

# Tim O'Brien's "Bad" Vietnam War: *In the Lake of the Woods* & Its Historical Perspective

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**Abstract**—Award-winning author Tim O'Brien was sent to Vietnam as a foot soldier in 1969, when American combat troops were gradually withdrawn from the country. A closer look at his Vietnam war stories reveals that he indeed touched upon almost all issues or problems of American soldiers in this "bad" war; yet not many peer-reviewed authors or online literary analysis websites could identify and discuss them all. The purpose of this article is to address the war details in O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods* and its historical perspective, so that middle and high school readers can understand the meaning behind Tim O'Brien's stories and know the entire big Vietnam War picture. Specifically, this article discusses the following issues that are raised by O'Brien in this novel: the Mỹ Lai Massacre and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in Vietnam War veterans. In addition, the Mỹ Lai Massacre cover-up, forgotten heroes of Mỹ Lai, and soldiers' moral courage are also presented.

**Index Terms**—Tim O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods*, Vietnam War, Mỹ Lai Massacre, Mỹ Lai cover-up, Hugh Thompson, Ron Ridenhour, Seymour Hersh, Lawrence Colburn, Glenn Andreotta, peers inquiry

## I. INTRODUCTION

Award-winning author Tim O'Brien was sent to Vietnam in 1969, when President Nixon already ordered the gradual withdrawal of American combat troops from the country. As stated in one of his interviews, "By 1969, nobody ever talked about winning... we had been reading enough headlines to absorb the hopelessness of the war" (Ackerman, 2017). Partly based on his direct combat experience, O'Brien's writing about the Vietnam War in all his fiction novels is always "bad," meaning that these war events were terribly destructive for American GIs and Vietnamese civilians, with practically no good, moral, or inspiring stories to share. A detailed discussion about the "good" and the "bad" Vietnam War periods has been presented in "Tim O'Brien's 'Bad' Vietnam War: *The Things They Carried* & Its Historical Perspective" (Mahini et al., 2018a). A closer look at O'Brien's Vietnam war stories reveals that he indeed touched upon almost all issues or problems of American soldiers in this "bad" war (Mahini et al., 2018a and 2018b), yet not many peer-reviewed authors or online literary analysis websites could identify and discuss them all (Heberle, 2001; Green, 2010; Vernon and Calloway, 2010). In 1994, O'Brien makes history by becoming the only American author who uses the actual 1968 Mỹ Lai<sup>1</sup> Massacre, considered by many as the most horrific evil that was committed by American troops in Vietnam, as one the central events in his fiction novel *In the Lake of the Woods* (O'Brien, 1994a) to address the American conscience about the "bad" Vietnam War. This article addresses the war-related issues raised by O'Brien in this novel, with the purpose of helping middle and high school readers comprehend the meaning behind his writing about the Vietnam War, understand the entire big war picture, and discern the right from the wrong according to the US law of war.

## II. THE "BAD" VIETNAM WAR IN *IN THE LAKE OF THE WOODS*

Although O'Brien denies that he is a Vietnam War writer, he admits that three of his novels "have a lot of Vietnam in them... *In the Lake of the Woods* occurs after Vietnam and living with the consequences of history and misdeed and horror" (Hicks, 2005). In this novel, O'Brien's protagonist John Wade struggles to live with posts-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from his combat experience during the Vietnam War. The narrator of the story is similar to the real-life O'Brien, a Vietnam War veteran who served in the United States (US) Army one year after John Wade in the Quảng Ngãi (meaning "Extensive Righteousness") province. As this is the author's own favorite novel (Ackerman, 2017), O'Brien also blends his own childhood personality (e.g., being chubby, lonely, talented in magic), his personal experience (e.g., having an alcoholic father), his wartime aspiration (being a soldier with the least desire to kill [O'Brien,

<sup>1</sup> "Mỹ" means "American" or "Beautiful" and "Lai" means "Mixed-race" in Vietnamese.

1999]), and real details about the Mỹ Lai Massacre with the fictional life and love of John Wade and his wife, Kathy Wade. After serving as Minnesota state senator and lieutenant governor, John Wade suffered a humiliating landslide loss during the US Senate primary because the media found out about his well-kept secret of [accidentally] killing two people (an old Vietnamese man and his fellow soldier) during the Mỹ Lai Massacre. As O'Brien tries to reconstruct the different events leading to the disappearance of Kathy Wade – without disclosing the story end, he includes many hypotheses and supporting evidence in an innovative way to evoke curiosity and different sets of emotions in his readers. The aspects of the Vietnam War that O'Brien touches upon in this novel are the unspeakable atrocities committed by American troops on unarmed Vietnamese civilians at Mỹ Lai 4 and the PTSD several soldiers subsequently suffered as they returned to America. In addition, the forgotten heroes of Mỹ Lai, the Mỹ Lai Massacre cover-up, and soldiers' moral courage are also presented in this article.

#### A. *The Evil of the Mỹ Lai Massacre*

The Mỹ Lai Massacre has been considered by people in the US and around the world as the most shameful part of the American military history, in which American soldiers proved that they themselves could commit Nazi-like atrocities. In various published interviews, O'Brien has expressed the possibility of how deep sorrow and immense anger could cause some soldiers to cross the line between rage and homicide to commit the barbaric murder of innocent civilians (Public Broadcasting Service [PBS], 2009a). According to Piwinski (2000), O'Brien is disgusted at the "grotesque, monstrous, obscene evil" of the 1968 Mỹ Lai Massacre and is disappointed that "his feelings about this shameful incident are no longer shared by many Americans." In "The Vietnam in Me," O'Brien writes, "It made me angry that only one person was convicted for Mỹ Lai and that was Lieutenant Calley... Soldiers who testified that they killed twenty people were never prosecuted... What really bugs me is that of the 150 or so people who were there, the American public only remembers Calley's name. But what about the rest of them? Those people are still all around us. What are they telling their wives and children? Are they guarding their secrets, too?" (O'Brien, 1994b). So then we have it: using the Mỹ Lai Massacre in his fiction novel *In the Lake of the Woods*, O'Brien "not only fictionally dramatizes the notorious massacre, he also makes it the novel's moral lynchpin as he explores the corrosive effect of protagonist John Wade's unsuccessful attempt to repress the evil he witnessed at Mỹ Lai" (Piwinski, 2000).

Interestingly, there is a real public figure whose life is similar to John Wade's – the real story of one [questionable] American hero, the [falsified citation] Bronze Star recipient, the [inflated] Congressional Medal of Honor recipient, the governor/senator from Nebraska, and the one time US presidential candidate - Bob Kerrey. For 32 years, Bob Kerrey kept secret about his commanding role in the 1969 Th ánh Phong (meaning "Sacred Maple") Massacre (that killed up to 23 unarmed civilians), until a reporter learned about it from his SEALs (Sea, Air, Land, US Navy Special Force) teammate's confession [Gerhard Klann] (Vistica, 2001; Accuracy in Media [AIM], 2001). Kerrey's squad after-action report did not mention the murdered civilians, only the falsified "21 killed Việt Cộng" (or VC, a shortened slang for Vietnamese Communists). This falsified report earned Kerrey a Bronze Star that he never mentioned in his official biography. Less than a month after the Th ánh Phong Massacre, Kerrey's next mission also went wrong because his squad was led into a trap. A grenade exploded at Kerrey's feet during the intense 90-second firefight, but he got his men into safety. Somehow, that disastrous mission was considered a success by their commanding officers. When his SEAL squad mate Mike Ambrose recommended Kerrey for a Silver Star, the request was embellished and the recommendation was elevated as it moved up the chain of command. One year after his last mission, Kerrey was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor (the nation's highest military award) from President Nixon. All his SEAL squad mates knew "it was ridiculous" and Ambrose mentioned that Kerrey wanted to turn the medal down because it was "just another night out" when "they got hit by the VC." Kerrey and his SEALs team believed that his Congressional Medal of Honor was politically motivated, because it was given within days of the invasion of Cambodia, and the unpopular Nixon needed more "heroes" for his war (McGeary and Tumulty, 2001). Although Kerrey felt that he was being used as "a pawn in the Nixon's war," he finally accepted the Congressional Medal of Honor on May 14, 1970 "for the sake of all members of the SEALs" (Vistica, 2001). By doing so, Kerrey became a national hero but he was uncomfortable being introduced as an American hero anywhere he went to.

Just like John Wade, Bob Kerrey was forever changed by the Vietnam War experience because he felt that, "I cannot be what I once was, carefree, no nightmares, no pain, no remorse, no regrets, feeling in church like God was smiling warmly down upon me..." (Vistica, 2001). Speaking of that awful night in Th ánh Phong on February 25, 1969, Kerrey admitted, "It's far more than guilt. It's the shame. You can never, can never get away from it. It darkens your day. I thought dying for your country was the worst thing that could happen to you, and I don't think it is. I think killing for your country can be a lot worse. Because that's the memory that haunts" (Vistica, 2001). To the US Army, this statement is unmistakably accurate with regard to the Mỹ Lai Massacre. It was the SHAME that many US Army officers deny, cover, and whitewash the Mỹ Lai Massacre, especially when the official number of murdered civilians went up to more than five hundred people.

The Mỹ Lai Massacre, also called the Pinkville Massacre, was a 4-hour brutal mass raping, maiming, and killing of 504 unarmed villagers<sup>2</sup>, mostly women, children, and old men by more than 100 US soldiers of the Charlie Company. It was the beginning of a 4-day tactical operation (March 16-19, 1968) in the village of Son Mỹ (meaning "Beautiful

<sup>2</sup> The murdered civilian victims included 17 pregnant women and 210 children under the age of 13.

Mountain”), a heavily populated area known to the American GIs as Pinkville<sup>3</sup> (*Peers Inquiry*, Library of Congress [LOC], 1970). The key target of the operation that morning was Mỹ Lai 4, a small sub-hamlet called Thuận Y ên (meaning “Gentle Peace”), part of the Son Mỹ village. Later that day, roughly two miles away, “another Task Force Barker unit, Bravo Company, similarly massacred 90 people in a village called Mỹ Khê 4” (Ridenhour, 1993). O’Brien used real names and actions of the American GIs who committed the reprehensible atrocities at Mỹ Lai, except the three fictional characters John Wade (nicknamed Sorcerer), Richard Thinbill, and Private First Class (PFC) Weatherby: “Simpson was killing children... He [Sorcerer or John Wade] found someone stabbing people with a big silver knife. Hutto was shooting corpses. T’Souvas was shooting children. Doherty and Terry were finishing off the wounded. This was not madness, Sorcerer understood. This was sin” (O’Brien, 1994a, p. 107). One of the most grotesque imageries of the savage attack describes how the soldiers shot people, “...dead and carved up with knives and raped and sodomized and bayoneted and blown into scraps. The bodies lay in piles” (O’Brien, 1994a, p. 200). Other gruesome details of the massacre show Sorcerer, “...came across a GI with a woman’s black ponytail flowing from his helmet [indicating he scaped his female victim]” (O’Brien, 1994a, p. 106) and “...came across a young female with both breasts gone. Someone had carved a C in her stomach” (O’Brien, 1994a, p. 210). Using vivid imagery, O’Brien paints the horrid massacre scene in which a logical human mind is no longer working. The massacre at Mỹ Lai that day was undeniably a deeply inhumane act committed by many American GIs. In reality, no GIs were shot or killed at Mỹ Lai 4 because there was no enemy resistance.

In many chapters, O’Brien also mentions Second Lieutenant (2LT) Rusty Calley [leader of the First Platoon] and his specific order of killing all unarmed civilians to his troops, “‘Eyeballs for eyeballs,’ Calley said. ‘One of your famous Bible regulations’ (O’Brien, 1994a, p. 102)... ‘Kill Nam,’ said Lieutenant Calley. He pointed his weapon at the earth, burned twenty quick rounds. ‘Kill it’... ‘Grease the place’... ‘Kill it’ (O’Brien, 1994a, p. 103)... the lieutenant said, ‘get with it - move - light up these fuckers’ (O’Brien, 1994a, p. 107)... Rusty Calley was among the talkers. Gooks were gooks, he said. They had been told to waste the place, and wasted it was, and who on God’s scorched green earth could possibly give a shit?” (O’Brien, 1994a, p. 205). O’Brien even describes Rusty Calley’s real-life murdering actions, “He [Sorcerer] watched a little boy climb out of the ditch and start to run, and he watched Calley grab the kid... then toss him back... and shoot the kid dead” (O’Brien, 1994a, p. 214-215). O’Brien also records Calley’s threat to his troops to remain quiet about the massacre: “‘Hey, *which* babies?’ Calley lifted his eyebrows at Boyce and Mitchell... ‘No way,’ said Boyce. ‘Not the breathing kind.’ Calley nodded. ‘... if you ask me, the guilty shouldn’t cast no stones. Another famous Bible regulation’ (O’Brien, 1994a, p. 212)... The little lieutenant pushed up on his toes... ‘Here’s the program. No more flappin’ lips. Higher-higher’s already got a big old cactus up its ass people blabbling about a bunch of dead civilians’” (O’Brien, 1994a, p. 205-206). Obviously, O’Brien’s viewpoint about the Mỹ Lai Massacre is very clear in his novel. This is evil and murder; and those who commit this act are absolutely guilty. In a study on the Vietnam Veteran’s war stress and trauma, researchers from Brooklyn College and Columbia University found that American soldiers who witnessed “abusive violence” also experienced PTSD like those who committed atrocities (Laufer et al., 1984).

As reported by Matthew Dallek, Associate Professor at George Washington University, what O’Brien did not mention was that one American soldier, Varnado Simpson, admitted in a 1982 [*Four Hours My Lai*] interview that he gruesomely mutilated his victims, slashing their throats, cutting off their tongues, chopping off their hands, and scalping them, “A lot of people were doing it and I just followed” (Dallek, 2018; Montgomery, 2018). Simpson committed suicide 15 years later after that interview. British journalist Michael Bilton, who produced the 1982 documentary film and co-wrote the book *Four Hours My Lai* had said, “Most Americans still don’t realize how savage it was... They ripped open young girls with bayonets. They fired into women’s [private parts]. They threw an [alive] old man down a well and tossed a grenade in after him. They didn’t just shoot people” (Auchmutey, 1998). All this awful Mỹ Lai experience plays a crucial role in John Wade’s life trauma and the suspicion that he might have killed his wife Kathy. It also displays the fact that O’Brien’s America is “a perverse and outrageous double standard” (Coffey, 1990), as O’Brien states, “That’s where I think our nation and our army back then lost its sense of what sin is and what evil is, and then somehow justify it all and say ‘that’s war for you, and this is how you have to conduct yourself’” (Gross, 2010). The Mỹ Lai Massacre is different from other massacres that occurred in Vietnam; it was the US soldiers who committing the Nazi-like atrocities, while the US was “supposed to be on a moral crusade for freedom” (Auchmutey, 1998).

### B. *The True Heroes of the Mỹ Lai Massacre*

What O’Brien does not mention in his fiction novel *In the Lake of the Woods* was that the Mỹ Lai Massacre reportedly ended when a courageous 25-year old American helicopter pilot, Warrant Officer (WO1) Hugh Thompson, Jr., landed his OH-23 helicopter<sup>4</sup> between the advancing Charlie Company soldiers and a few unarmed villagers left, still hiding in their earthen bunker. Perhaps Tim O’Brien did not mention Hugh Thompson because Thompson was not publicly recognized as an American hero until 1998, many years after *In the Lake of the Woods* was published. According to Jon Wiener, Professor Emeritus of history at University of California, Irvine, who had interviewed

<sup>3</sup> The village Son Mỹ’s high population density was depicted in red color on the Army maps; therefore, the area was called Pinkville.

<sup>4</sup> OH-23, also called Raven helicopter, is a small, light 3-man observation helicopter with a “Goldfish bowl canopy” used to draw fire from the enemies and to let the American infantry soldiers know where the enemies are in order to protect the ground troops.

Thompson in 2000 in Los Angeles, by the time Thompson recognized what was going on at Mỹ Lai 4, American soldiers had already killed hundreds of Vietnamese civilians (Wiener, 2018). Thompson mentioned what his 20-year old crew member Glenn Andreotta, his 19-year old helicopter gunner Lawrence Colburn, and he himself saw when flying over Mỹ Lai that fateful day, “we started noticing these large numbers of bodies every where... And we started thinking what might have happened, but you did not want to accept that thought - because if you accepted it, that means your own fellow Americans, people you were there to protect, were doing something very evil... They [murdered Vietnamese civilians] were not combatants. They were old women, old men, children, kids, and babies.” When Thompson went back to Mỹ Lai on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the massacre in 1998, an old lady survivor that Thompson had saved asked him, “Why didn’t the people who committed these acts come back with you?... So we could forgive them” (Wiener, 2018).

The most harrowing and touching details of what really happened that fateful day of March 16, 1968 in Mỹ Lai do not come the point of view of those who took life, like what O’Brien describes in *In the Lake of the Woods*; they come from the point of view of those who protected life, as recorded from the 2009 emotional PBS interview with Thompson’s door gunner Colburn, in memory of Thompson (PBS, 2009b). Always addressing with respect “Mr. Thompson” in all his conversations, Colburn described the Mỹ Lai Massacre that he, Thompson, and Andreotta personally observed that day, “It was a Saturday morning, people would go to market on Saturday morning [as they had done for centuries]. And we saw groups of men, women, and children leaving the village. We did not think it was unusual. [The Army] probably dropped some flyers before artillery prep, so it was good the civilian population got out of the way. This was right in the center of Son Mỹ, the village... we thought ‘Wonderful, they’re getting out of the way. Let’s continue our recon.’ We were off or out of that particular area for ten, fifteen, maybe twenty minutes. When we came back, those same people were dead or dying on the road that they were leaving on, and they were the same people. That’s when we started marking wounded people... We’d drop a green smoke grenade... to tell our low gunship that we’re marking a civilian here that could use medical attention... [We] left again to continue reconnaissance, came back, and the people that we’d marked were dead... it became obvious to us what was happening when we lingered by one of the bodies that we’d marked. It was a young female with a chest wound, but she was still alive. And we saw a Captain (CPT) with a squad of American soldiers approaching her, and Mr. Thompson decided he’d moved back, stay at a hover, and watch. And that’s what we did, and we saw the CPT approach the woman, look down at her, kick her with his foot, step back, and [he] just blew her away right in front of us... Simultaneously, all three of us - Glenn Andreotta, Hugh Thompson, and I – said, ‘You son of a bitch!’ We screamed it. There was no reason. She was no threat. There was no reason to do that. Later on we found that it was CPT Medina... who did this” (PBS, 2009b).

And Colburn continued, “He [Thompson] was furious. That was not his idea of being an American soldier... Mr. Thompson got on the radio and just said, ‘This isn’t right. These are civilians. There are people killing civilians down there.’ And that’s when he decided to intervene... We were ready to face the consequences. It was so obviously wrong. When you see babies machine-gunned, you must intervene... Then Glenn Andreotta keyed his mic and told Mr. Thompson about an irrigation ditch which he saw... it had bodies in it - women and children and elderly people” (PBS, 2009b). The most ironic and morally depraved scene of all was when Thompson landed his OH-23 helicopter for the first time to ask a Sergeant (SGT) standing next to the ditch to help the wounded people in the ditch. That officer replied, “Yeah, we’ll help them out of their misery” (PBS, 2009b). As Thompson and his crew left, they heard the automatic gun fire and immediately found out what was going on, “Glenn said, ‘He’s shooting into the ditch.’ Mr. Thompson was just beside himself. He felt helpless... These people were marched into the ditch while begging for mercy for their children. And there was no mercy that day” (PBS, 2009b).

Then Glenn saw some people in an earthen bunker peering out a small hole. Thompson noticed that there was a squad of American soldiers approaching that bunker, and he knew that these civilians had less than 30 seconds to live. So he landed his OH-23 helicopter the second time in between the civilian people in the bunkers and the approaching American soldiers. Thompson then asked his two crew members, as a man asking for the last request before he was going to die: “Y’all cover me! If these bastards open up on me or these [civilian] people, you open up on them. Promise me!” (Angers, 1999). When Thompson got out of his OH-23 Raven, he did not take any weapon with him except his sidearm still in its holster. Thompson then confronted the 2nd Platoon’s leader, 2LT Stephen Brooks, “Hey, listen, hold your fire. I’m going to try to get these people out of the bunker. Just hold your men here” (Angers, 1999). When the superior Brooks told Thompson that he could get the civilians out of the bunker with a hand grenade, Thompson seriously demanded, “Just hold your men here. I think I can do better than that” (Angers, 1999). Seeing that Colburn had a machine gun M-60 pointed at their direction<sup>5</sup>, Brooks and his platoon soldiers stayed put. Thompson then courageously rescued about 12 civilians, including old men, women, and children. He took another radical departure from the norm during war time by asking his two friends Danny Millians and Brian Livingston to land their UH-1 Huey gunships in the actively operating military zone to take the civilians to a safety area. Those 12 civilians would have been killed if Thompson did not intervene. Later Glenn even jumped out of the helicopter and got down to the bloody and slimy ditch filled with massacred civilians [up to his waist] to rescue an eight year-old boy who still held on tight to his dead mother’s body, and Thompson’s crew took the boy to the Quảng Ngãi hospital. To Thompson, Glenn

<sup>5</sup> Colburn testified later that he pointed his M-60 at the ground and was thankful that no Charlie Company soldiers took any aggressive action during the standoff.

Andreotta was a true hero that day. O'Brien uses a similar scene of Sorcerer accidentally falling in the same ditch filled with blood and slime from dead bodies of massacred Vietnamese civilians in *In the Lake of the Woods*, but not to rescue anyone else. Instead, Sorcerer accidentally killed one of his fellow soldiers [PFC Weatherby] (O'Brien, 1994a, p. 64), perhaps because the ditch was slippery with blood, blasted body parts, and excretion, so Sorcerer could not control his rifle while trying to get out. In real life, Thompson's courageous team member Andreotta gave his life to his country when he was killed in action three weeks later on April 8, 1968.

According to Colburn, even though Thompson and his crew already saved nearly 12 innocent civilians, this sad experience haunted Thompson for the rest of his life because he would beat himself up, "why didn't I intervene more quickly? I could have saved more people" (PBS, 2009b). Associate Professor Matthew Dallek at George Washington University (2018) reported that the Army's Public Information Office issued the March 18, 1968 press release about the Mỹ Lai operation that was full of falsehoods, "For the third time in recent weeks, the Americal Division's 11th Brigade infantrymen from Task Force (TF) Barker raided a Viet Cong stronghold known as "Pinkville" six miles northeast of Quảng Ngãi, killing 128 enemy<sup>6</sup> in a running battle" (Roberts, 1968). Because of Thompson's report, the indiscriminate killing of Vietnamese civilians during entire Mỹ Lai operation was called off early, around 2:00 – 4:00 PM on March 16, 1968, instead of the end of the day of March 19, 1968. Indirectly, Thompson had saved thousands of civilians from being massacred for the rest of the 4-day Mỹ Lai operation (US Naval Academy [USNA], 2004). Thompson quickly received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his action at Mỹ Lai, but the award citation contained falsified and fabricated information<sup>7</sup>. Thompson threw away the falsified citation and medal and suspected that the Distinguished Flying Cross medal was an effort to shut him up.

Speaking of the event that day at the US Naval Academy in 2004, Thompson states, "We do have casualties of war. Civilians get killed in war... It was a massacre, and civilians were murdered, not killed. There was nothing accidental about this. These were not soldiers. They were not military people. They were hoodlums, renegades disguised as soldiers, and that's what hurt me the most that day, because my job was to save their life..." (USNA, 2004). "Hoodlums, renegades disguised as soldiers," Thompson was right, because it had been reported that those who had committed criminal acts prior to joining the Army became prolific killers or killers without remorse. They were part of the McNamara's Morons (see "Tim O'Brien's 'Bad' Vietnam War: *Going After Cacciato* & Its Historical Perspective" [Mahini et al., 2018b]). In their 2003 investigation on the atrocities committed by US Tiger Force in the Quảng Ngãi province (The Blade, 2003), Sallah and his reporters wrote that Private (PVT) Sam Ybarra and SGT William Doyle were the prolific killers of civilians and they both had criminal records before their Army service (Sallah and Weiss, 2006; Sallah, 2017). For their investigation of the Tiger Force killing spree, Sallah and his associates received the 2004 Pulitzer Prize. *The Peers Inquiry* report on the cover-up of the Mỹ Lai Massacre (see Section D "Uncovering the Mỹ Lai Cover-up with American Conscience and Democracy" below) also states, "TF Barker had some men who had been law violators and hoodlums in civilian life and who continued to exercise those traits, where possible, after entering the Army... it is considered likely that the unfavorable attitude of some of the men of TF Barker toward the Vietnamese was a contributing factor in the events of Sơn Mỹ" (LOC, 1970).

### C. *The Thorough Cover-up of the Mỹ Lai Massacre*

A cover-up of the Mỹ Lai Massacre throughout the American Army chain of command, from company to division (LOC, 1970) that involved 20 senior Army officers including two generals, started on day one to omit/falsify the facts and finally conceal the Mỹ Lai Massacre (Ridenhour, 1993). This cover-up included submitting falsified reports and arranging the disappearance of potential living witnesses. When Thompson's aircraft arrived back at landing zone Dottie around 11:15 AM on March 16, 1968, he reported to his section leader, CPT Lloyd, and the company commander, Major (MAJ) Watke, what he had seen. Thompson's complaint was confirmed by other crewmen and pilots who had also flown over Mỹ Lai 4 that day. Details of the cover-up, described in the *Peers Inquiry* report (LOC, 1970) and summarized by PBS (2009b), involved Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Barker, Colonel (COL) Henderson, Major General (MG) Koster, LTC Holladay, Brigadier General (BG) Young, etc. At the high-rank officer meeting on March 18, 1968, COL Henderson was tasked to conduct an investigation, which appeared "to have been little more than a pretense of an investigation and had as their goal the suppression of the true facts concerning the events of 16 March" (LOC, 1970). This investigation contained mainly a brief interview with Thompson, a brief conversation with CPT Medina (who later instructed his troops to stay silent about their actions), and a fly-over of the Sơn Mỹ village area. During this interview, Thompson was described as being furious at "Henderson's lack of concern," and he threw his pilot's wings to the ground (PBS, 2009b).

From March 19-22, 1968, COL Henderson made a series of oral reports to BG Young and MG Koster and he concluded: "This operation was well planned, well executed, and successful. Friendly casualties were light and the enemy suffered heavily. The infantry unit on the ground and helicopters were able to assist civilians in leaving the area in caring for and/or evacuating the wounded." MG Koster accepted this falsified information as "adequately responding

<sup>6</sup> Falsehood reported by the US Army: killing 128 [VC] enemies, instead of murdering between 347 [figure not including those killed in the Mỹ Lai 5 area] to 504 unarmed civilians.

<sup>7</sup> Thompson was falsely praised for rescuing and taking a Vietnamese child "caught in intense crossfire" [there was no enemy resistance] to the hospital and that his "sound judgment had greatly enhanced Vietnamese-American relations in the operation area."

to the charges made by Thompson.” On April 8, 1968, Task Force Barker’s mission was declared a success and the Companies involved were disbanded. The Mỹ Lai Massacre problem appeared to have been squashed until about mid-April 1968, when the Vietnamese Sơn Mỹ Village Chief submitted a report to the Sơn Tịnh (meaning “Quiet Mountain”) District Chief alleging mass civilian killings by US Army soldiers as “an act of insane violence, if true.” Around the same time, officers of the Army Republic of Việt Nam (ARVN) or South Vietnam Army also received VC propaganda alleging that US forces had killed 500 people in the Sơn Mỹ village. To respond to these Vietnamese sources, MG Koster directed COL Henderson to change his oral report to writing. The “Report of Investigation” dated 24 April, 1968 consisted of only two typewritten pages and two inclosures - the operation summary and list of personnel purported interviewed. Making no reference to Thompson or to any other members of the aero scout unit, it falsely concluded that “20 non-combatants were inadvertently killed by artillery and by crossfire between the US and VC forces, no civilians were gathered and shot by US Forces, and the allegation that US Forces had shot and killed 450-500 civilians was obviously VC propaganda” (LOC, 1970).

PBS (2009c) also reported that as part of the cover up, between April to May 1968, righteous American soldiers like Thompson and his crew and other Army soldiers who refused to participate in the Mỹ Lai Massacre were assigned to dangerous missions to “make them go away”: “The Army sends Warrant Officer Thompson out in increasingly dangerous situations. Thompson is shot down five times, the last occurring during a mission from Đà Nẵng (Vietnamese adaptation of the ethnic minority Chăm word “*da nak*,” meaning “Opening of a Large River”) to an airbase at Chu Lai (named after the mandarin name of General Victor Krulak), which breaks his back. Many members of Charlie Company have a similar bad experience, such as being isolated in the mountains surrounded by enemy snipers for over 50 days following the massacre (PBS, 2009c). It has also been reported that not every soldier in the Charlie Company committed the murderous acts that day (USNA, 2004). For example, PFC Michael Bernhardt reported that CPT Medina threatened him and gave him more dangerous assignments such as point duty on patrol to silence him. Other soldiers who refused to murder civilians were Team Leader Ronald Grzesik, SP4 Robert Maples, and PVT Harry Stanley (Angers, 1999). Stanley refused to massacre unarmed civilians, even when 2LT Calley threatened court-martial and pointed his rifle at Stanley, who pointed and cocked his pistol back to Calley. After Stanley’s story (“I ain’t killin’ no women and children” [Angers, 1999]) was told in several newspapers and in a film documentary, the City of Berkeley, California, designated October 17 to be the “Harry Stanley Day” to honor him (Herald, 1989).

#### *D. Uncovering the Mỹ Lai Cover-up with American Conscience and Democracy*

The military cover-up of the Mỹ Lai Massacre would have been a *fait accompli* if not because of the courage of more US soldiers/heroes like 21-year old Ron Ridenhour and other citizens/reporters. Ridenhour joined the US Army at the end of 1967 as a helicopter door gunner. By mid April 1968, while serving in the Quảng Ngãi province, he first learned about the Mỹ Lai or Pinkville Massacre over a beer with PFC “Butch” Gruver [some references cited “Gruber”], one of his friends from the Schofield Barracks in Hawaii: “Oh, man, we massacred this whole village... We just lined them up and killed them... Men, women and kids, everybody, we killed them all” (University of Missouri-Kansas City [UMKC], 2018). The young and morally conscientious Ridenhour could not ignore this story because he felt, “It was an instantaneous recognition... that this was something too horrible... and that I wasn't gonna be a part of it. Just simply having the knowledge, I felt, made me complicit, unless I acted on it.” Ridenhour also recognized, “While the massacre at Mỹ Lai was the logical extension of the smaller but far more numerous day-to-day atrocities I had witnessed as a helicopter door gunner, hearing the story come from the lips of someone I knew and trusted, someone who'd been there, who saw it and participated in it, staggered me” (Ridenhour, 1993).

So Ridenhour spent the remainder of his time in Vietnam to locate more witnesses and facts by going to the divisional Long-Range/Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP) Company, where he could find four or five more people who had been his friends in Hawaii and had been in the Charlie Company. These friends had transferred into the divisional LRRP Company within ten days of the Mỹ Lai Massacre. Ridenhour tried to engage his friends on a one-on-one conversation to obtain information. Two of them were Ridenhour’s very good friends, PFCs Michael Terry and William Doherty, who admittedly “finished off” the noisy, wailing, and moaning wounded civilians in the ditch, so that they would have a quiet lunch break. Mike Terry<sup>8</sup> was a close friend of Ridenhour, whom Ridenhour would never believe to be able to commit murder. Ridenhour wrote about his feelings when hearing that his fine friend Mike Terry admitted that he too had committed murder at Mỹ Lai 4, “As Mike told me the story, my head felt like it must feel when someone is scalping you alive. Even as it is actually happening, you can’t bring yourself to believe it. But yes, yes, yes, he said on every detail. It was all true. He hadn’t shot into the people when Calley first had them all crowded into the ditch. That was awful. The whole thing was like a bad dream. ‘It was like a Nazi kind of thing,’ he said” (Ridenhour, 1994). After talking to SGT LaCroix and obtaining the falsified military report (about 128 VC killed in Mỹ Lai) from the official history of the division, the coordinates of the village, and other specific information, Ridenhour needed one more witness who did not participate in the Mỹ Lai atrocity, and that was PFC Michael Bernhardt. After CPT Medina threatened Bernhardt to keep his mouth shut about the Mỹ Lai Massacre, Bernhardt’s commander did not allow him to transfer to any place (e.g., the LRRP Company). Like Thompson, Bernhardt was sent to all the dangerous places, and

<sup>8</sup> PFC Michael Terry is described by Ridenhour as a “very fine human being”, a kind-hearted young Mormon who was so pure that “he didn’t cuss, discuss women, lie, cheat, steal or speak badly of anyone... Just sort of determinedly innocent.”

even to the front of the line every time they thought an ambush was coming. They would not let him out of the field when he got bad jungle rot for four months, to the point of not being able to walk. Dropping from 145 to 105 pounds (lbs) (Angers, 1999), finally without obtaining any permission, Bernhardt jumped on a supply chopper as it was lifting off and went himself straight to the aid station, where the doctors told him that he should have been there months earlier (UMKC, 2018).

Ridenhour did not bring up the M̃y Lai Massacre when he was in the US Army because he was afraid of his own safety (the way Thompson, Bernhardt, and other righteous Charlie Company soldiers were treated). When he finished his tour and returned home in Phoenix, AZ, against all friends' and families' advice of leaving the incident alone, on March 18, 1969 (a year or so after the massacre), he sent 30 letters to President Nixon; Secretaries of State, Defense, and Army; Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staffs, and two dozens of members of Congress in Washington detailing the M̃y Lai Massacre and telling them about a "2LT Kally" who mowed down groups of civilians with machine gun. Citing what Winston Churchill once said, "A country without conscience is a country without a soul, and a country without a soul is a country that cannot survive," Ridenhour urged an investigation onto the alleged massacre (Angers, 1999). Most recipients ignored Ridenhour's letter. However, with the support of AZ Congressman Mo Udall, they contacted the Army's Chief of Staff General Westmoreland and the Pentagon. By April 1969, the Office of the Inspector General began a full inquiry, started interviewing members of the Charlie Company, and eventually identified 2LT Calley as a suspect. Early in August 1969, the investigation was turned over to the US Army Criminal Investigation Command (commonly known as CID). On September 5, 1969, Calley was charged with six counts of premeditated murder the day before his scheduled discharge from the Army.

When the investigative reporter Seymour Hersh got a tip that 2LT William Calley of the Charlie Company was being court-martialed on charges that he had murdered unarmed Vietnamese civilians, Hersh interviewed Calley about his role in the massacre. Calley insisted that M̃y Lai had been a fierce battle against the VC, not a massacre of unarmed civilians. Undeterred, Hersh sought to interview other soldiers who were there. In the second week of November 1969, more than a year and a half after that fateful day, Hersh reported the M̃y Lai Massacre and its cover-up to the public on *Dispatch News Service*, a small wire agency (because no other large, national journals wanted to publish it) (PBS, 2009c). Hersh won the 1970 Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting for this work. A week after, the first gruesome pictures of the M̃y Lai Massacre taken by the Army photographer Ron Haeberle with his private color camera appeared in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (Theiss, 2018). In the same month, Mike Wallace of CBS News interviewed ex-GI Paul Meadlo, who remorsefully confessed to shooting and killing many unarmed Vietnamese civilians of all ages, together with 2LT Calley.

By late November 1969, GEN Westmoreland appointed Lieutenant General (LTG) W.R. Peers to investigate the potential military cover-up of the M̃y Lai Massacre (Raviv, 2018). Early in December 1969, the *Wall Street Journal* informal poll showed that most Americans didn't believe the occurrence of the M̃y Lai Massacre (Laderman, 2018). As evidence was collected, the *Peers Inquiry* recommended that charges be brought against two non-commissioning officers (NCOs) and 28 officers for the M̃y Lai Massacre cover-up. The CID report also showed adequate evidence to charge 33 out of 105 Charlie Company soldiers with major war crimes. But 17 had left the Army and charges against them were dropped due to the 1955 Supreme Court case *Toth v. Quarles*<sup>9</sup>. Of the 13 soldiers that were charged, only five were tried, and four were acquitted. In the end, only 2LT William Calley, the First Platoon Commander of the Charlie Company, was convicted for premeditated murder of "not less than" 22 civilians and was sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labor in March 1971.

#### E. *The Corrupt President, Deluded Politicians, and Confused American Mass*

The recent release of the declassified Haldeman's (Nixon's Chief of Staff) handwritten notes stored at the Nixon Presidential Library in Yorba Linda, CA, shows that Nixon started his shadow campaign to sabotage the M̃y Lai Massacre trials as early as December 1, 1969. Nixon gave Haldeman the following instructions to do damage control of the M̃y Lai crisis: "use dirty tricks... [but] not too high a level... Discredit one witness [referring to Hugh Thompson]... We have to use a senator or two [to support Nixon's shadow campaign]" (Angers, 2014). As a result, records show that Haldeman met with Nofziger (White House Director of Communications) the next day, who in turn solicited help from South Carolina Congressman L. Mendel Rivers, Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee and a dependable Nixon's ally. Congressmen Rivers and Herbert formed a subcommittee to take testimonies from witnesses (including that from Hugh Thompson) in secret sessions, sealed the testimonies and refused to share them with defendants' lawyers to sabotage the trials. Secretary of the Army Stanley Resor and one prosecutor COL William Eckhardt had condemned Rivers and Herbert's tactics. Meanwhile, Rivers asserted that there was no massacre and that the alleged M̃y Lai Massacre reports were simply attempts to oppose the Vietnam War (UMKC, 2018); in fact, Rivers did everything he could to protect the soldiers who were responsible for the massacre. Worse, after Thompson testified before the secret hearings of the Armed Services Subcommittee, Rivers publicly mentioned that Hugh Thompson should be the only soldier at M̃y Lai to be punished (for turning his weapons on fellow [hoodlum] American troops).

<sup>9</sup> The 1955 Supreme Court case *Toth v. Quarles* asserts that US ex-servicemen cannot constitutionally be subjected to trial by military court-martial.

Although Rivers unsuccessfully tried to have Thompson court-martialed, he was successful in the defamation of Thompson's character. As a result, instead of coming home as a hero for stopping the horrific massacre, protecting unarmed civilians, and upholding the moral courage of the American Army, Thompson was accused to be "unpatriotic," "traitor," and "VC sympathizer." He was frozen in rank and ostracized by both the US Army and the public. Colburn reported that within 15 minutes after Thompson walked into an officers' club, he would find himself sitting alone after other officers recognized who he was (PBS, 2009b). At home, Thompson started receiving hate mail, death threats over the phone, and mutilated dead animals on his doorstep (USNA, 2004).

The tactics used by Nixon and his sycophants seemed to be working because the confused media and the public were more supportive of the mass murderer Calley than the morally courageous Thompson. Calley's verdict of guilt and sentence of life imprisonment caused a huge rally from both the rights and the lefts, the hawks and the doves. He had simply performing his duty, or he was considered as a scapegoat for the politicians and military brass who dragged America into an immoral war, they would say. About three months after his verdict, the White House received more than 300,000 telegrams and letters expressing support for Calley. Calley himself received approximately 10,000 letters and packages a day. To appease their angry constituents, deluded politicians even came up with their own colorful and imbecile acts. Georgia's Governor Jimmy Carter [the future US president] urged his state residents to "honor the flag as Rusty [murderer Calley] had done!" Indiana's Governor Whitcomb ordered his state's flags at half-staff! Mississippi's Governor Williams asserted that his state was "about ready to secede from the Union" over the Calley verdict. Local leaders across the country also demanded that President Nixon pardon Calley (Raviv, 2018). Some of Calley's supporters went to greater lengths to let their voices heard. Two musicians Julian Wilson and James M. Smith of Muscle Shoals, AL wrote the "C Company – Battle Hymne of Lt. Calley, featured Terry Nelson. On January 10, 1972, *Time Magazine* published the results of a public opinion poll conducted by two Harvard scholars on Mỹ Lai. It showed that two-thirds of the 989 Americans surveyed thought that "incidents such as this [Mỹ Lai] are bound to happen in a war". Only 22 percent of those surveyed expressed the moral repugnance to the action that "soldiers may have intentionally gunned down unarmed women and children" and 13 percent had no opinion (*Time Magazine*, 1972). As a result of public outrage, Calley's jail time was reduced by Nixon to about three and a half years of house arrest and he was a free man in November 1974.

In a letter to President Nixon in April 1970, CPT Aubrey M. Daniel, Calley's prosecutor, strongly protested Nixon's interference of the military judicial system, "When the verdict was rendered, I was totally shocked and dismayed at the reaction of many people across the nation. Much of the adverse public reaction I can attribute to people who have acted emotionally and without being aware of the evidence that was presented and perhaps even the laws of this nation regulating the conduct of war. These people have undoubtedly viewed Lieutenant Calley's conviction simply as the conviction of an American officer for killing the enemy. Others, no doubt out of a sense of frustration, have seized upon the conviction as a means of protesting the war in Viet-Nam. To believe, however, that any large percentage of the population could believe the evidence which was presented and approve of the conduct of Lieutenant Calley would be as shocking to my conscience as the conduct itself, since I believe that we are still a civilized nation... How shocking it is if so many people across the nation have failed to see the moral issue which was involved in the trial of Lieutenant Calley-- that it is unlawful for an American soldier to summarily execute unarmed and unresisting men, women, children, and babies. But how much more appalling it is to see so many of the political leaders of the nation who have failed to see the moral issue, or, having seen it, to compromise it for political motive in the face of apparent public displeasure with the verdict... In view of your previous statements concerning this matter, I have been particularly shocked and dismayed at your decision to intervene in these proceedings in the midst of the public clamor... Your intervention has, in my opinion, damaged the military judicial system and lessened any respect it may have gained as a result of the proceedings... I would expect that the President of the United States, a man whom I believed should and would provide the moral leadership for this nation, would stand fully behind the law of this land on a moral issue which is so clear and about which there can be no compromise. For this nation to condone the acts of Lieutenant Calley is to make us no better than our enemies and make any pleas by this nation for the humane treatment of our own prisoners meaningless" (Daniel, 1970).

#### F. *True Military Heroes and Moral Courage*

In contrast to the prevailing public opinion about the Mỹ Lai Massacre at the time, professional military leaders thought differently about Calley and his verdict. These leaders believed that Calley should have never been an officer in the US Army because he was initially rejected in 1964 due to hearing defect. Calley also struggled with achieving respect from his men. In 1971, COL Robert Heinl, Jr. wrote about the college dropout Calley, "Lieutenant William L. Calley, Jr., an ex-company clerk, was a platoon leader who never even learned to read a map. His credentials for a commission were derisory; he was no more officer-material than any Pfc. in his platoon. Yet the Army had to take him because no one else was available. Commenting on the Calley conviction, a colonel at Ft. Benning said, 'We have at least two or three thousand more Calleys in the Army just waiting for the next calamity'" (Heinl, 1971).

In his 2017 book *My Lai: Vietnam, 1968, and the Descent into Darkness*, Professor Howard Jones reported that many Vietnam Veterans felt that the Mỹ Lai Massacre had posed a negative impact on the military, "Perhaps the most outspoken critic was Harry G. Summers, a retired colonel in the U.S. Army, veteran of the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and best selling author of books on military strategy. At a 1994 conference on Mỹ Lai at Tulane University, he told the



audience, ‘Calley and Medina ought to have been hung and then drawn and quartered and the remains put at the gates at Fort Benning to remind all who enter of the consequences. The bastard fell through the cracks.’ In a television interview, David Hackworth [former US Army COL highly decorated in both Korean and Vietnam Wars, creator of Tiger Force] agreed with this position. Calley ‘should have been lined up against the wall and shot.... The guy’s a murderer.’ At the same Tulane conference attended by Summers, [Tim] O’Brien said that ‘military authorities today should prosecute both the perpetrators of the war crimes at Mỹ Lai and those who covered them up. Calley should have remained in jail all his life. He was no scapegoat; he committed the crimes – as did the other in Charlie Company who followed his orders and, like him, publically admitted to the killings. O’Brien’s comment echoed what Lieutenant General Peers had said fifteen years earlier: ‘There is no statute of limitations for war crimes’” (Jones, 2017). These expressions are consistent with the international law of war. The Nuremberg Principles 1946, Article 1 states, “Any person who commits an act which is a crime under international law is responsible himself and may be punished.” Article 4 says, “Even if a person committed the criminal act under orders from the government or a superior, he is still responsible, if a moral choice was in fact possible for him” (International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], 2018).

On August 19, 2009, Calley made his first public apology for the massacre in a speech to the Kiwanis club of Greater Columbus, Georgia, “There is not a day that goes by that I do not feel remorse for what happened that day in Mỹ Lai... I feel remorse for the Vietnamese who were killed, for their families, for the American soldiers involved and their families. I am very sorry” (Jones, 2017). But Colburn and Professor Emeritus Howard Jones believed that those hollow words showed no true repentance, “There just was no inner change of heart... I mean it just wasn’t there. No matter how people tried to paint it.” Professor Jones noted that because at the end, Calley still insisted that he’d only been following orders of CPT Medina (Raviv, 2018), who recently passed away on May 8, 2018.

It took the Army 30 years to recognize Hugh Thompson’s good deeds and award Thompson, Colburn, and Andreotta (posthumously) the prestigious Soldier’s Medal (the highest medal the US Army can award their troops for courage not involving direct conflict with their enemy) on March 6, 1998, thanks to the 9-year letter campaign by the retired Clemson University professor David Egan, his wife, and the businessman/retired Army Reserve COL William Cavanaugh. Professor Egan, who was a US Army officer in France in the 1960s, could recognize a true American hero when he saw one. Although Egan knew about the Mỹ Lai Massacre for years, he did not learn about Thompson’s heroic deeds until he saw the British documentary *Remember Mỹ Lai* in 1989. He took it on as his mission to make the US Army recognize Thompson as “one of its best and most courageous... outstanding soldier... a shining example of the caliber of men who served their country with honor in the Vietnam War” (Angers, 1999). At first Thompson refused the Soldier’s medal unless it was awarded to all his crew and the ceremony to be held in a public ceremony in front of the Vietnam War Memorial wall.

The award event was broadcasted live on TV that day. Presenting the Soldier’s medals to Thompson and Colburn, MG Michael Ackerman described the Mỹ Lai Massacre as “one of the most shameful chapters in the Army’s history.” MG Ackerman also remarked, “Mr. Hugh C. Thompson, Mr. Lawrence Colburn, and Mr. Glenn U. Andreotta exhibited great personal courage and ethical conduct at the Vietnam’s village of Mỹ Lai... It is clear that the crew saved the lives of at least eleven Vietnamese and initiated the report which saved countless others by bringing about a cease-fire. In his book, *The Mỹ Lai Inquiry*, LTG William Peers wrote, ‘If there was a hero of Mỹ Lai, he [Thompson] was it.’... The ability to ‘Do the right thing’ - even at the risk of their personal safety - that guided these soldiers to do what they did... This award... Is a tribute to these great soldiers... whose actions... have set standard for all soldiers to follow...” In response, Thompson said, “I would like to thank all them [veterans] who served their country with honor. In a very real sense, this medal is for you.” Colburn quoted General Douglas McArthur: “The soldier, be he friend or foe, is charged with the protection of the weak and the unarmed, it is his very existence for being.”

From being ostracized as traitors by imbecile politicians for thirty years, Thompson and his crew began to be recognized as national heroes for their real true worth. After receiving their Soldier’s medals, Thompson and Colburn were invited to West Point, US Naval Academy in Annapolis, MD; Marines Corp Base Quantico, and US Air Force Academy to lecture on the topic of moral courage to young cadets. They also received honorary doctoral degrees from Connecticut College in the Fall of 1998 and had songs written about them. After Thompson’s death in 2006, Colburn emotionally talked about his revered WO1 Hugh Thompson, “He was from Stone Mountain, Georgia... He was Cherokee. His father’s father walked the Trail of Tears... he had a very strict upbringing. He knew right from wrong... He had very solid moral footing” (PBS, 2009b). Professor Emeritus Howard Jones of University of Alabama dedicates his 2017 book *My Lai: Vietnam, 1968, and the Descent into Darkness* as, “A special tribute to Warrant Officer Hugh C. Thompson, Specialist-4 Glenn W. Andreotta, and Specialist-4 Lawrence M. Colburn, for personifying the essence of good character in the midst of horrific circumstances.” Professor Emeritus Wiener ended his 2018 article with, “Hugh Thompson died in 2006, when he was only 62. I wish we could have done more to thank him.” Now the Mỹ Lai story is part of the curriculum at the US and European military service academies. Lawrence (2018) writes that Air Force MAJ Logan Sisson, who is teaching ethics at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, proudly shows his students a picture he took with Hugh Thompson and Larry Colburn, “If we can use the term heroes, if there were any heroes at Mỹ Lai, it was them.” Thompson’s heroic action resulted in an order for a cease fire at Mỹ Lai and put an end to a 4-day operation that could cost up to 20,000 civilian lives (U.S. Naval Academy [USNA], 2004). After more than 30 years of

being ostracized, Thompson was finally recognized, “Warrant Thompson’s heroism exemplifies the highest standards of personal courage and ethical conduct, reflecting distinct credit on him, and the United States Army” (USNA, 2004).

#### G. *A Mỹ Lai a Month?*

Indeed, while praising the courage of Thompson, Professor Emeritus Wiener also mentioned the recent study by Nick Turse, a Ph.D. from Columbia University who found declassified Army materials in the National Archives that indicated “invasive and systemic” killing of Vietnamese civilians by American soldiers. One soldier Turse interviewed even told him that there had been “a Mỹ Lai a month” (Wiener, 2018). Turse’s investigations of American war crimes in Vietnam (Turse, 2013) have gained him a Guggenheim Fellowship, a fellowship at Harvard University’s Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, and a Ridenhour Prize for Reportorial Distinction. Although others have criticized Turse’s work (Kulik and Zinoman, 2014), the objective of this paper is not to evaluate the validity of the Turse’s study or the arguments against his work. Perhaps by “a Mỹ Lai a month,” the interviewed soldier meant that the cumulative monthly killing of unarmed Vietnamese civilians in the free fire zones could add up to be equivalent to the total number of civilians killed at Mỹ Lai. But it does not mean that the systematic murdering of a large group of villagers/families together like Mỹ Lai and Th nh Phong did occur once a month. Common sense would dictate that if there were actually a Mỹ Lai-like massacre a month, the Vietnamese government, especially the VC or North Vietnamese Army (NVA) propagandists would have erected numerous massacre memorials all over the South Vietnam landscape.

#### H. *PTSD in Vietnam War Veterans*

After his tour in Vietnam, John Wade of *In the Lake of the Woods* suffered many PTSD symptoms like many other Vietnamese war veterans, “On occasion, though, he’d yell in his sleep-loud, desperate, obscene things (p. 75)... In the dark, sometimes, he would see a vanishing village. He would see PFC Weatherby...” (O’Brien, 1994a, p. 76). The US Department of Veterans Affairs (USVA) had found that PTSD affected about 31 percent of all Vietnam War veterans. This number is much higher than the reported values for modern wars (10 percent for Desert Storm and 11 percent for Afghanistan War) (National Institute of Health [NIH], 2009). There are different groups of veterans experiencing different PTSD symptoms. Some started having PTSD symptoms early after they returned from the war and their symptoms last until old age. Others found that their early PTSD symptoms decreased with time, but worsened later in life. And many veterans did not experience PTSD symptoms until later in life.

A recent 2015 VA study found that many older Vietnam War veterans still have PTSD symptoms, more than 50 years after their wartime experience. This is because new stresses like retirement, increased health problems at older age, loss of loved ones, and watching war scenes from television can bring back horrid wartime memories (USVA, 2015). Paul Meadlo of the Charlie Company said that as he gets older, the terrible memories of the Mỹ Lai Massacre came back more frequently, “I can actually see the faces and the terror and all those people’s eyes. And I wakeup and I’m just shaking and I just can’t hardly cope with it” (Raviv, 2018). After his dishonorable discharge from the Army, Sam Ybarra of Tiger Force, who once had worn a necklace of human ears and had tied a scalp to his rifle as trophies, endured severe PTSD and alcohol/drug abuse until his death at 36 years old, “... each time he closed his eyes, the memories would rush back. The more he tried to forget, the more he remembered... ‘It’s my life. What I did... I killed people, Mama. I killed regular people. I shouldn’t have. My God, what did I do?’... Ybarra began sobbing uncontrollably... ‘I asked God to forgive me for what I did, for killing all those people, all those civilians, all those children...’”

Not only those who committed war atrocities experienced PTSD symptoms with flashbacks and nightmares, those who failed to stop others’ horrible actions experienced worse PTSD conditions. Just like Thompson and Colburn, in addition to the trauma of witnessing the atrocities, these righteous soldiers were saddled by a strong sense of guilt because they could not reconcile the killing of unarmed civilians with their core set of values (Sallah and Weiss, 2006). Like many veterans, Colburn and Thompson struggled with PTSD for many decades. Their experience was consistent with the findings by researchers from Brooklyn College and Columbia University in a study on the Vietnam Veteran’s war stress and trauma. These researchers found that PTSD occurred not only to American soldiers who were in combat, but also to those who participated in abusive violence and those who witnessed abusive violence (Laufer et al., 1984).

### III. CONCLUSIONS

Tim O’Brien’s *In the Lake of the Woods* brings the most shameful period of the Vietnam War to the front by using the actual 1968 Mỹ Lai Massacre as one of its central events. However, the complete history of Mỹ Lai also showcases the moral courage of many US soldiers to uphold the country’s highest ethical standards. Currently, as high school students spend less than a minute hearing or talking about the Mỹ Lai Massacre in their AP [Advanced Placement] US History class or quickly scan O’Brien’s war novels for their “American Author” essay in their English class, they could be convinced by O’Brien that the Vietnam War had always been a “bad” war and that “a true war story is never moral” (O’Brien, 1990). But once students know more about the historical context of all O’Brien’s Vietnam War details (Mahini et al., 2018a and 2018b), especially the entire Mỹ Lai story 50 years after its occurrence as presented in this article, they may be able to disagree with O’Brien. No, Timothy O’Brien, a true war story can also, if not always, be moral (USNA, 2004), depending on the ethics and moral courage of the fighters of war. For over a decade, there are

plenty of US soldiers and officers who served honorably and heroically in Vietnam and who sacrificed their lives to help Southern Vietnamese enjoy their democracy. Soldiers and officers like 2LT Robert Swan Muller III, who was sent to Vietnam around the same time as Calley in 1968. He came back not as a war criminal like Calley but as a well-respected FBI director for several administrations, dedicating most of his life for noble public service (Graff, 2018). It was because like Mr. Thompson and other American heroes, Mr. Muller was raised by his parents who did not tolerate any lie or misdeed – always by a strict moral code, always on solid moral footings. The Vietnam War was a painful chapter in the US history, but we did not totally lose our soul over it after all. As Aronovitch concluded in her 2001 article in the *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, “Effective fighters are also ethical fighters... good soldiers must in certain ways be good persons as well.” And the Army Ethic always “begins with the *moral values* the Army defends. The Army protects the rights and interests of the American People by conducting military operations in the service of government policy **in a manner that respects the basic human rights of others**” [emphasis added] (US Army, 2010).

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