



NOTES FROM THE EDITORS' CUFF

By Reed Irvine

AIM Report

March-B 1998

THIS REPORT WILL BE THE LAST OF MANY THAT JOE GOULDEN HAS WRITTEN OVER THE PAST nine years. Joe has had a great career as a reporter, author of books and media critic. His reporting career began with his hometown paper, followed by the Dallas Morning News and the Philadelphia Inquirer. He was Washington bureau chief for the Inquirer until he decided to apply his great talent to writing books in the 1970s and 1980s. He has authored or co-authored 18 that have been published and one, a biography of Woodrow Wilson, that is close to completion. I first met Joe while he was working on *Fit to Print, A.M. Rosenthal and his Times*. Rosenthal was the executive editor of The New York Times, and Joe asked to use our files in doing his research. The book was published in 1988, and it included material that portrayed AIM in a very favorable light. Joe joined our staff in 1989, accepting a salary far less than he could have earned elsewhere.

JOE'S LONG EXPERIENCE IN THE NEWSROOM ENABLED HIM TO SPEAK WITH AUTHORITY ON journalistic practices and ethics. After joining AIM, he was frequently called upon to testify as an expert witness in libel suits, and his testimony helped several plaintiffs win some big judgments. As a successful author he also helped many aspiring authors seeking advice on how to get their books published. A speed reader, he read and evaluated many a dauntingly thick manuscript, and he regularly reviewed books for The Washington Times and other publications, as well as for AIM. He was co-author with Cliff Kincaid and me of *The News Manipulators*, a collection of our columns and radio commentaries. He has given speeches and radio interviews for AIM all over the country, and for two years, 1994 to 1996, he was co-host with me on AIM's TV show, "The Other Side of the Story." Joe has now decided that he has another book or two in him that he wants to get out, and we have reluctantly bade him farewell. We will fill the void left by his departure in part, at least, by making more use of outside talent, and you will probably be seeing several different by-lines in the AIM Report in the months ahead.



CORRECTING THE LIES TOLD BY THE MEDIA ABOUT THE VIETNAM WAR HAS LONG BEEN DEAR to Joe's heart, and it is fitting that we publish as his last AIM Report the story of the successful effort by Ron Timberlake to expose one of the most durable of those lies that has been associated with the 1972 prize-winning photo of a naked Vietnamese girl fleeing from an air strike in which napalm was dropped. Joe's article tells how Timberlake, a decorated Vietnam veteran, succeeded in getting the AP, The Baltimore Sun and the Washington Post to set the record straight last December, exonerating our military of any responsibility for this air strike. Of course, that doesn't mean it won't resurface in other publications. The AP blankets the country, but not everything that it distributes is printed by its client newspapers.

THERE IS ANOTHER VIETNAM STORY, ONE INVOLVING THE NOTORIOUS MY LAI MASSACRE carried out by U.S. Army troops in Vietnam in March 1968 that I believe deserves more attention than it has received. AIM member Harvey H. Wilkins of Colton, Calif., sent me an AP story by Leslie Zganjar published on the front page of the Riverside Press-Enterprise on March 2 telling about the valiant effort of an American helicopter pilot and his crew to save Vietnamese women and children from death at the hands of American army troops at My Lai. If you missed this story, you may have seen on TV or read about the heroic humanitarianism of Hugh C. Thompson Jr, Lawrence Colburn and Glenn Andreotta when they were honored on March 6 at a ceremony at the Vietnam Memorial in Washington. They were awarded the Soldier's Medal, the Army's highest decoration for bravery in action not involving conflict with an enemy. The award to Glenn Andreotta was posthumous; he died in a helicopter crash two weeks after My Lai. I had never heard of these men before. I have never condoned what our troops did at My Lai, but I have criticized the media for giving it so much attention while ignoring the Communist massacre of some 5,000 civilian inhabitants of Hue during their occupation of that city in February 1968. I wish the media had reported the Thompson story prominently when the My Lai story broke late in 1969 because I think it would have done much to

counter the impression that our troops in Vietnam were all sadistic killers. This story was such an eye-opener to me that I am going to quote a good part of Leslie Zganjar's AP story with some modifications taken from a good story by David Montgomery in The Washington Post the day following the ceremony.

“THE MY LAI MASSACRE ...STANDS AS ONE OF THE DARKEST MOMENTS IN AMERICAN military history. There is a sliver of light: Thompson’s little known story. It’s the story of a man who obeyed his convictions, who defied superiors, who placed his body between villagers and his fellow soldiers, who ordered his gunner to fire on American troops if necessary. It’s also a story of long-withheld recognition of this bitter brand of heroism....Some insist the military was reluctant to publicly honor what Thompson did. Shortly after My Lai, he received the Distinguished Flying Cross as his crew mates received Bronze Stars, but he looks on that cynically. ‘It was only to keep me quiet,’ he says. Thompson, then 24, and his two-man crew were to swoop down over the village and draw fire so helicopters behind them could destroy the enemy with machine-gun and rocket fire. They never drew fire.

“BUT THEY SPOTTED A YOUNG VIETNAMESE GIRL, INJURED AND LYING ON THE ROAD. Thompson marked the spot with a smoke grenade, radioed for help and hovered nearby. He and his crew watched in horror as an American Army officer walked up to the girl, nudged her with his foot, and shot her dead. They saw the bodies of Vietnamese children, women and old men piled in an irrigation ditch. Thompson landed and implored American soldiers: ‘Help the wounded.’ Instead, troops fired into the bodies. Thompson wracked his brain for an explanation. ‘We wanted to find something that would point the blame to the enemy, but it just didn’t work,’ the gruff, graying Thompson says. ‘It all added up to something we just didn’t want to believe.’

“HE WAS MOVED TO ACTION WHEN HE SPOTTED VILLAGERS CROWDED IN A HUT, AN OLD woman standing in the doorway, a baby in her arms, a child clutching her leg. American soldiers were approaching. ‘These people were looking at me for help and there was no way I could turn my back on them,’ Thompson recalls.” Thompson put his chopper down in front of the advancing troops and asked an officer to help him get the villagers out. “The officer replied that the only help the villagers would get would be a hand grenade, Thompson says. So he gave his gunner, Lawrence Colburn, a simple direct order: ‘Train your M-60 on the GIs. If the Americans attempt to harm the villagers, you open up on them.’ Thompson radioed two gun ships behind him, and together they airlifted a dozen villagers to safety. He flew back to the irrigation ditch where his other crew mate, Glenn Andreotta, saw something move. Andreotta jumped out and waded through the bodies until he reached a 2-year-old boy, still clinging to his dead mother, but unharmed. He handed him over to Colburn. ‘You’ve never seen shock like this,’ Colburn says of the child, whom he cradled as they flew to a hospital. ‘Such a blank stare.’”

BOTH ABC AND NBC AIRED STORIES ABOUT THE EPISODE ON MARCH 6, THE DAY THE MEDALS were awarded. ABC's report was far more detailed than NBC's. It described briefly what led to the My Lai massacre, saying that Army intelligence had reported that everyone in the village was Vietcong. One former soldier, said to be haunted by the experience, admitted on camera to having personally killed between 20 and 25 people, obeying orders to do so. Twenty-five soldiers were charged with murder, but Lt. William Calley was the only one who was convicted, and he spent only three days in jail and three years under house arrest. Both ABC and NBC credited Thompson with having halted the atrocities by reporting to his superiors what was going on.

DAVID EGAN, AN ARCHITECTURE PROFESSOR AT CLEMSON UNIVERSITY, SAW THOMPSON interviewed on a BBC documentary ten years ago and began writing letters to Congress and high-ranking officials pressing for recognition of his courageous, morally correct action. He won the support of former Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and finally the Army informed Thompson in August 1996 that he had been approved for the Soldier’s Medal. It took them another 19 months to make the award. A Pentagon spokesman, Dov Schwartz, blamed the delay on “bureaucracy and efforts to ensure that Thompson’s crew was also recognized, not on military shame to revive the tragedy and shame of My Lai.” My Lai was indeed a tragedy and a shame, but in honoring Thompson, Colburn and Andreotta we demonstrate that My Lai was a departure from the standards of conduct expected of our troops that are exemplified by the actions of these three men.

I AM ENCLOSING CARDS YOU MAY SEND TO THE AP, ABC AND NBC TO THANK THEM FOR reporting this story and reminding them that there are other stories that are being covered up that they should report.