

Testament to Unsung Heroism
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“Men turn their backs and hide their cowardice. Where has it fled, the conscience of mankind? The world just opens wide its eyes and stares.” Perhaps the words of Huyen Chi paralleled the thoughts of Captain Hugh Thompson as he flew his jet over Mai Lai, Vietnam, in March of 1968. Just imagine if you were him and your actions could directly influence the outcome of the Vietnam War. Just imagine how you would react if your countrymen were murdering innocent civilians. Try to imagine what you would do if you were in Thompson’s position (Huyen Chi).

Upon orders from Lieutenant William Calley “to shoot anything that moved”, American troops were in the process of slaughtering 500 Vietnamese because of the misconception that they were hiding Vietcong gorillas. This massacre was committed in silence until one voice rose to the occasion: the voice of Thompson. He was the first one to notice masses of dead Vietnamese. Further suspicion was aroused when he witnessed an Army officer shoot a wounded girl. Noticing that troops were about to kill a group of elderly men and small children hiding in the trenches, Thompson decided American troops had gone too far. With his own body between the soldiers and quivering Vietnamese he vowed, “If you shoot them, you’ll have to shoot me” (Ethics Update).

Moments later, he noticed a dazed four-year-old boy struggling to get out of the mass of dead and dying. Thompson came to the aid again. He gathered all the survivors he could find and airlifted them out of Mai Lai to an army hospital and safety. Over the next few weeks, it was Thompson’s voice that boomed over the radio in protest of the massacre at Mai Lai. His message ended the killings for good. Most importantly, his actions saved countless Vietnamese (Dartmouth College).

Thompson’s story exemplifies the true meaning of moral courage. Moral courage is a quality that everyone wants but very few have. It is the strength to make the crucial decision to do what you believe is right, even if the outcome is death. It requires empathy, humility, resolve and zeal. In fact, this form of courage is a medley of many different qualities that all come

together to create a person that will never back down or become overwhelmed. This powerful attribute is stronger than any difficulty.

Wars are the hardest times to maintain morals. When surrounded with death and devastation, many soldiers focus on self-preservation. Not Captain Thompson. At a time when it was easy to give up and become bitter about the situation in Vietnam, Thompson showed his deep compassion for others. He defied his own country's troops because he believed that their actions were wrong. Even when values and morals were hard to find, he displayed them by putting his own body in the line of fire for people he didn't even know.

Before I read his story, I had a vastly different perspective on the Vietnam War. Previously, the imbalance of inhumanity and humanity had been frightening to me. I didn't believe that any good came out of the undesirable conflict. His story proved the opposite. The unsung heroism in Vietnam caused me to realize that when you believe that something is immoral, you should make your voice heard. Unfortunately, the vast majority of people choose to remain silent. This is what I see when I look back at my own actions only two years ago.

Back in middle school, there was a girl named Lisa. She possessed all of the characteristics of someone constantly harassed: glasses comparable to the bottoms of Pepsi cans, unpopular styles of apparel, and a sensitive personality. Everyone looked at her as an easy target. Since we shared first names, if someone was talking about her, I always thought it was me. Many times, I would hear the name Lisa come up in hushed whisperings in the hallways or in loud intentional conversations in the back of our bus. I would always ask if they were talking about me and my friends would laugh and say, "Not you; the other Lisa." Then I would think, "Oh, ok. Good; it's not me."

One day, the kids in the back of the bus were throwing pencils and paper wads at Lisa. She asked them to stop various times, but they persisted. After several attempts, they succeeded in hurting her. She started to sob. I was sitting right next to her. I just sat there looking at the bus driver, expecting her to do something about it, but she did nothing.

When I looked back at my actions, I realized that I had always depended on others to solve problems. I turned my head from hatred. Unfortunately, this is where many cases of inhumanity start. To prevent inhumanity, people must start with themselves. The process begins by looking at our mistakes from the past. From these mistakes, one learns to counteract negative peer pressure, overcome fear of failure or disapproval and make key choices that are backed up

by action. Once one person does this, others will follow. This is the true power of example and the way moral courage can be used in the fight against inhumanity.

I now recognize that the conscience of mankind was not entirely extinct in the Vietnam War. Just imagine how wonderful it would feel if you were airlifting those you had saved out of the torture and misery they had known for the past month. The lives of those Vietnamese survivors are the most powerful testament to the moral courage possessed by Captain Thompson; more powerful than I can even hope to convey. True, he was not the only example of moral courage in Vietnam. But his was the one that most influenced me. If we can all find one person to be our example, if all of us can be an example for someone else, we will begin the path towards a better world tomorrow. In this new world, moral courage will be alive and exuberant.

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