

# Making Apocalypse Now

## *Episode 16: Puppy Boat Massacre*



## Forward

By **CINEMATYLER**

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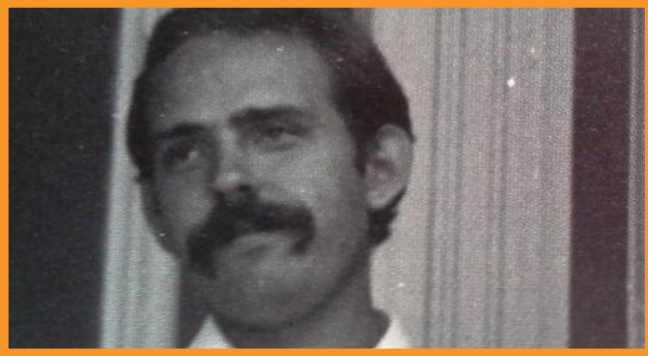
Thanks so much for your support! It took me way too long to realize that, despite being the second-to-last scene filmed, Coppola was saying that Walter Murch suggested what would become the Puppy Sampan scene during the hiatus. Coppola must have written it during the hiatus and then came back to shoot the Do Lung sequence, which makes sense why the puppy was already planned to be there.

Since Clean's death scene was the last thing filmed, it's possible that after Do Lung, he had planned to incorporate the puppy somewhere during the Kurtz scenes (which might be why the puppy shows up in that one shot on the boat) and ultimately decided to

have the puppy be lost when shooting Clean's death scene.

This Companion PDF contains a transcript of Coppola's commentary on the scene and some more info about the investigation and cover-up of the My Lai massacre.

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# CHARACTERS



## **Francis Ford Coppola:**

The Hero. A director coming off the massive success of *The Conversation* and *The Godfather* parts I and II is about to embark on a journey that will test his limits—physically, mentally, and spiritually. Will he change the film industry? Will he survive?



## **Martin Sheen (Willard):**

The Face. An actor yearning to become a movie star will go through a journey similar to his character, Willard. In order to exercise his demons, he must face his one true enemy... himself.



## **Vittorio Storaro (Cinematographer):**

The Genius. An Italian cinematographer apprehensively accepts perhaps the most important role on this team—capturing the images that will tell this epic story. A true student of light and color, Storaro must bring these grand ideas into reality. Failure would bring a potential end to Coppola's career. Can he do it?



## **Walter Murch (Editor):**

The Wizard. It would be his idea to add a massacre scene to *Apocalypse Now*—a harrowing scene that would add a new layer of accountability rarely seen in American war movies.

# Commentary

## THOUGHTS ON PUPPY SAMPAN

What follows are Francis Ford Coppola's thoughts on the scene from the Apocalypse Now Redux Commentary.



*Now, the scene you're about to see is, of course, inspired by the My Lai massacre that had become so notorious in the news—something that we embarrassingly have become more familiar with. The idea that the American soldier, the wonderful American soldier that we love from World War II, could be as sadistic and as cruel and as trigger-happy as anyone else's soldiers.*

*And it was Walter Murch on the break, back in America after the typhoon, who told me that he felt that the film needed a scene that was more like the My Lai massacre, and as I said, I was always happy to invent a new scene—anything to keep me from dealing with my real problem, which was the ending.*

*I thought very much what Walter suggested was right and I don't remember exactly whether he came up with the thought of the little dog, or if that came from working*

*out the scene. But I felt it was a wonderful idea of his because it gave the movie not only a moment of suspense, but also caught that My Lai sense that really [showed that] we were there with our guns loaded and it was very easy for innocent people [to be hurt].*

*You see Laurence Fishburne there. We affectionately called him "the fish" in those days when he was a kid, but he's all stoked up and ready to be dangerous and Chef is, of course you know, unglued as usual and this whole thing has just the markings of a tragedy about to happen.*

*[The scene plays out and the civilians are killed.]*

*I guess this is how it happens, people are keyed up, someone makes a move to the left or to the right... Today, the news is that the police shot with five shots to the head, a suicide bomber, who turned out not to be a suicide*

# Commentary

## THOUGHTS ON PUPPY SAMPAN



*bomber. Who is the blame? I mean, if people are frightened, if they're if they don't know when they're likely to be attacked and they unleash it. It's just the Oresteia\* all over again. You can't keep trading violence with violence will bring about this or bring about this heartbreak.*

*Doesn't look it, but we were actually not cruel to the dog. Sam was extremely savvy with with the animals and he actually was quite fond of that dog, and that's how it became like a fixture on the boat and in the story for the next section of the film.*

*Again, the moral dilemma, technically by the rules of the game, if the woman in question is still alive, they're obligated to take her to medical help. And of course, Willard's mission is to continue going on and so again, the moral issue was dealt with again. He killed her in cold blood rather than to bring her back—assuming she would've died anyway. But in the duel with the chief, of course, the chief insisted on*

*their inspecting the sampán, so again the blame goes back and forth, ultimately. Who has the blame? We all have the blame.*

*From this moment on, when really, you see bloodshed so directly, both by the crew of the boat and by Willard in the case of the girl, once life is taken, the path is very very different.*

*\*The Oresteia is a trilogy of Greek tragedies written by Aeschylus showing how murder leads to more murder.*

# Investigating War Crimes

## MY LAI MASSACRE

### Cover-up

Colin Powell, who was a high-ranking military officer at the time, was asked to look into a letter that said US soldiers might have done some terrible things during the Vietnam War. But his investigation reported that they didn't find any evidence of "unnecessary killings or war crimes" and no facts relating to the events in My Lai. However, some people later criticized Powell for "whitewashing" or covering up what happened in My Lai.

A specialist outside of the official investigation sent a letter to some important politicians asking them to look more into what happened at My Lai. He wasn't there when it happened, but he had talked to some Charlie Company soldiers who were. They told him about the killings that had happened, so he asked the politicians to check it out.

Under the pressure from the specialist's letter, the Army finally charged a soldier named William Calley with premeditated murder for killing 109 South Vietnamese civilians in My Lai. This news was eventually published, and the public learned about the massacre more than a year and a half after it occurred.

The revelation of the massacre was a big problem for the US government and President Nixon, who set up a special team called the "My Lai Task Force" to manage the fallout. Part of the task force was even involved in attempting to discredit witnesses. Pressure from Congress was mounting to investigate what happened.



Finally, a thorough review of the My Lai incident by Lieutenant General William R. Peers found that many high-ranking officers had participated in a cover-up and recommended court-martial for 34 people, including some very high-ranking officials.

Journalist Jonathan Schell found that nearly 70% of the villages in the province containing My Lai had been destroyed by artillery and there were around

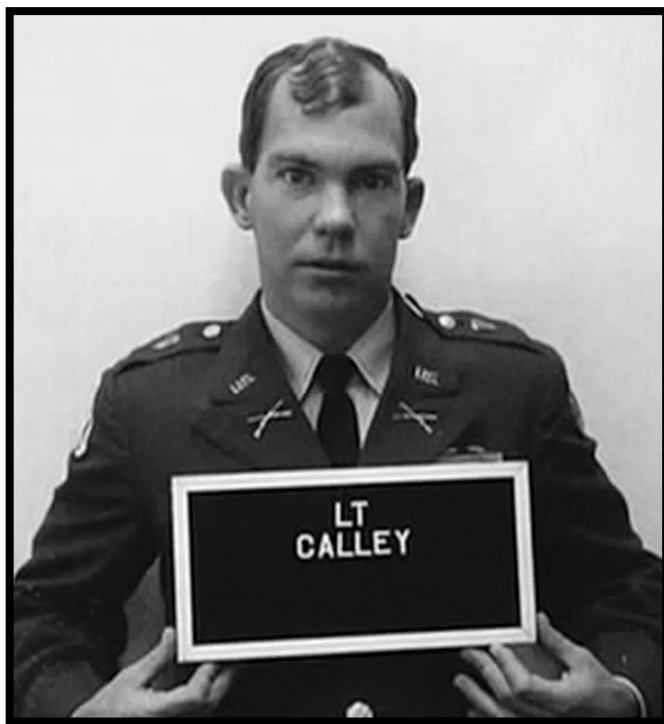
# Investigating War Crimes

## MY LAI MASSACRE

50,000 civilian casualties a year. In 1970, an anonymous sergeant said that massacres like My Lai were “happening monthly” between 1968 and 1969.

### William Calley

In July 1969, William Calley and twenty-five others were charged with war crimes. In November 1970, 14 military officers were



charged with hiding information about the My Lai massacre. But, most of these charges were dropped, and only one high-ranking officer, Colonel Henderson, actually went to trial. He was found not guilty.

1st Lieutenant William Calley, who was part of the massacre, was put on trial too. He said he was just following orders, but he was still found guilty of murdering at least 20 people. He was sentenced to life in prison in March 1971. Two days later, President Nixon decided to release him and put him under house arrest while waiting for his sentence to be reviewed. Later, his life sentence was reduced to twenty years, and he ended up spending only three and a half years under house arrest before being released in September 1974.

Captain Medina, who Calley claimed gave him the orders, had his own trial and was found not guilty. This meant that the idea of holding a leader responsible for their soldiers' actions (known as “command responsibility”) was rejected. Later, Medina admitted that he had hidden evidence and lied about the number of people who had died.

Another officer, Captain Kotouc, was also put on trial but was found not guilty. Major General Koster was demoted and both he and his deputy, Brigadier General Young, had medals taken away that they'd been given for their service in Vietnam.

Out of 26 people initially charged, Calley was the only one found guilty. Some people think that these trials didn't uphold the laws of war established during previous war crimes trials in Nuremberg and Tokyo.

Howard Callaway, the Secretary of the Army, said that Calley's sentence was reduced because Calley thought he was just following orders.

# Investigating War Crimes

## MY LAI MASSACRE

But this goes against the rules set during the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials, where following orders wasn't a defense for committing war crimes.

Aside from the My Lai trials, the U.S. Army held 36 other trials from 1965 to 1973 for crimes against civilians in Vietnam.

Some authors argue that the light punishments for those involved in My Lai and the reluctance to hold higher officials responsible were part of a pattern that led U.S. soldiers to mistakenly kill suspected Vietnamese enemies. This, they argue, led to other massacres and a pattern of war crimes in Vietnam.

## Other US War Crimes in Vietnam

Newly released U.S. Army documents have confirmed the stories told by a Vietnam War veteran named Jamie Henry about his unit's harmful actions during the war, including a tragic event where 19 innocent people were killed in 1968. These files, put together by the Department of Defense in the 1970s, reveal that war crimes by U.S. forces in Vietnam were more common than previously admitted, with 320 confirmed incidents.

The papers, which are around 9,000 pages long, contain investigation files, witness testimonies, and reports for top military leaders. They show that violent actions, including murder, rape,

and torture, happened in every Army division in Vietnam. The files support accounts of seven massacres from 1967 to 1971 where at least 137 civilians were killed. They also validate 78 other attacks on innocent people that resulted in at least 57 deaths, 56 injuries, and 15 cases of sexual assault, as well as 141 cases of U.S. soldiers torturing civilian prisoners.

Although there was strong evidence against 203 soldiers, only 57 were tried in military court, and just 23 were found guilty. Most of the confirmed cases ended with a small punishment or no punishment at all.

The documents also tell about a system created after the My Lai massacre to monitor war crimes allegations. These records were made public in 1994, but they didn't get much attention until recently. Now, retired Brigadier General John H. Johns, who served on the task force, believes these records should be shared widely to prevent current military abuses.

## The Heroes That Day

Chief Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson was flying a reconnaissance helicopter when he spotted the massacre taking place. Thompson landed between the villagers and soldiers telling his machine gunner to keep Calley's men back while he helped the villagers out of a bunker. Thompson ordered a large helicopter to come and evacuate the villagers.

Thompson reported what he had witnessed to his



# Investigating War Crimes

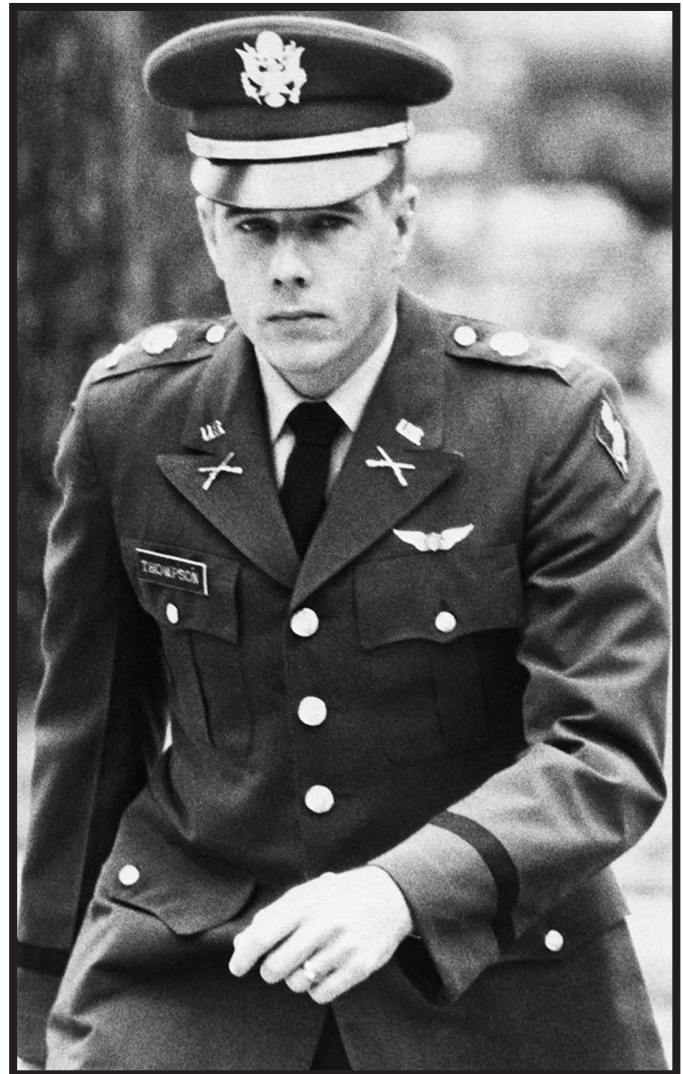
## MY LAI MASSACRE

superiors who then immediately tried to cover up what happened. They awarded Thompson a medal in hopes of keeping him quiet, but he threw it away and testified before the House Armed Services Committee in Washington, DC where the committee chairman tried, unsuccessfully, to have Thompson court-martialed.

During his testimony, Thompson said,

*It was probably one of the saddest days of my life. I just could not believe that people could totally lose control and I've heard people say this happened all the time. I don't believe it. I'm not naive to understand that innocent civilians did get killed in Vietnam. I truly pray to God that My Lai was not an everyday occurrence. I don't know anybody could keep their sanity if something like that happened all the time. I can see where four or five people get killed, something like that. But that was nothing like that, it was no accident whatsoever. Pure premeditated murder. And we are trained better than that and it's not something you would like to do.*

Thompson was continually harassed following his testimony with death threats and even “mutilated animals on his doorstep.” Thomson would continue his career as an instructor pilot and ultimately retired in 1983. In 1998, Thompson and two others under his command that day received the Soldier's Medal for their bravery during My Lai.



# Selected Comments

## MEDEVAC SEQUENCE

C

CircusOf5

15:00 I think that it's okay to feel close to the men, having followed them so intimately upriver, and then have that thrown into question when they take advantage of the women: it's the amoral fog of war -- has any surviving participant ever come back entirely whole? Call me a cynic, but I find that one of the more grounded sequences. Love your work CinemaTyler.

M

Michael Hall

While it's ultimately disposable I rather like this scene, too; certainly more than I like most of the other footage that made its way into REDUX. While it doesn't refer to anything specific in "Heart of Darkness," it nevertheless feels very Conradian to me, as the characters start to leave civilization behind and the very structure of reality seems to come apart, culminating in a moment of real horror as the soldier's remains spill out of a casket into a scene that starts with the promise of sex with a pretty girl and ends with the reality of an anonymous death in the jungle. I'll take it over the French plantation any day.

D

David Lean

Had the scene been in the movie from day one, we'd have gotten used to it and accepted it as part of the weird ride into a figurative hell. However, the movie we grew to love didn't include it and seemed perfect. This did feel a bit tagged on, even though it's a great scene. It's too weird, too soon, at least that's how I felt after watching the Redux first. The colour change doesn't help either. Gone is the golden sunlight, the brightly coloured flares. It's like a beautifully shot scene.. from another movie entirely!



Kowalski

If you really want to see where the film drags look for the workprint scene of Willard's torture. It goes on forever!! I think if he cut it down dramatically (it lasts for at least 20 minutes) it might have added a little more evil to the Kurtz compound and how far the people under Kurtz's spell had fallen into madness.

# Selected Comments

## MEDEVAC SEQUENCE

Y

YouMeandPooneil

This fuel/sex exchange scene in Redux has always bothered me because that helicopter wouldn't run on diesel fuel. You can hear the helicopter turbine whine as they spin up. The engine needs jet fuel. Jet A is closer to refined kerosene. Not the fuel oil, (diesel) that the drums show. The scene was cut for a very good reason.



Monroville

I haven't seen the Final Cut yet, but is the "stealing Col. Kilgore's surfboard" scene still in there? If there was one scene that felt completely out of place it was that scene. I still don't understand why Hopper's Death, the footage of Scott Glenn and the Devolution of Weapons scenes were cut.

D

Dan Riess

It's still there. You're absolutely right about how out of place it feels. In putting together the Final Cut, Coppola forgot a few things. One is: less is more. Col. Kilgore is an emblem of this. He's so over-the-top that the more you see of him, the more your suspension of disbelief in the film gets torn down. Plus, the scene of Willard stealing his surfboard doesn't advance the plot, and having Willard giggling while engaging in hijinks is extremely out of character.

# SOURCES

## Endnotes

*Apocalypse Now Redux (Commentary)*

*My Lai Massacre - Wiki*

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*“Civilian Killings Went Unpunished” by Nick Turse & Deborah Nelson*

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*The Moral Courage Paradox: The Peers Report and My Lai*

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<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/books/browse-books/ibooks-and-epubs/the-moral-courage-paradox/>

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