

(c Strong Clear vision >>
By Maya Lin

VOICES: VIETNAM

MY LAI, MARCH 16, 1968: During a tour through the village of My Lai, American GIs went on a rampage, raping, looting and killing as many as 400 unarmed South Vietnamese civilians. Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson saw it all from his helicopter—and tried to stop it.

The Massacre at My Lai

I ARRIVED OVER MY LAI, WHICH WAS better known as Pinkville, at about 7:20 in the morning. I was flying a Scout helicopter and my job was to draw out enemy fire. We had been briefed the night before that there had been a large enemy buildup in the area. But so far, we only saw one draft-age male running out of the village with a weapon. I told my door gunner, Lawrence Colburn, to fire at him. He missed. That was the only enemy person we saw all day.

We were flying back and forth for some time, not getting shot at, when I left to refuel. When we got back on station there were bodies everywhere. These were infants and toddlers, women and very old men—but no young men. On one pass just outside the village, we saw a teenage girl lying on her back in a rice field. She was flailing back and forth, obviously wounded. I hovered over her, marked her with a smoke flare and got on the radio to call for help. A captain approached. He nudged her with his foot, then stood back, put his weapon on automatic, and blew her away. We didn't know what to think of that.

We came across a ditch that had a large number of people in it who appeared to be injured. We noticed babies, women and children and old men. I put the helicopter down, then went over to ask a sergeant to help them out. He said the only way to do that was to put them out of their misery. I thought he was joking. We took off and heard shots right away. My crew chief, Glenn Andreotta, yelled, "My God, they

are firing into the ditch." I swung the Scout around so all of us could see. They were standing around, just firing. We said, "My God, what is happening here?" We ran some scenarios through our minds, but we didn't want to condemn our own people. But it sunk into me that these people were marched into that ditch and murdered.

A few minutes later I saw some people huddled by a bunker. There was a woman,

said a hand grenade would do the job. I said, "You see my guns? If you open up, they open up." I coaxed about 10 people out of the bunker, then called a friend flying a bigger chopper to take them away.

We made a final pass over the ditch. Glenn yelled that something was moving. I set the helicopter down and Glenn ran over to the ditch. Larry and I covered him with our weapons. He waded in among the dead



SHAMEFUL DAY: Chopper pilot Hugh Thompson (left) intervened to stop Americans from killing more civilians at My Lai

an old man and a couple of kids with her. We saw some advancing American forces coming at them, being led, I was told later, by William Calley (who was ultimately court-martialed). I said the Vietnamese have only about 15 seconds to live. I sat the chopper down between the civilians and the advancing Americans. I told Colburn to blow 'em away if they began to fire at the civilians. I thank God that they didn't. I went over to the officer in charge and said there are some civilians in here, can you get them out? He

and bloodied people, and pulled out a little boy, about the same age as my son, who was 4 at the time. The boy was covered in blood, but he didn't have a scratch on him. We got back in and laid the kid over our laps. As we flew to a nearby orphanage, tears were streaming down our cheeks. I flew back to base and confronted my superiors. It would take time, but the horrible killing at My Lai would become public. My Lai was no accident. It was pure, premeditated murder. ■



STATESIDE, 1967: The president's wife, Lady Bird Johnson, saw the war polarizing the country.

I WAS ON A TRAIN AND SAW ANOTHER TRAIN CARRYING CARGO, AND REALIZED THAT it was the coffins of men who had been in Vietnam. I knew that if Lyndon had seen that, it would eat him up. I knew that it couldn't continue. I saw it in the eyes of young people. I traveled to a lot of campuses. At the beginning of Lyndon's presidency, I would see so much interest and liking in their faces. Then, at Yale, I was speaking to the Young Democrats and realized that nothing was getting through to them—not conservation, not the cities, only the war, the first we had ever fought in people's own living rooms, on television. I knew that we were going to have to wind down our participation—even if America lost the war, which Lyndon would have hated.