



## COMMENTARY &amp; OPINION ON HISTORY &amp; POLITICS

## Hugh's News

## The wingman and the village

by Hugh Turley

Lt. Col. James Robert Hildreth arrived in Pleiku, South Vietnam in March 1967. A career Air Force officer trained to fly combat missions, he was anxious to get into the fight before the war ended. So he took the first available assignment, flying an A-1E Skyraider.

The aircraft provided close air support to ground forces and attacked supply lines. Hildreth was commander of his squadron and flew 285 combat missions during his tour in Vietnam.

The A-1 was heavily armed and low flying, so he could see the people he was shooting at and who were often shooting at him, unlike high performance jets where the pilot seldom sees the people killed when a target is destroyed.

On one mission, Hildreth commanded two A-1s ordered to a target on the northern coast of South Vietnam. He does not remember the name of the village or province. "It was on the coast along Route One, the main north-south highway," was all that he could recall in a recent interview.

The forward air controller (FAC), whose primary job was ensuring the safety of friendly troops, told him it was an enemy village. But Hildreth wondered.

"It just didn't look right," he

said. "It was an old village with three or four hundred houses and probably twelve to fifteen hundred people. It had been there for a long time."

So he asked why it was a target. The FAC said it had been identified as an enemy village because "three Vietcong in black pajamas were seen running into the village from the rice paddy across the road."

Hildreth said, "I told the air controller, 'Hell, I wear black pajamas.' So I asked if they were armed and he said they were." When Hildreth pointed out that they could have been carrying rakes or hoes, the FAC told him the provincial governor, a lieutenant colonel in the South Vietnamese army, was in the back seat of his plane and *he* said it was a Vietcong village.

Hildreth decided to fly in low for a closer look and see if he could draw some enemy fire. Instead, he saw small children smiling and waving in a courtyard.

The FAC instructed him to drop napalm so the breeze from the sea would burn the entire village. Hildreth and his wingman planned to approach from opposite directions, but the wingman dropped his napalm across the road.

When Hildreth saw a woman run from a hut with an infant strapped on her back and a

young child holding her hand, he too dropped his napalm away from the village. The FAC was furious.

Back at their base his wingman told him, "Sir, I have three small grandchildren at home, and I could never face them again if I had followed those orders." Hildreth transferred his wingman to another unit because he did not want to fly any more "combat" missions.

Hildreth reported what had happened to a brigadier general, the director of the command center of Seventh Air Force. His answer, he recalls, was: "Don't you know what's going on? The village didn't pay their taxes and the [governor] was teaching them a lesson."

A few days later, during another mission over the same area, Hildreth saw the village had been totally destroyed. He was sure the report read, "Target 100% destroyed, body-count 1200 KBA [killed by air] confirmed." When asked if he would have destroyed the village had he been flying a F-105 supersonic fighter-bomber, Hildreth replied coolly, "Yes, [because] you don't see the people."

He continued flying combat, and went on to lead the entire Pacific region as commander of the 13th Air Force. General James R. Hildreth retired on July 1, 1981.