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Autobiography & Memoir

The Forgotten Hero Of My Lai: The Hugh Thompson Story
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On March 16, 1968, 504 Vietnamese villagers—212 twelve year olds and younger—were murdered by American soldiers of Charlie Company, led by Lieutenant William Calley, "the butcher of My Lai." Hugh Thompson, a helicopter pilot who happened to be flying over the carnage, exhibited extraordinary bravery by landing his helicopter and ordering the Americans to stand clear while he and his crew, Larry Colburn and Glen Andreotta, personally rescued eleven Vietnamese and possibly saved thousands of nearby villagers from slaughter. For his heroism, Thompson was originally awarded with ostracism, a possible court martial and even the real possibility of assassination by rogue elements of the military that wanted to cover up the atrocity.

Angers, author and longtime editor of Acadiana Profile: The Magazine of Cajun Country, presents a compelling journalistic investigation—readers will be affected by this story of heroism and rehabilitation.

Thompson, along with many other wounded Vietnam veterans, faced his own personal hell. Recurring nightmares of "all those Vietnam people …lying in the dirt, killed, violated, blown to bits…" combined with his own near death when his helicopter was shot down shortly after the massacre, overwhelmed his adjustment to non-combat life. A lengthy section recounts the exposure of the original cover-up and how the frustrating legalities of the military judicial system allowed Calley and the other convicted leaders of the massacre to escape with light sentences.

Gradually, however, members of the media and former soldiers revealed the truth. In March 1998, thirty years after the massacre, Thompson was awarded the Soldier's Medal at a triumphant presentation near the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. He used this forum to acknowledge all American soldiers who fought bravely while upholding the ideals of their country. A few days later, Thompson and Colburn were honored guests at a memorial ceremony

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Veterans Memorial. He used this forum to acknowledge all American soldiers who fought bravely while upholding the ideals of their country. A few days later, Thompson and Colburn were honored guests at a memorial ceremony in My Lai, which was broadcast as a segment of 60 Minutes to twenty-two million viewers, where an emotionally overcome Thompson met two women he saved. Today in My Lai the victims are remembered by a statue of a defiant woman with one hand clenched and the other holding a dead baby.

In 1994, a symposium on the massacre was held at Tulane University. The proceedings were published in an excellent book, Facing My Lai, edited by David Anderson (University Press of Kansas, 1998). Thompson was a participant; his humility was as evident there as it has been at every following event honoring his courage. The story of this authentic American hero and “warrior for humanity” is movingly portrayed in this first-rate biography.

Karl Helicher