

THERE ARE HEROES, AND THEN THERE ARE HEROES



Hugh Thompson, Jr.

Memorial Day has its roots in the US Civil War, and has expanded to include remembrance of all those who have served their country and have died. In various places, the remembrance may focus on a particular conflict, like the Civil War and Carbondale, IL. It might also center on a location, like Arlington Cemetery or the Pearl Harbor Memorial. It might focus on recipients of the Medal of Honor. In a lot of places, Memorial Day is a big deal.

But on this Memorial Day, with the protests on college campuses in the US and around the world related to the unfolding events in Gaza and the West Bank, my thoughts go to Hugh Thompson, Jr., Glenn Andreotta, and Lawrence Colburn. They were three members of the US Army, who received the

Soldiers Medal on March 6, 1998 for their actions 30 years earlier as they flew a mission on March 16, 1968.

Thompson commanded a observation helicopter at the time, tasked with locating enemy firing positions and then directing US forces in response. As their helicopter came over the village of My Lai, they observed no enemy fire, but were shocked to see US military forces killing obvious Vietnamese civilians. At one point, Thompson maneuvered his helicopter between civilians and US forces on the ground, so as to protect the Vietnamese civilians, and he ordered Colburn, his door gunner, to open fire on the US forces if they tried to prevent him from protecting the civilians. Colburn, without hesitation, concurred. Andreotta, the crew chief, was shocked to see the atrocities committed by US forces, and helped locate other civilians who had been shot and needed medical care. As Thompson described it,

Glenn Andreotta—if there was a hero, I don't like that word, but if there was a hero at My Lai—it was Glenn Andreotta, because he saw movement in that ditch, and he fixed in on this one little kid and went down into that ditch. I would not want to go in that ditch. It's not pretty. It was very bad. I can imagine what was going through his mind down there, because there was more than one still alive—people grabbing hold of his pants, wanting help. "I can't help you. You're too bad [off]." He found this one kid and brought the kid back up and handed it to Larry, and we laid it across Larry and my lap and took him out of there. I remember thinking Glenn Andreotta put himself where nobody in their right mind would want to be, and he was driven by something. I haven't got the aircraft on the ground real stable. He bolted out of that aircraft into this ditch. Now he was a hero. Glenn Andreotta gave his life for his

country about three weeks later. That's the kind of guy he was, and he was a hero that day.

For their actions in 1968, Thompson, Andreotta, and Colburn received the Soldier's Medal, given to "any person of the Armed Forces of the United States or of a friendly foreign nation who, while serving in any capacity with the Army of the United States, including Reserve Component soldiers not serving in a duty status at the time of the heroic act, distinguished himself or herself by heroism not involving conflict with an enemy."

That last phrase – not involving conflict with an enemy – is central to why these three received the Soldier's Medal and not the Medal of Honor.

Thompson's medal was awarded with this description:

Soldier's Medal, Hugh C. Thompson, Jr., then Warrant Officer One, United States Army:

For heroism above and beyond the call of duty on 16 March 1968, while saving the lives of at least 10 Vietnamese civilians during the unlawful massacre of noncombatants by American forces at My Lai, Quang Ngai Province, South Vietnam. Warrant Officer Thompson landed his helicopter in the line of fire between fleeing Vietnamese civilians and pursuing American ground troops to prevent their murder. He then personally confronted the leader of the American ground troops and was prepared to open fire on those American troops should they fire upon the civilians. Warrant Officer Thompson, at the risk of his own personal safety, went forward of the American lines and coaxed the Vietnamese civilians out of the bunker to enable their evacuation. Leaving the area after

requesting and overseeing the civilians' air evacuation, his crew spotted movement in a ditch filled with bodies south of My Lai Four. Warrant Officer Thompson again landed his helicopter and covered his crew as they retrieved a wounded child from the pile of bodies. He then flew the child to the safety of a hospital at Quang Ngai. Warrant Officer Thompson's relayed radio reports of the massacre and subsequent report to his section leader and commander resulted in an order for the cease fire at My Lai and an end to the killing of innocent civilians. Warrant Officer Thompson's Heroism exemplifies the highest standards of personal courage and ethical conduct, reflecting distinct credit on him, and the United States Army.

Thompson and his crew did not act against a foreign enemy, but against members their own US military. The Soldier's Medal, therefore, was as high an honor as they could receive – but the fact that **it took 30 years for the DOD to admit that they deserved it** is a stain on the US military. (Stars and Stripes has a great writeup of My Lai and the aftermath, written at the death of Larry Colbrun – the last of the three heroes, and it includes the push it took to get the DOD to award these medals.)

All this came back to mind as I read a Guardian piece yesterday about a prison camp run by the Israel Defense Force:

Prisoners held at an Israeli detention camp in the Negev desert are being subjected to widespread physical and mental abuses, with at least one reported case of a man having his limb amputated as a result of injuries sustained from constant handcuffing, according to two whistleblowers who worked at the site.

The sources described harrowing treatment of detainees at the Israeli Sde Teiman camp, which holds Palestinians from Gaza and suspected Hamas militants, including inmates regularly being kept shackled to hospital beds, blindfolded and forced to wear nappies.

According to the two sources, the facility, located approximately 18 miles from the Gaza border, consists of two distinct sections: an enclosure where up to 200 Palestinian detainees from Gaza are confined under severe physical restrictions inside cages, and a field hospital where dozens of patients with war injuries are handcuffed to their beds and often deprived of pain relief.

One whistleblower, who has worked in the facility as a prison guard, said detainees were forced to stand up for hours, or to sit on their knees. The source, who spoke out at risk of reprisals, said several detainees were beaten with truncheons and not able to move their heads or to speak at the facility.

“The prisoners are detained in a sort of cages, all blindfolded and handcuffed,” the source said. “If someone speaks or moves, they are immediately silenced or they are forced to stand with their hands raised above their head and handcuffed for up to one hour.

“If they are unable to keep their hands raised, the soldiers attach the handcuffs to the bars of the cage. Many of the detainees had infected wounds that were not being properly treated.”

[snip]

The prison guard’s statements are corroborated by a second whistleblower who spoke to the Guardian and who was

part of the medical staff operating in the field hospital in Sde Teiman.

“There were about 15 patients in total, they were all handcuffed and blindfolded,” he said. “They were naked, wearing diapers and were covered by blankets. Most of them appeared to have obvious war injuries, some had undergone amputations and others underwent major abdominal or chest surgery. They were practically naked except for a diaper.”

The member of the medical staff added: “I understand that it is difficult to treat a patient accused of heinous crimes, but it is the job we have chosen and as physicians we should recognise that every human being has a right to appropriate healthcare regardless of their backgrounds.”

There’s a lot packed into that article, and the link under “the facility” in the excerpt above is a big deal. It goes to the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, which says this about the conditions in this camp (emphasis in the original):

The testimonies of innocent people held in the Sde Teiman Military Base and released after being interrogated painted a **horrifying picture of inhumane prison conditions, humiliation and torture**. The detainees are held in a kind of cage, crowded, sitting on their knees in a painful position for many hours every day. They are handcuffed at all hours of the day and blindfolded. This is how they eat, relieve themselves and receive medical care.

Detainees at the facility were physically punished by tying them to a fence for hours with their hands raised. Those whose hands were tired and took them down were beaten. In addition,

soldiers at the facility beat detainees, extinguished cigarettes on them, urinated on detainees, and deprived them of food, toilets, and sleep. Additional evidence of the inhumane conditions in the detention facility arises from requests from doctors, who serve in the hospital established at the base, for the purpose of treating detainees. They testify that **detainees' arms and legs are routinely amputated due to handcuffed wounds, lack of medication, inadequate medical care, violence suffered by detainees, and lack of food.**

I have no complaints about those who have received the Medal of Honor for their heroic actions in the face of enemy fire. But folks like the heroes of My Lai and the anonymous guard and medic at Sde Teiman publicly confirming what released prisoners have said about the actions of the Israeli Defense Force are even more heroic. It's one thing to stand up to "the enemy," but standing up to your brothers and sisters in arms when they violate basic humanitarian norms – putting your own bodies in the path of their weapons – is truly amazing.

Enjoy your BBQ this weekend – a tradition that has been part of Memorial Day since the beginning (at least in Carbondale) – and a raise a glass to Thompson, Andreotta, Colburn, and all those who defend civilians, even in the midst of war.

Because that's when civilians are most in need of protection.