

CASE STUDY - HUGH THOMPSON, MY LAI



WHAT HAPPENED?

On March 16th, 1968, Chief Warrant Officer Hugh Thomson, Jr. was piloting a Scout helicopter providing air support for ground elements engaged in combat around two hamlets of Son My Village, Quang Ngai Province, Republic of Vietnam. While reconnoitering the village, Thomson and his flight crew noticed large numbers of bodies – infants, young children, women, and very old men. None of the bodies appeared to carry weapons; none of the bodies appeared to be of “draft-age” men.

Thomson landed his helicopter to investigate. He and his crew discovered that U.S. soldiers were shooting unarmed villagers. As Thomson questioned the troops he was told that they were “just following orders.” Thomson then began to coordinate airlifting villagers to safety. He personally had to place himself, and his helicopter, between soldiers and villagers to ensure their protection. He also had to tell his crew that if U.S. soldiers made further aggressive actions against the remaining villagers, then his crew was to open fire upon the U.S. soldiers. Thomson and his crew made approximately three airlifts rescuing at least ten villagers. They are credited of having stopped the My Lai Massacre.

General William R. Peers investigated the My Lai incident. His report summarizes the situation Thomson and his crew flew into, “During the period of 16 – 19 March 1968, US Army troops of TF Barker, 11th Brigade, Americal Division, massacred a large number of noncombatants in two hamlets of Son My Village, Quang Ngai Province, Republic of Vietnam....On 16 March, soldiers at the squad and platoon level, within some elements of TF Barker, murdered noncombatants while under the supervision and control of their immediate superiors....A part of the crimes visited on the inhabitants of Son My Village included individual and group acts of murder, rape, sodomy, maiming, and assault on noncombatants and the mistreatment and killing of detainees. They further include the killing of livestock, destruction of crops, closing of wells, and the burning of dwellings within several subhamlets....Some attempts were made to stop the criminal acts in Son My Village on 16 March; but with few exceptions, such efforts were too feeble or too late.”

Hugh Thomson and his crew’s action were one of those exceptions.

QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS WITH YOUR SOLDIERS...

1. As a soldier, how do you recognize lawful versus unlawful orders? When do you say “no” to an order from a superior officer?
2. As a leader, how can you positively influence your men to have the moral courage to take action in the face of adversity? As a soldier, what morally courageous acts have you witnessed in the Army?
3. As a leader, how do you work with your soldiers to ensure that they understand the proper treatment of civilians or noncombatants during combat? As a soldier, how would you respond to a superior officer’s order to protect foreign

nationals, even if it meant firing upon U.S. soldiers? Is your response consistent with Army Values?

4. Hugh Thomson displays the ability to recognize a morally charged situation and the courage to act in the face of adversity.

5. What can you do to similarly recognize and act in ethically challenging situations? For example, in this case the OPS report stated that 174 people were killed, but only 3 weapons were recovered. What would it take to get you to step forward and report this as a "red flag"? Why do you think no one that read the ops report either noticed a potential issue (174 killed and 3 weapons recovered) or if they did, did not say anything? What can we do as an Army to produce Soldiers who would raise the red flag?