In the interim between the wars in Korea and South Vietnam the development of the helicopter and airmobile operations occasioned numerous changes in strategic and tactical doctrine and military terminology. The helicopter became a highly versatile vehicle to be used in a wide variety of roles—troop movement, supply and logistics, aerial gunfire, and observation, among others. Strategically, it was used to move large groups of men and equipment over long distances to bring maximum effort to bear quickly. Tactically, it provided a means by which ground forces could be moved into a crucial area with little or no warning. This type of operation, known as an air assault, was normally used by forces from platoon (thirty to fifty men) to battalion (five to six hundred) size and required detailed planning and precise timing in execution.

The first requirements of an air assault are to establish the objective, determine the size and capability of the enemy, designate the friendly forces to be used in the operation, and then—by map, photo, or air reconnaissance—to plot the exact location where the troops are to be landed. This is known as the landing zone, or LZ. (Some of the LZs used by larger formations were later converted to fire bases for artillery or used for other purposes; this was the case with those referred to in the following pages as LZ Dottie and LZ Uptight.) Normally, before the first flight of troop-carrying helicopters is landed, the LZ is thoroughly covered by an artillery preparation to clear it of enemy forces, destroy mines and booby traps, and cause nearby enemy troops to seek cover. The amount of artillery used depends principally upon the strength and location of enemy forces and the size of the LZ.

Before the air assault, the commander of the assault force assembles the commanders or representatives of all units that are to participate to review every aspect of the assault, including such matters as the assignment of helicopters, timing of the artillery prep, and the use of helicopter gunships. Normally the assault-force commander controls the operation from a command helicopter with radio contact to all concerned units so that he can make adjustments if necessary. The artillery prep is scheduled to lift immediately—not more than a minute—before the initial flight of troop-carrying helicopters set down in the LZ. The landing itself requires only four or five seconds, with the helicopter barely touching the ground while the troops get out and move to secure the LZ while other troops are landing. If enemy fire is received during the assault, the LZ is referred to as "hot"; if not, it is designated "cold." The gunships assisting in the assault are used to subdue any enemy forces that oppose the landing. When the LZ has been

about as may be required by the tactical situation. When the Americal Division was standardized, the brigade command position was downgraded to colonel. The assignment of colonels to brigade command spots was strictly controlled by division and higher headquarters, and all officers assigned as brigade commanders had outstanding military records. Accordingly, it would appear that in early 1968 Colonel Henderson was in line for possible promotion to brigadier general.

secured and sufficient forces landed, efforts are directed toward the objective area. Upon completion of the operation the troops are often extracted from the field by helicopter, an operation that also requires careful execution to make sure that the final elements to be taken out are not overwhelmed by superior enemy forces.

To meet the needs of the situation in South Vietnam, MACV headquarters published numerous regulations and directives. One group, known in general terms as Rules of Engagement, covered the employment of artillery and mortar fire, air operations, helicopter gunfire, and ground operations, among other matters. In every instance that I am aware of the intent was unquestionable: to minimize noncombatant casualties and prevent the destruction of property. For example, the rule covering ground forces specifically prohibited firing into homes or buildings of any kind unless enemy fire was being received from it. Fire zones were defined in the rules covering artillery fire; a no-fire zone was exactly as stated; a specified-strike zone could be fired into only with the approval of the provincial headquarters, but even with such approval artillery was not to be fired into villages or other areas where noncombatants might be located; free-fire zones were generally located in the remote areas of jungle or mountains and required no prior approval before being fired into, but if it was known or suspected that noncombatants might be present fire was to be withheld. The problem with these and other comparable regulations, however, was that it was difficult to define rules to cover every possible situation and have them understood by all the troops, and it was even more difficult to make sure they were implemented. The constantly changing situation and the rapid rotation of personnel magnified the problem in South Vietnam.

One set of terms that bears discussion concerns the type of operation to be conducted, specifically "search and clear" and "search and destroy."

Search-and-clear operations were analogous to a police roundup. Military forces reinforced with interrogation teams moved through an area or cordoned it off to isolate individuals suspected of being Viet Cong, who were then turned over to the interrogation teams for additional screening and questioning. Such operations were sometimes accompanied by medical teams and other civic-action-oriented personnel to gain the support of the people.

Search-and-destroy operations, despite their name, were never intended to obliterate settlements, but were focused upon enemy base camps, with their stores of weapons, ammunition, other military equipment, and foodstuffs. These were normally located in jungle or mountain areas, although occasionally they were near or even in population centers. In such cases, weapons and other military equipment were removed or destroyed on the spot. Under no circumstances did search-and-destroy missions include the wholesale destruction of dwellings or the killing of noncombatants. However, if the term were used by commanders who did not fully understand

that on about May 10, 1968, General Young had told him that General Koster had been thinking about the My Lai incident and now wanted a detailed report, in writing—a "formal investigation and report." (This, to any senior Army officer, would mean an investigation in accordance with Army Regulation 15–6: that official orders would be published appointing the investigating officer, sworn testimony would be taken, and an official report would be filed through channels.)

In April 1968 Task Force Barker had been inactivated and Lieutenant Colonel Barker had returned to the brigade as executive officer. Henderson said he appointed Barker as the investigating officer with the concurrence of General Young, but had not issued written orders to this effect because he thought division headquarters would do so. He gave Barker rather detailed verbal instructions, he said, to insure that the investigation would be complete, proper, and formal. After making inquiries, Barker concluded that approximately twenty civilians had been killed in the exchange of fire between VC and U.S. forces. The report, Henderson said, was three or four pages long, and attached to it were sworn, signed statements from fifteen to twenty of the men involved in the incident, including Captain Medina, Captain Michles, and some platoon leaders, pilots, and enlisted men in Bravo and Charlie companies as well as some of the men working in the Task Force Barker operations center. Since the task force had been disbanded and the rifle companies had returned to their parent battalions, Barker had had to visit several units to obtain the statements. Henderson was not certain whether statements from Lieutenant Calley and Warrant Officer Thompson had been included.

In the statements, Henderson said, each man acknowledged that he had been warned of his rights and had participated in the Task Force Barker operation at My Lai. None of them mentioned having witnessed or participated in an atrocity or massacre, and they all said they had not purposefully killed any civilians, nor had they seen anyone else do so. Henderson said he had concurred with Barker's findings because they were consistent with the results of his own personal inquiry, so he endorsed the report, recommending that it be accepted. Three unclassified copies—not even marked "For Official Use Only"—were typed up, and some time in late May he hand-carried all three copies to division and personally delivered them to the division Chief of Staff. No file copy was kept at the 11th Brigade; Henderson could not explain why one hadn't been.

At some later date Henderson discussed this report with General Young, but he said he had never talked about it with General Koster. He assumed it had been accepted by division, but to his knowledge division never returned an approved file copy.

When asked why he had designated Barker to conduct the formal investigation—in effect, to look into the activities of his own men—Henderson said he had thought it was all right because Barker was to investigate a

subordinate unit, and—as he had already mentioned—he had cleared this with General Young, who had offered no objections.

Then the Inquiry panel got down to some nitty-gritty questions. Colonel Henderson said he did not think he had seen MACV Regulation 20–4 covering the reporting of war crimes, but he acknowledged that his ignorance of the specifics of the directive did not negate his responsibility to know of any atrocities that might have been committed and to conduct a proper investigation. He was certain that the brigade had a copy of the division Standing Operating Procedures (SOP) and, of course, the brigade had its own SOP. Both of these documents covered the treatment of civilians, handling of prisoners of war, and reporting of casualties. When asked why, in his operations report or by some other means, he had not reported the civilian casualties to higher headquarters, he said he felt those deaths had occurred during the normal conduct of war, in a firefight, and did not necessarily need to be reported. Besides, he said, he had given this information to the division commanding general, which he felt had fulfilled his reporting requirement.[5]

Colonel Henderson was shown the official black-and-white photos taken by Sergeant Ronald D. Haeberle of the 11th Brigade Public Information Office during the My Lai operation. He did not recall having seen them but acknowledged that some of them might have been included in the photo packet prepared for him on his departure from the brigade. As for Haeberle's color photos, he had seen only those which had appeared in the December 5, 1969, issue of *Life* magazine. Any photo showing any kind of atrocity should have been called to his attention by his public information officer, he said, but he had never been shown any of these.

He was fully aware of and supported General Koster's prohibition against deliberately burning Vietnamese houses. During the operation on March 16, he said, he had seen three or four grass hootches (houses) burning in My Lai-4 but had thought it was the result of the firefight in the hamlet. From its review of some of the CID interrogation reports the Inquiry had learned that not only had most of My Lai-4 been destroyed but that on the following day Bravo and Charlie companies had burned out five or six other hamlets. When confronted with this information, Henderson was greatly

5. To my knowledge, other large U.S. units in Vietnam did not function in such a lackadaisical manner. For example, within First Field Forces, which commanded all U.S. combat forces in the Vietnamese II Corps area, the subordinate commanders knew the requirements for reporting as cited in MACV and USARV regulations. They knew that if an artillery round so much as nicked a civilian it was to be reported. Also, all such incidents, regardless of whether they involved Vietnamese or Americans, were to be investigated by a disinterested officer appointed in writing by the division Staff Judge Advocate and an official report filed. These reports were to be analyzed and then forwarded to higher headquarters with appropriate comments and recommendations. This process served the purpose of letting subordinate commanders know that there must be no indiscriminate shooting, and that if there were any, action would be taken against the responsible party.

gade of the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia, and might be expected to have a better memory than he was displaying at the Inquiry. His response was a classic: "I've tried, sir. I've put this thing over in my mind. In fact it is going around right now." He either had the worst of all memories or was covering up. His responses were so evasive that I began to wonder if he were pulling my leg.

We recalled him in early February 1970, hoping that his memory might have improved. It had not. Before his testimony, Lieutenant Colonel Fred Mahaffey of our staff went over with him, item by item, the entries in the Task Force Barker and 11th Brigade logs, as well as the transcript of the tape made by Captain Lewellen. It did not affect his memory one iota. Mr. MacCrate, Colonel Franklin, Lieutenant Colonel Bauer, and others questioned him, using varying approaches, but to no avail. In closing he thanked us for our hospitality and said, "I wish that God speeds you all."

Captain Dennis R. Vasquez, the task force artillery liaison officer, said he was with Lieutenant Colonel Barker in the command helicopter on the morning of March 16. He was in radio contact with the artillery firing battery at LZ Uptight and adjusted the original marking round from about a thousand meters northeast of My Lai-4 in one shift to the area of the LZ just west of the hamlet. (This was somewhat unusual, as it normally takes several rounds to adjust on the center of impact before firing for effect.) He recalled that the initial rounds were white phosphorus (smoke) rounds and the remainder were high explosives. About a hundred rounds were fired over a period of about ten minutes (actually it was five minutes), he said, with ten to twenty rounds landing along the western edge of My Lai-4.

The report of sixty-nine VC killed by artillery came in from the ground forward observer soon after the operation started, but Vasquez had seen no bodies in the area of the artillery preparation and doubted the report. However, he granted that since some of the rounds had landed in the hamlet, the VC casualties could have occurred there. No other artillery was fired into the area of My Lai-4 on the 16th and, to his knowledge, no artillery fire landed at the location where the sixty-nine VC were reported to have been killed.

Lieutenant Colonel Barker's helicopter normally flew at twelve to fifteen hundred feet,[3] so Vasquez hadn't been able to see much of what was happening on the ground. He had seen some bodies on the road south of My Lai-4, but hadn't been able to identify them. Oddly enough for an artillery officer, he had had no binoculars—because, he said, Task Force Barker was short of equipment. This bordered on the absurd.

Because there was no radio communication within the helicopter,

3. To have been flying at this altitude seems ludicrous when other helicopters working at treetop level and receiving no ground fire and the units on the ground had reported no hostile fire.

Vasquez and Barker had had to converse by shouting. Vasquez said he had expressed his doubts about the sixty-nine VC killed by artillery, and Barker had responded by reminding him that the report had come from the ground but said he would check it out anyway. Vasquez made no further inquiries, and as far as he had been concerned the matter was closed.

Captain Steven J. Gamble, the commander of the artillery battery that supported Task Force Barker, had attended the commanders' meeting at LZ Dottie on March 15 but had not heard the instructions Lieutenant Colonel Barker issued to the infantry company commanders because he had been conferring with Captain Vasquez at the time. Gamble thought the artillery preparations were to be fired on the landing zones, and did not know that part of the preparation for Charlie Company had landed on the western portion of the hamlet itself. Later that morning, he said, he received word that sixty-nine VC had been killed by the preparation in support of Charlie Company. He had never been aware that any civilians had been killed during the operation or that an investigation had been conducted, and he had never been questioned about his role in the action.

Of all the artillery personnel questioned by the Inquiry, Gamble was one of the most knowledgeable. He fully understood the meaning of no-fire, specified-strike, and free-fire zones. He also knew that, even though it was often perfunctory, clearance to fire into the My Lai area had to be obtained from Vietnamese authorities. Most importantly, he was fully familiar with the USARV regulation that, regardless of the type of zone being fired into, if any civilians were killed or wounded an Artillery Incident Report was to be initiated. Hence, it was most regrettable that he hadn't known civilian casualties were thought to have resulted from the artillery fire.

One thing had stuck in Captain Gamble's mind. He said that about a month after the My Lai incident he had had a visit from the division artillery commander, Colonel Mason J. Young Jr.,[4] and Lieutenant Colonel Luper. During their conversation, Gamble had mentioned something about the sixty-nine VC that had been credited to artillery and air strikes during the Task Force Barker operation and Luper had said, "We're not sure that those were all enemy." Gamble said they had not pursued the subject, however, and he had not had an opportunity to question Luper further about it.

Captain William C. Riggs, commander of Alpha Company at the time of the incident, gave us his version of the role played by Alpha Company in the operation. During the night of March 15–16 the company moved from its night defensive position south of LZ Uptight to blocking positions along the Diem Diem River to prevent any VC from fleeing northward from the My Lai area. They encountered minor resistance and one man was

4. Gamble was mistaken either about the date of the visit or the name of the commander, because Colonel Young had been replaced by Colonel Lawrence M. Jones on March 31, 1968.

persons conducting the questioning, while with some of the key witnesses as many as ten might participate. Second, panel members could read the testimony or listen to the tapes. This may seem to have been expecting too much, but in the final analysis I wanted to be able to rely on the judgment of each panel member in completing our report; if he were to provide an informed judgment each member would have to know the whole story, not just part of it.

We knew that each of the interrogation teams had many people to question and little time in which to do it. Accordingly, we asked each of them to draw up lists of the men they wanted to question in order of priority. To assist in this, Lieutenant Colonel Breen and his administrative group developed a "succession list" for each key position. Normally, a person would stay in command or staff position for about six months, but in some instances the turnover was more rapid. For example, we wanted to talk to all of those who had been operations officers with the Americal Division during the critical period before and after the My Lai operation. By using the various morning reports, logs, and personnel rosters, Breen was able to establish that from December 1967 to April 1968 three different persons had occupied that post in addition to another who was an acting operations officer, and that four other men had filled the position after the critical period. This was done for thirty positions within the Americal Division and the 11th Brigade and proved most helpful.

Colonel Whalen and Lieutenant Colonel Brandt finished their work in South Vietnam in late January 1970 and closed our liaison office with MACV headquarters. In order not to miss any possibility of locating documents relating to the incident, they conducted searches of the Records Holding Area in Okinawa and of the Overseas Record Center in Hawaii. They also screened the headquarters of U.S. Army Hawaii and U.S. Army Pacific. Several pertinent administrative documents were located, but nothing of any great impact.

The final repository for Army documents is the National Records Center at Suitland, Maryland, and many of the documents we used had come from there. However, we wanted to be sure we were not missing any relevant papers, so toward the end of January Patterson and eight other officers screened the appropriate files. During a weekend at the Suitland Records Center they reviewed the shipping papers of fourteen hundred shipping boxes and screened the documents in 275 of them. Out of these literally thousands of documents, they found only thirty-two that had not already been made available to the Inquiry. These included some directives, orders, logs, and miscellaneous documents from USARV, the Americal Division, Task Force Oregon, and the Quang Ngai Province advisory group. However, nowhere did they find any reference to a Report of Investigation of the My Lai incident in any form.

As we were nearing the end of the Inquiry we had accumulated twenty-five linear feet of documents. It would have beclouded the issue and made management of our report most difficult if all of them had been entered into the record, so only the most substantive were entered and the others were included in a twenty-five-page listing of titles.

Colonel Armstrong and his interrogation group were not long in checking into possible misconduct or war crimes within Alpha Company. We had already questioned Captain Riggs, and Colonel Anderson interrogated fifteen others from the company and several from supporting helicopter units. He could find no evidence to substantiate the allegation of misconduct within the company. Because Alpha Company had not become involved in any atrocities, the details of its operation were not included in our final report.

Lieutenant Colonel Patterson and Major Kraus continued to interrogate helicopter pilots and crewmen and check aviation log books. In the process, they had one fortunate break. We had thought all of the troop lift helicopters for the air assaults of Bravo and Charlie companies had come from the 174th Aviation Company at Duc Pho. However, one day Warrant Officer Thompson stopped by the Inquiry and was shown some photos of helicopters taken at LZ Dottie, My Lai-4, and in flight. Thompson noted that not all the lift helicopters were from the 174th Aviation Company. The photos were enlarged and checked with a magnifying glass. Sure enough, by checking the unit facsimile on the tail rudders they found that some of the helicopters were from other companies of the 123rd Aviation Battalion. Through the log books they found that of the nine lift helicopters, five were from the 174th and four were from other companies.

The pieces of the helicopter puzzle soon fell into place. All told, the Inquiry questioned thirty-five officers and men of the 123rd Aviation Battalion and seventeen from the 174th Aviation Company. By the time Patterson and Kraus were finished they had an almost complete crew listing as well as a time schedule covering the activities of each helicopter participating in the operation. They had done an excellent job of a meticulous and time-consuming project.

Time was getting very short, and so we had to focus on the primary functions of the Inquiry—the adequacy of reports, sufficiency of investigations, and possible suppression of information.

To tie up the loose ends, we drew up a tentative schedule of witnesses, including other officers at division and brigade headquarters, file clerks who received and filed papers within the headquarters, and various staff members of the U.S. advisory elements at the 2nd ARVN Division, Quang Ngai Province, and Son Tinh District. In addition, we planned to recall some witnesses to recheck their testimony against what we had uncovered during our trip to South Vietnam. In the process we uncovered numerous items of interest.

In early June 1968 General Koster had left the Americal Division to

chapter 8

Warrant Officer Thompson's Testimony

Our next witness was Warrant Officer Hugh C. Thompson, who had been assigned to B Company, an aero scout unit of the 123rd Aviation Battalion, known as the Warlords. On the morning of March 16, 1968, he was the pilot of the observation helicopter that was part of a three-helicopter aero scout team whose mission was to fly over and around the battle area, often at treetop level, to locate enemy forces, defensive positions, weapons, supply dumps, and the like, and to relay this information to the ground forces. As protection against enemy ground fire, there were two M-60 machine guns on either side of the aircraft, which that day were manned by Thompson's crew chief, Specialist-4 Glenn W. Andreotta, and his gunner, Specialist-4 Lawrence M. Colburn. The other components of the aero scout team were two helicopter gunships—often referred to simply as "guns"—that orbited over and around Thompson to provide additional protection.

I was surprised to learn that Thompson had been piloting an OH-23 observation helicopter, a small aircraft similar to those used to monitor highway traffic in the United States. Although the OH-23 was capable of doing the job, it was considered obsolete, and there were improved observation helicopters that could perform the task much better. In the central highlands we had replaced all OH-23s well over a year earlier. The principal drawback in the case of Thompson's helicopter was its primitive radio communications capability. He could speak directly to his unit operations center, located near the helipad at LZ Dottie, but he could not reach the ground commander he was supporting, the task force commander's helicopter, or his top supporting gunship. Thus in order to pass information to the

ground commander (or to any other command network) he had to transmit it to his low gunship, which relayed it to the top gunship, which—finally—could pass it on to the proper party. This baroque process worked in reverse if one of the commanders wanted to contact Thompson. This of course not only delayed the transmission of information but also led to errors and omissions, and certainly eliminated any personal involvement. I have often thought that if Thompson had been able to communicate directly with Captain Medina and Lieutenant Colonel Barker, the course of events in My Lai-4 might have been changed somewhat—not drastically, perhaps, since most of the action in My Lai-4 had occurred before the aero scout team got there, but at least Thompson would have been able to notify the troop commanders, in his own words, of the large groups of dead noncombatants he was seeing in the area.

The supporting gunships were B model UH-1 helicopters, commonly referred to as Hueys, which were still being used extensively throughout South Vietnam. Their principal limitation was their low power and lift capability. Since they were armed with M-60 fixed machine guns and carried a large supply of ammunition as well as pods of 2.75-inch rockets, they were so heavy that they could not take on a full load of fuel, which restricted their flying time to a little over an hour. They could barely lift off the ground—they sort of staggered into the air—and in flight had to maintain a fairly fast air speed in order to remain airborne. Thompson's helicopter could hop from one place to another, but his supporting gunships had to fly about him in circles, generally at low altitudes. And because they had to refuel every hour while Thompson's observation helicopter could fly in excess of two hours, there seemed to be continual changes of gunships. Thompson said he was never sure which gunships were on station with him at any given time.

The initial mission of the aero scout team was to reconnoiter the area south of Highway 521, running generally east-west from the China Sea to Quang Ngai City. (In order to better follow Thompson's testimony, please refer to the accompanying aerial photo of the My Lai-4 area.) They arrived in time to see the artillery preparation—intended to suppress enemy defenses on the landing zone and detonate any mines or booby traps—which started at 7:24 A.M. and ended at 7:29. Within a minute the first of nine helicopters carrying Charlie Company arrived. Thompson remembered the artillery preparation and the helicopter landing zone as being just west of My Lai-4, and he said some of the artillery rounds landed on the western edge of the village. Two helicopter gunships (Sharks) from the 174th Aviation Company supported Charlie Company's landing and placed some suppressive fire on the western side of My Lai-4. The lift helicopters then returned to LZ Dottie to bring the remainder of Charlie Company to My Lai-4.

Shortly after 7:30 Thompson spotted an armed VC running toward a

AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH OF MY LAI-4 AREA

hedgerow just south of Highway 521, and had his door gunners take him under fire. He did not think they hit the VC, however, so he did not report it as an enemy KIA (killed in action).

The aero scout team then flew about two miles to the east, where they observed the landing of Bravo Company, which appeared to be going well. Thompson's team moved farther to the south and then, finding no indication of enemy activity, returned to the My Lai-4 area. On Hill 85, about a mile south of the settlement, Thompson spotted what he thought was a VC mortar position and, through his gunships, reported it to Barker and to his operations center at LZ Dottie. An infantry reaction platoon from the Aero Scout Company located at LZ Dottie was sent to check it out; they did not find the mortar position, but did turn up about forty rounds of 60-mm. mortar ammunition.

Since Charlie Company's landing had been completed, Thompson was given authority to reconnoiter north of Highway 521, where he noted several wounded civilians in the rice fields south of My Lai-4. He had his gunship notify Lieutenant Colonel Barker, expecting that medics from Charlie Company would be sent to give medical assistance. His door gunners dropped a gray-colored smoke grenade near each of the wounded to mark their positions.

Then Thompson was informed that three black-pajama-clad VC had broken from the column of civilians moving west along Highway 521 toward Quang Ngai City, and was directed to intercept them. By maneuvering low and to the front of these men, Thompson was able to stop two of them, who stood with their hands in the air. Soon another helicopter landed nearby to apprehend the suspects. (This, of course, was Colonel Henderson's command helicopter but Thompson did not know it at the time.) Thompson then flew to the helipad at LZ Dottie to refuel.

By nine o'clock he was back in the My Lai-4 area, and saw that all the wounded civilians he had marked with smoke grenades were now dead. This upset him because he was sure he had passed on a request for medical assistance. (Later testimony revealed that, in relaying the information to Barker, Thompson's gunships had referred to the wounded as VC, some of them armed. Although communications problems may have contributed to a misunderstanding, there was no justification for killing these people, whether or not they were Viet Cong.)

Thompson and others of the aero scout team saw one of the Shark gunships making east-west passes, or gun runs, seemingly directed at the people moving along Highway 521. Thompson spotted five to ten dead civilians and a couple of dead water buffalo on the road and in the ditches alongside. He particularly noted that a wounded woman who had been lying in the ditch just south of the road was dead by the time they returned from refueling. (Thompson later identified her in a photograph taken by an Army photographer.) All of this disturbed him greatly. He could not under-

stand why the Sharks were killing innocent civilians.[1]

Thompson then flew to an area about two hundred yeards south of My Lai-4, where he saw a captain (Medina, but Thompson did not know his name) approaching a wounded woman whom the aero scouts had previously marked with a smoke grenade. Thompson said he put his helicopter into a stand-still hover close to the ground, about fifteen to twenty feet away, where he had a clear view of all that went on. According to Thompson and Colburn, one of his door gunners,[2] the captain prodded the young woman a couple of times with his foot and then stepped back and put a burst of M-16 rifle fire into her. This, of course, is quite different from the version of this incident given by Captain Medina to Colonel Henderson, who said that Medina had shot the woman when she made a move as if she were going to throw a grenade. Which account is the true one is impossible to say; the Inquiry did not make a judgment on this issue. In his subsequent court martial, however, Medina was charged with the murder of this woman.

As the aero scout team continued its observation around My Lai-4, the men saw a pile of bodies on the trail leading south out of the hamlet but weren't able to tell exactly how many there were. Not far from there they saw three to five other bodies in a courtyard. In Thompson's judgment, all these dead were civilian noncombatants.

Then, about seventy-five to a hundred yards east of My Lai-4, Thompson noticed an old irrigation ditch in which there were a large number of bodies. He landed nearby to talk with a sergeant who was in charge of a group setting up a defense line east of the ditch, and then walked to the ditch and noted that some of the people, although wounded, were still alive. He asked the sergeant if something couldn't be done for the wounded and was told that the only way to help them was to put them out of their misery. Thompson thought the man must have been joking, but suggested that he do what he could to help them. Thompson himself was not sure, but some of the later witnesses thought he had also talked with a lieutenant at the ditch site. (If so, it would have been Lieutenant Calley. If Thompson did talk to Calley, he couldn't remember what they said. As has already been noted, Calley refused to testify before the Inquiry, so we were unable to determine if in fact he had talked with Thompson.)

Thompson said the ditch was V-shaped, five or six feet across at the top

1. The aero scout team's assumption that these civilians had been killed by the Sharks caused considerable animosity between the two units, and it took some time for the wounds to heal. Actually, while it is true that the Sharks were making east-west firing runs, they were shooting fifty to a hundred yards south of the road at an armed VC, probably the same one Thompson's crew had seen earlier. The VC was killed and his weapon later recovered, accounting for the third and final weapon captured in the operation. As for the dead civilians, they had been killed by an element of Charlie Company while Thompson was refueling. This will be discussed later.
2. Specialist-4 Andreotta, the crew chief and other door gunner on Thompson's helicopter, was killed in a later action in Vietnam.

and three or four feet deep. Bodies were spread along it for fifty to seventy-five feet, and in some places filled the ditch almost to the top. He had no idea as to the number of bodies there were—it could have been fifty, a hundred, a hundred and fifty, or more. All he knew for sure was that a lot of people had been killed.

Thompson returned to his helicopter, and as they lifted off Andreotta reported over the intercom that a sergeant—but not the one to whom Thompson had spoken—was firing into the ditch. Thompson glanced back from the cockpit and saw a soldier with his weapon pointing into the ditch, but he did not see any firing nor could he identify the person or his rank.

The aero scout team could clearly see that a large part of My Lai-4 was burning and being systematically destroyed. Thompson, in particular, was greatly disturbed because of the large number of dead civilians (between one and two hundred by this time) and because his efforts to see that medical aid was given to the wounded were totally ineffective. His emotions, he said, could best be described as a combination of frustration and anger. In this frame of mind, he continued his observation mission.

Some time shortly after ten, he told us, he spotted a group of eight to twelve women and children running toward a bunker about two hundred yards northeast of My Lai-4, followed closely by a group of U.S. soldiers. With the scene at the ditch in mind, Thompson decided to land his helicopter between the advancing troops and the women and children, who by this time had crawled into the bunker. As he left the helicopter to talk to the lieutenant leading the Americans, Thompson told Andreotta and Colburn to cover him "real close." (Thompson testified that he thought the man leading this group was Lieutenant Calley, commander of the 1st Platoon, but in all probability he was confusing this lieutenant with the lieutenant he might have spoken to at the ditch. From subsequent testimony by members of Charlie Company and work by the panel staff in plotting the locations of groups and individuals at specific times, we concluded that it was Lieutenant Steven K. Brooks, commander of the 2nd Platoon, at the bunker site. Since Lieutenant Brooks was later killed in action in Vietnam, we were not able to confirm this.)

Thompson said that when he asked the lieutenant for assistance in getting the women and children to safety, the response had been, "The only way to get them out is with a hand grenade." So, after telling the lieutenant to keep his men where they were, Thompson himself went to the bunker and motioned for the Vietnamese to come out. When they had done so, he radioed for one of his gunships to land nearby. The low gunship, piloted by Warrant Officer Dan R. Millians, picked up about half of the women and children and flew them to safety near Highway 521, south of My Lai-4. The remainder of the group was taken out in a second trip.

Thompson's decision to use one of his gunships to evacuate the civilians is questionable. In that location and landing attitude, if the gunship had

been subjected to enemy ground fire it would have had little defense. Also, as has already been noted, it was carrying a heavy load of fixed armament and ammunition, although much of its fuel had been used by that time, which lightened the weight. In all events, it was an extremely dangerous mission, and the crew of the gunship carried it out very skillfully.

Once in the air again, Thompson talked with his door gunners about returning to the ditch to see if anyone there was still alive, and both agreed it would be a good idea. This time Thompson landed somewhat closer to the ditch and removed one of the M-60 machine guns to provide cover for Andreotta and Colburn while they searched for survivors. Walking through, and often on, the bloody and mangled bodies, they found a child of about two who had been shot in the arm but was otherwise in good condition. They removed the child, becoming quite bloodied in the process. There were also some adults who were still alive, but because of the limited space and lift capability of the small observation helicopter, Thompson felt they simply could not take them out. One of the gunners held the child while they flew to the civilian hospital in Quang Ngai City. After leaving the child with the hospital attendants, Thompson returned to LZ Dottie at about 11:00 A.M.

Thompson was reported to have thrown down his helmet in anger and disgust as he got out of the helicopter, and some of the gunship crews were also greatly upset by what they termed "unnecessary killing." Thompson, along with a few gunship crew members, went to see their section leader, Captain Barry C. Lloyd, to whom Thompson expressed his deep concern over what he had seen that morning, as did the others, although perhaps not in such strong terms. Then Thompson, Lloyd, and some of the others went to see Major Fredric Watke, commanding officer of Company B, 123rd Aviation Battalion. Thompson testified that he believed he told Major Watke about everything—the scene at the ditch, the captain killing the young woman, the action at the bunker, and the larger number of dead civilians he had seen—but Watke later testified that he did not recall Thompson mentioning the ditch or the captain shooting the woman. He did remember the other parts of Thompson's statement and his reference to the "needless killing of women, children, and old men." Captain Lloyd and Sergeant Lawrence Kubert, the operations sergeant, generally agreed with Major Watke as to what Thompson had told him, but when they heard such terms as "murder" and "unnecessary killing," they knew that Thompson was very angry and upset. More importantly, whether he had mentioned everything or not, Thompson had leveled serious charges against Charlie Company's operation in My Lai-4, and other crew members had also reported what they had seen to Major Watke. In his testimony, however, Watke said he had felt that they, along with Thompson, had been "overdramatizing" the situation, and that only about thirty noncombatants had been killed.

For all practical purposes, Thompson's involvement with the My Lai operation ended with his report to Major Watke. That evening after he returned to Chu Lai, the base camp of the Americal Division, Thompson said he filled in his personal flight log indicating his hours of flight and other details, and completed the aircraft log book. He then went to his unit's operations office and wrote out a report of his flight activities, including the details of his observations. This report was never located by the Inquiry, although considerable effort was made to find it.

That evening (March 16), still very depressed and despondent over the events of the day, Thompson went to see the division artillery chaplain, Captain Carl E. Creswell, to unload his grief. Thompson knew Creswell because he was interested in the Episcopal faith and had been receiving instruction for confirmation from the chaplain. After telling him everything he had seen and done during the entire day, Thompson felt greatly relieved. Creswell said he would do what he could and would make a report through chaplains' channels, and suggested that Thompson should take it up through command channels. Actually, Thompson had already done about everything he could do within the bounds of his authority: he had reported verbally to both his section leader and his company commander and had filed a written operational report; it would have been inappropriate for him to take further action at that time. The only other thing he could have done would be to bypass his immediate commanders and report directly to one of the division senior officers or to the division Inspector General.

Thompson said that a day or so later he was at the helipad at LZ Dottie when he was told by Major Watke to report to the Task Force Barker operations center to be questioned by a colonel. He was not certain of the exact day or date, but remembered that it was in the morning. (The Inquiry panel was later able to pin it down to Monday morning, March 18—a day later than Colonel Henderson had recalled.) Thompson did not remember the colonel's name but assumed it was the brigade commander, Colonel Henderson. He was not placed under oath or in any way advised of his rights.

There is considerable divergence between what Thompson testified he told Henderson and what Henderson recalled having heard. Thompson said he related the entire series of events of the morning of March 16. Henderson, however, recalled hearing that a captain had shot a Vietnamese woman and some general statements about wild shooting and unnecessary killing by the troops and helicopter crews. Also, Henderson said the meeting lasted for only a few minutes, while Thompson stated that it had lasted for at least twenty and possibly up to thirty minutes. Thompson remembered that Henderson took notes during the conversation but thought he had used a writing pad rather than a notebook. Moreover, while Henderson's impression of Thompson had been that he was inexperienced in combat and emotionally upset, Thompson felt that by that time he had been quite calm

and collected and had given a logical, coherent account. No written statement was prepared and Thompson was not asked to sign anything. He said that in addition to himself and Specialist-4 Colburn, one of the gunship pilots, whose name he could not recall, was also interviewed by Colonel Henderson that day.[3]

When asked if he had ever been interviewed by Lieutenant Colonel Barker or if he had prepared or signed any written statement relating to the events of March 16, Thompson replied that he had not. The interview with Henderson was the last time he was questioned about the My Lai-4 incident, he said, until he was interrogated under oath by Colonel Wilson of the Inspector General's office in mid-1969, over a year later. Thompson remained in Vietnam with the Americal Division until August 1968, when his aircraft crashed as a result of engine failure and he suffered compression fractures of the back. He was evacuated to the U.S. Army hospital in Japan and was later moved to Fort Benning, Georgia, where he stayed until November 1968.

In my view, Warrant Officer Thompson reacted in about the way I would have expected any decent young man caught up in the midst of the My Lai madness to react. He had done everything he felt he could to report what he had seen, and during the operation itself had tried to intercede to stop the indiscriminate killing and help the civilians. During his appearances before the Inquiry he spoke softly but surely, was alert, and showed a keen knowledge of and interest in aviation. He appeared before us three different times, and on each occasion was cooperative in every respect.

Specialist-4 Lawrence M. Colburn, one of Thompson's door gunners, told the panel of essentially the same series of events on the morning of March 16 as related by Thompson, with one important difference. Thompson had said that when he left the helicopter to talk to the lieutenant and get the people out of the bunker he had told his door gunners to cover him. Colburn was a bit more specific: he said Thompson had told them to fire back if the infantry troops fired on the Vietnamese while he was trying to get them out of the bunker. Colburn did not elaborate on this, so it is a matter of conjecture as to what would have happened if the infantry had taken either the people in the bunker or Thompson under fire. Fortunately, this did not happen.

After they had evacuated the child from the ditch and returned to LZ Dottie, Colburn said, Thompson told his crew he was going to see Major Watke. It was obvious to Colburn that he was angry and upset. Colburn did not go with him, but Thompson later told him about the meeting.

Colburn said he and Thompson had gone to the airfield at LZ Dottie to

3. It was later determined that the gunship pilot was Warrant Officer Jerry R. Culverhouse. After testifying before the Inquiry, Culverhouse annotated a map showing the locations of between 175 and 230 dead civilians he had seen in the My Lai-4 area.

see Colonel Henderson on the same day, although they were interrogated separately. He thought it had been on the 16th, as he recalled having on the same set of bloodied fatigues. His session was only five to ten minutes long; he was not sworn in, did not make a written statement, and they did not go into much detail. He testified that he had told Henderson of placing smoke grenades near the wounded (a signal that medical help was needed) and later seeing them dead, of the captain shooting the young woman, of evacuating the people from the bunker, of sixty to seventy dead civilians in the ditch, and of taking the child to the hospital. The only thing he didn't tell Henderson, he said, was of the confrontation between Thompson's crew and the ground forces. He said Henderson had seemed interested and had taken notes during the meeting.

Colburn said there had been considerable discussion within the aero scout unit about the My Lai action for a few days, and then it stopped. Nobody had ever told him to keep quiet about the incident, but he knew of no investigation. He was later presented with a decoration for his part in the My Lai operation.

Warrant Officer Dan R. Millians' testimony concerning the incident also closely paralleled Thompson's. Millians, a gunship pilot, had flown in support of Thompson's observation helicopter twice on the 16th—once near the end of the artillery preparation and again beginning at about 10:30 A.M. He saw only one Viet Cong during that time—the one Thompson had ordered him to take under fire; but Millians did not think he had hit the man.

The number of dead civilians he saw had shocked him, he said, as had the number of buildings being burned. He had a good view of it because he and his co-pilot alternated flying, which had given him a chance to observe the ground action. He was certain he had seen at least seventy-five to a hundred bodies, and he identified their locations in about the same areas as had Thompson. While they were flying at an elevation of between 150 and 200 feet he saw an American firing into a ditch that contained, he estimated, fifty to seventy-five bodies. He could see the rounds impacting and someone's head being blown apart. At one point, he said, he told his co-pilot he wished he has his camera with him so he could get a record of some of the things he was seeing. Also, on several occasions he asked the high gunship flying with Thompson to contact the ground forces in an effort to put a stop to the unnecessary killing, but he didn't know if his requests had been transmitted.

It was Millians' gunship that landed to evacuate the Vietnamese at the bunker. He told us how he had landed and, in two flights, lifted these people to safety near Highway 521. He was not sure how many he had taken out —maybe twelve to fourteen. When asked if he thought it had been wise to land a gunship in enemy territory, he could offer no opinion as to whether or not it was a normal procedure. But, as already noted, under the circumstances it was probably the only course of action that could have been taken.

Millians did not go with Thompson when he reported to Major Watke; he could only say he was certain that Thompson had talked with someone but he was not sure of his identity. Millians had never been asked for a statement about the incident nor had he ever been aware that an investigation was being made.

The members of the Inquiry were most favorably impressed with Warrant Officers Thompson and Millians. With few exceptions, this could be said for all the other helicopter pilots we interrogated, officers and warrant officers alike; they were of an extremely high caliber, and the warrant officers in particular were a young, eager, straightforward group. Most of them were only about twenty years old and just out of high school when they entered the Army. They had been put through an intensive course of instruction to qualify as helicopter pilots and then sent off to South Vietnam. They did not know much about the Army, but they were excellent pilots and, above all else, they told it as it was.

chapter 9

Captain Medina's Testimony

Captain Ernest L. Medina, Charlie Company's commander during the My Lai operation, had attracted considerable publicity and had engaged F. Lee Bailey as his lawyer. We had no idea what to expect.

They arrived at the Inquiry with considerable fanfare, meeting with the newspaper and television reporters on their way in. In addition to Bailey, Captain Medina was accompanied by one other civilian lawyer and a military lawyer. Some members of the panel were amused by the fact that Bailey and his assistant were dressed almost identically, almost as though they had decided to wear their uniforms since they were going to a military outing.

Within the Inquiry we always advised the witness if we had any reason to think he might have committed an offense chargeable under military law. Medina was the first such witness, so after he was sworn in and informed of the purpose of the Inquiry and his rights as a witness, Colonel Miller advised him that he was suspected of murdering Vietnamese civilians, disobeying orders and regulations, and misprision (withholding information) of felonies, specifically of murder.

Bailey asked several questions concerning the form of Medina's testimony, his right to confer with counsel, and the availability of a verbatim record. After some sparring he was told he would have the opportunity to review Medina's testimony but that its release would be at the discretion of the Secretary of the Army, and that whenever Medina wished to confer with his counsel he could. He did so often. Aside from the initial questioning, Bailey had only a few interjections, but there was no question as to who was controlling Medina's testimony. It was apparent throughout his appearance that Medina had been well rehearsed.

My Lai-4, burning.—*U.S. Army Photo.*

results of Colonel Henderson's investigation had come to him piecemeal from Young and Henderson, and he could not recall having received a comprehensive oral report from Henderson. (This was in direct contradiction to what Young had told us—that he had heard about this report from Koster—and to Henderson, who said he had made an oral report to Koster on March 20.) However, Koster said, from the interim reports he had gotten the impression that Henderson had talked with everyone responsible for the operation as well as with a cross section of the personnel in both ground and air units. He thought Henderson had indeed made an in-depth investigation, which had found no evidence of excessive use of firepower. This greatly relieved him, as he had thought that perhaps indiscriminate firing by ground troops, gunships, and artillery had caused the civilian casualties.

We asked General Koster if he had ever been aware of a written report dated April 4–6 that Henderson claimed to have prepared based on his oral report. Koster said no, he did not recall it, and in fact, he said, he had not requested a written report until after he had seen the allegations in the Viet Cong propaganda and the Son Tinh District chief's letter. Then, he said, he had directed Henderson to put his oral report into writing and also to include an investigation of the VC charges. The result, however—Henderson's report of April 24, 1968—responded only to the propaganda and did not cover his former investigation; Koster had considered it to be inadequate. Normally, such a report would have been logged in and filed within the division, he said; if it had not been, he could offer no explanation.

Some time after his return from leave in Hawaii on May 8, 1968, through either General Young or Colonel Parson, the division Chief of Staff, General Koster ordered Henderson to prepare a formal report. However, in their testimony both Young and Parson said they had neither received such a directive nor passed it on to Henderson. An order should have been published directing the investigation, but Koster could not recall this having been done. He thought Colonel Henderson would be conducting the investigation, since he was one echelon above the task force level, and was quite surprised when he heard that Lieutenant Colonel Barker was conducting it. The Report of Investigation was submitted a week or so later, about May 15–16, and Koster's description of its format and conclusions was very similar to Henderson's testimony in this regard. Koster said he discussed the report with Young and Parson, but, again, neither had any knowledge of such a discussion or of seeing the report.

Master Sergeant Gerberding, the brigade intelligence sergeant, vaguely recalled seeing a letter from Koster to Henderson concerning the VC propaganda and the district chief's report and directing Henderson to investigate them, but he was far from certain about this, and did not recall ever seeing the report itself. All of this, combined with the lack of any notations in logs or journals concerning such a report and the fact that we could find no one