

Return to My Lai

Haunted American heroes who saved lives journey back for thank you

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By Jim Auchmutey

My Lai, Vietnam --- The image has never left him. She is crouched in the grass, her head turned flat against the ground, a straw hat beside her. A young woman with straight black hair, a blue shirt and a white earring. She stares vacantly, her gaze as cold as a fish eye, in a look of eternal bewilderment.

Larry Colburn was an 18-year-old gunner on a U.S. Army helicopter when he saw her from the air on the morning of March 16, 1968. The blades of the hovering chopper parted the tall grass, and there she was, alone and desperate. He motioned for her to stay down, to hide, because if the infantry spotted her, they would probably shoot her as they had already shot dozens of unarmed civilians that day. She seemed to understand and fell into a crouch as the helicopter whirred away.

When the chopper returned, the woman was in the same position, but there was a pink trail of brain matter leading from her head. As if Colburn could ever forget the sight, an Army photographer took her picture and captured a still life of death that the former gunner, now 48 and living in Cherokee County, has never shaken.

"She haunts me everytime I see that picture," he says. "When I'm anxious or bothered about something, I still dream about the things I saw that morning."

It has been 30 years since U.S. soldiers entered the hamlet of My Lai on a search-and-destroy mission that turned into a rampage of rape, murder and mutilation. More than 500 civilians were killed when two infantry companies swept unopposed through My Lai and the nearby hamlet of Co Luy. It hardly seemed possible that there were any American heroes that day. But there were.

Colburn and his pilot, Stone Mountain native Hugh Thompson, saved 10 villagers in an impulsive act of anger and compassion that could have gotten them court-martialed. For years, their role remained a forgotten footnote to one of the most shameful episodes in a war most Americans would just as soon forget. Only this month did the Army finally recognize the two veterans in a moving medal ceremony at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. Four days later, they were flying back to Vietnam for an anniversary commemoration that they looked forward to with exhilaration and a little apprehension.

On a rainy night before he left, Colburn sat in the dining room of his Woodstock home and talked about the trip. The table was covered with congratulatory letters, the floor strewn with toys from his son's 6th birthday party. There was another child on his mind as well. She must have been half Connor's age. They pulled her from a ditch full of bodies and flew her to a hospital. Now the Vietnamese authorities were trying to find her so she could thank her rescuers personally.

"If we do meet her," Colburn said, "I hope she doesn't remember me."

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A circle of children surround Hugh Thompson (left) and Larry Colburn in My Lai. Their happy faces contrast with those of the brutalized youngsters the two men encountered during the massacre, whose images are seared in their memory.

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ber," Colburn said, "I hope she doesn't remember me."

Tough pilot dissolves in tears

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long before the North Vietnamese launched the Tet Offensive of 1968, bloodiest fighting of the war.

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U.S. gunner.

Kong, they act like they're still a couple of boys in Nam. Colburn, a slender man with a brown brush mustache and a laid-back manner, calls his old Army pal "Buck." Thompson, 55, and starting to show some paunch, razzes his friend about not checking his luggage all the way through to Ho Chi Minh City. Then he heads off to the lounge for a smoke and a brew and the first in a barrage of off-color jokes lobbed in a deep, mumbly drawl.

In other words, they're a couple of regular guys. And like a lot of regular guys in the days before the war went sour, they volunteered for duty in Vietnam.

Thompson, the son of an electrical contractor, joined the Naval reserve after graduating from Stone Mountain High and was soon called up with the Seabees. He left the Navy and was learning the embalming trade in Atlanta when he saw a recruiting billboard that showed a dashing helicopter pilot and decided, on the spur of the moment, to apply for Army flight school.

Colburn, the son of an engineer, grew up in Mount Vernon, Wash., north of Seattle, and enlisted with some high school classmates. "We'd probably seen too many John Wayne movies," he jokes.

They both arrived in Vietnam in 1967 and were assigned to a new type of unit called the aeroscouts: three-man reconnaissance crews that supported ground assaults by flying ahead of the troops and trying to draw fire to flush out enemy positions. Thompson piloted the H-23, a small chopper with a plexiglass bubble for maximum visibility. The craft was so tiny that the others aboard, Colburn and crew chief Glenn Andreotta of St. Louis, had to ride outside the bubble wearing enormous seat belts. They were assigned to the central coast below Da Nang not long before the North Vietnamese launched the Tet Offensive of 1968, the bloodiest fighting of the war.

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On its first run at 7:30 a.m., the recon chopper crew spotted a young man running across a field with a rifle. Colburn, normally such a good shot that Thompson called him "Deadeye," rattled his M-60 and missed. It was the only V.C. suspect they saw the entire day.

When the helicopter returned after refueling, the men saw clusters of fresh corpses. They saw a U.S. officer prod a wounded woman with a boot, then shoot her. They saw an irrigation ditch clogged with bodies. Thompson landed and complained to a lieutenant who told him to mind his own business. He took off again and noticed a group of perhaps 10 villagers scurrying toward a bomb shelter, soldiers in pursuit. He set down the chopper between them and ordered Colburn to turn his gun on the Americans while he tried to help the civilians.

"I was going to have Larry fire at them," Thompson remembers. "I was that pissed."

He coaxed the villagers into the open and called in a larger helicopter to fly them out. Then, as Thompson made another pass over the ditch, his crew chief noticed a child moving. They landed, and Andreotta waded into the trench.

"He was knee deep in blood and fluids and dying people grasping at him," Colburn says. "He handed me the child, and it was as limp as a rag doll. I sat it on my lap and couldn't find any wounds. I snapped my fingers in the child's face, and there was no response. The kid was in serious shock."

As the helicopter lifted off, Colburn noticed that his tough, wise-cracking pilot had tears streaming down his face.

There were other massacres in Vietnam, to be sure. The communists slaughtered 3,000 civilians when they captured the city of Hue during the Tet

Offensive (a bloodletting that is neither acknowledged nor memorialized by the current government). The Korean Marines are said to have massacred 1,500 noncombatants in Quang Ngai Province in 1968.

But My Lai was different; this was the U.S., and the U.S. was supposed to be on a moral crusade for freedom.

"Most Americans still don't realize how savage it was," says Michael Bilton, a British journalist who made a documentary film on the massacre and co-wrote the definitive book, "Four Hours in My Lai." "They ripped open young girls with bayonets. They fired into women's vaginas. They threw an old man down a well and tossed a grenade in after him. They didn't just shoot people."

Thompson and Colburn testified before perhaps 10 proceedings, from court-martials to Army inquiries to a closed hearing of the House Armed Services Committee. Defense attorneys tried to discredit them by depicting Thompson as overly emotional and Colburn as a pot-smoking hippie who was court-martialed himself for possession of marijuana later in 1968. ("They took a stripe away from me," he says. "I never smoked when I was flying.")

Army investigators concluded that 33 of the 105 members of Charlie Company participated in the massacre, and that 28 officers helped cover it up. Charges were brought against only 13 men. Only one, Lt. William Calley --- accused of murdering 109 "Oriental human beings" --- was found guilty. He was paroled in 1974 after serving 3 1/2 years of what had originally been a life sentence. He now runs his father-in-law's jewelry store in Columbus and has refused for years to discuss My Lai.

Asked what a just sentence for Calley would have been, Thompson takes a deep drag on his cigarette and says, "I believe the maximum penalty was the firing squad."

After the court-martials, Thompson and Colburn didn't see each other for more than 15 years. Colburn left the Army and returned to the Pacific Northwest, where he attended college, fished commercially and ran a ski shop. One of his customers, a South Carolinian named Lisa, became his wife. He followed her south to Atlanta in 1981 and has worked in the medical supply business since then.

Thompson stayed in the Army until the early '80s, when he settled in Louisiana to fly oil rig supply helicopters and then took a job as a counselor with the state veterans department. That's where Bilton, the British journalist, found him in 1988 and reunited him with Colburn for his documentary.

When the film was shown in the States, David Egan, an architecture professor at Clemson University and a veteran, was so impressed that he launched a letter-writing campaign to persuade the Army to award Thompson and Colburn medals. In fact, they had already been decorated for their part in My Lai, but the dishonest citations made it sound like they had evacuated children trapped between U.S. and "hostile" forces. The only hostile force at My Lai was the U.S.

After nine years of lobbying, Egan finally succeeded in his campaign to gain a Soldiers Medal with an honest citation for Thompson. He refused it until the Pentagon agreed to approve identical honors for Colburn and Andreotta, who was killed in action a month after My Lai. Furthermore, Thompson insisted that the medals be presented in a public ceremony at the Vietnam wall --- his way of paying tribute to the fallen G.I.s and of reminding America that the baby-killers among them were horrible exceptions.

At the ceremony earlier this month, in front of a scrum of TV cameras worthy of a Monica Lewinsky sighting, a general approached Colburn with tears in his eyes and snapped a salute.

Thompson and Colburn were full-bird celebrities by the time they touched down in Ho Chi Minh City 10 days ago. They were met at the airport by two dozen journalists, including the "60 Minutes" crew whose network was paying their travel expenses. Everyone wanted an interview. Hotel employees wanted their

autographs. A Vietnamese writer even composed a poem about "the pilot of peace and the gunner of compassion."

The vets just wanted to play war tourist. They drove past the former U.S. embassy, hit the Apocalypse Now bar and stopped for a beer at the Rex Hotel, where the military brass used to hold the daily briefings that correspondents dismissed as "the 5 o'clock follies." The two vets also found time to visit the War Remnants Museum, a strange assemblage of exhibits and U.S. Army surplus. Walking past the souvenir shop, Colburn noticed a pile of battered dog tags for sale. They may have been reproductions, but the thought of all those American names being peddled like post cards disturbed him, and he bought every tag they had -- 39 of them. "If nothing else, I'll take them home and bury them," he said.

From Ho Chi Minh, the entourage flew to Da Nang and boarded a bus for a bumpy three-hour ride to My Lai.

The main road has been paved and they recently got electricity, but little else has changed in the hamlet that the Vietnamese know as Son My. Peasants still cut and thresh rice by hand. Bicycles still dodge water buffaloes prodded along with sticks. The warm coastal breeze still makes the thick stands of bamboo creak and groan like a spooky old house in winter.

The sight of the massacre has become a park with a small museum and a tall monument and grave-like markers showing where houses stood before the Americans burned them. In the rear of the park is a ditch said to be the one in which G.I.'s shot more than 100 civilians. The two Americans toured the sight solemnly but did not, after all, get to meet the girl from the ditch. Provincial authorities could not locate her. Of the villagers Thompson and Colburn saved, four had died, three had moved away and one was in jail for theft. He was not paroled for the occasion.

That left two women in My Lai who owe their lives to the veterans. There were embraces and free-flowing tears when Thompson and Colburn went to one of their homes to meet them. Pham Thi Nhanh was 14 when the pilot beckoned for her and the others to come out of the bunker. "I thought they were going to shoot us," she said, stroking her 6-year-old daughter's hair.

Nhanh was smiling as she talked. None of her family was killed in the massacre. It is a rare story in My Lai.

What happened to Pham Thi Thuan is more typical. A 30-year-old widow in 1968, she had just risen when the assault started and soldiers forced her and her 6-year-old daughter into the ditch. When they began firing, she hid under bodies and held a hand over her girl's mouth so the Americans would think they were dead, too. The soldiers fired a second volley into the ditch, and a third. She lost six family members that day.

"I saw my father crawl away and be shot in the head, and I had to stay silent," she said, burying her face in her hands and sobbing.

Thuan knew who Thompson and Colburn were and said she was grateful for their acts of kindness. But when she saw them standing at the ditch with Mike Wallace and the "60 Minutes" crew, she approached with a simple question that served as a rude reminder that My Lai is ultimately about Vietnamese suffering, not American heroism.

"Why did you come to our village and kill our women and children?" she asked the veterans.

Colburn, still soaring from their meeting with the survivors, suddenly felt "like somebody ripped my heart out." Thompson thought it an unfair question better addressed to other Americans who wouldn't dare return to My Lai --- yet somehow, looking at her sad, dark eyes, he couldn't bring himself to say that. Instead, he told her, "I don't know."