here to tell you about a day of my life. That particular morning we were to provide reconnaissance for a ground operation that was going on in My Lai 4, which was better known to us as Pinkville." It was supposed to be a real big operation that day. I flew a Scout helicopter covered by two gunships that flew cover for me, and my job was to recon out in front of the friendly forces and draw fire, tell them where the enemy was, and let them take care of it.

The village was prepped with artillery prior to the assault, and we went in right when the "slicks" ---the troop-carrying aircraft that brought the Charlie company and Bravo company--- landed simultaneously right in front of them. We started making our passes, and I thought it was gonna be real hot that day. The first thing we saw was a draft-age male running south out of the village with a weapon and I told him to get him. He tried, but he was a new gunner---he missed him. That was the only enemy person I saw that whole day.

We kept flying back and forth, reconning in front and in the rear, and it didn't take very long until we started noticing the large number of bodies everywhere. Everywhere we'd look, we'd see bodies. These were infants, two-, three-, four-, five-year-olds, women, very old men, no draft-age people whatsoever. That's what you look for, draft-age people. It came out in the interrogations that my crew and myself went through. My gunner's big questions---were, "Were there weapons that day?" There was not the first weapon captured, to my knowledge, that day. I think a count has been anywhere from two to four hundred, five hundred bodies--- it was that many. I think that's a small count, including the three villages that were hit.

As we were flying back around the civilian people, there was one lady on the side of the road, and we knew something was going wrong by then. Larry Colburn, my gunner, just motioned for her to stay down; she was kneeling on the side of the road. We just ordered her to stay down; we hovered around everywhere, looking, couldn't understand what was going on. We flew back over her a few minutes later and most of you all have probably seen that picture; she's got a coolie hat laying next to her. If you look real close, some odd object laying right next to her--- that's her brains. It's not pretty

We saw another lady that was wounded. We got on the radio and called for some help and marked her with smoke. A few minutes later up walks a captain, steps up to her, nudges her with his foot, steps back and blows her away.

We came across a ditch that had, I don't know, a lot of bodies in it, a lot of movement in it. I landed, asked a sergeant there if he could help them out, these wounded people down there. He said he'd help them out, help them out of their misery, I believe. I was . . . shocked, I guess, I don't know. I thought he was joking; I took it as a joke, I guess. We took off and broke away from them and my gunner, I guess it was, said, "My God, he's firing into the ditch." We'd asked for help twice, both times--- well actually, three times by then, I guess--- every time that people had been killed. We'd "help these people out" by asking for help.

Sometime later, we saw some people huddle in a bunker and the only thing I could see at that particular time was a woman, an old man, and a couple of kids standing next to it. We look over here and see them and look over there and see the friendly forces, so I landed the helicopter again. I didn't want there to be any confusion or something; I really don't know what was going on in my mind then.

I walked over to the ground units and said, "Hey, there's some civilians over here in this bunker. Can you get them out?" They said, "Well, we're gonna get them out with a hand grenade." I said, "Just hold your people right here please, I think I can do better." So I went over to the bunker and motioned for them to come out, everything was OK. At that time I didn't know what I was going to do, because there was more than three or four there, more like nine or ten or something like that. So I walked back over to the aircraft and kind of kept them around me and called the pilot that was flying the low gunship and said, "Hey, I got these people here down on the ground, and you all land and get them out of here." So he agreed to do that, which I think was the first time a gunship's ever been used for that. There's enough of them there that he had to make two trips and he picked them up and took them about ten miles or so behind the lines and dropped them off.

A short while later we went back to the ditch. There was still some movement in there. We got out of the aircraft and Androtta, my crew chief, walked down into the ditch. A few minutes later he came back up carrying a little kid. We didn't know what we were gonna do with this one either, but we all get back in the aircraft and figure we'd get him back to the orphanage or hospital back over at Quang Ngai. In examining him in the aircraft that day, the kid wasn't even wounded, or we didn't see any wounds, I'll put it that way. He was covered with blood, and the thought was going through my mind and my crew's mind, "How did these people get in that ditch?"

After coming up with about three scenarios, one of them being an artillery round hit them, you wipe that out of your mind 'cause every house in Vietnam, I think, has a bunker underneath it. If artillery was coming there, they would go to the bunker; they wouldn't go outside in the open area. Then I said, well, when artillery was coming, they were trying to leave and a round caught them in the ditch while they were going for cover. I threw that one out of my mind. Then something just sunk into me that these people were marched into that ditch and murdered. That was the only explanation that I could come up with.

Taking the child to the hospital was a day I'll never forget. It was a very sad day, very mad day, very frustrated and everything. So later in the afternoon, (this was brought up when everything hit and became public during interrogations, the Department of the Army IG was asking me about the incident and I had totally blocked it out of my mind. I had no idea what this guy was questioning me for), after the mission that day, I went back to our operations area, which is over in LC Dottie and I was very upset. I was very mad.

I reported to my platoon leader. He said let's go see the operations officer. In turn we went to our commander and the words were said for me that day that, you know, dean this up. "If this damn stuff is what's happening here," I told him, "You can take these wings right now 'cause they're only sewn on with thread." I was ready to quit flying.

My commander was very interested. Within a day or so--- I don't think it was that day, it was probably the next day--- we were called up to the command bunker at LC Dottie and everybody gave their statements. This was a full colonel (a full colonel is next to a general); that means he can walk on water. He was very interested it seemed; I remember him taking notes and that was it, I do believe. I don't know if I was called again to report to the commanding general.

There was one thing in my mind that I think, but I can't be positive. Our two units were like sixty miles away. So we didn't have contact with these ground people every day. A lot of people don't understand that sixty miles into Vietnam is a long way away You just don't go there. I guess I assumed something was being done. It wasn't a colonel's position to come down to a W1 and inform him of his investigation, that just was unheard of. It seemed like it was just dropped after that.

Approximately two years later is when it was broke publicly and that's when all the investigations started. I was called before the US Senate, the Department of the Army IG and for every one of the court-martial investigations. They appointed Lieutenant General Peers to investigate this. I honestly think the Army thought they had a 'yes-man' when they got Lieutenant General Peers and found out when he released his final report that he was not a "yes-man." I think he made a fairly accurate report of what happened that day.

I believe too, as everybody says, there was a cover-up and everybody's talked about that the cover-up started on the ground. In my mind, I'm not real sure that's where the cover-up started. I would not be the least bit surprised if this cover-up started "up" and worked its way all the way back down.

It was probably one of the saddest days of my life. I just could not believe that people could totally lose control and I've heard people say this happened all the time. I don't believe it. I'm not naive to understand that innocent civilians did get killed in Vietnam. I truly pray to God that My Lai was not an everyday occurrence. I don't know if anybody could keep their sanity if something like that happens all the time. I can see where four or five people get killed, something like that. But that was nothing like that, it was no accident whatsoever. Pure premeditated murder. And we're trained better than that and it's just not something you'd like to do.