

Casualty Reports by U.S. Again Raise Skepticism

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL

FIRE SUPPORT BASE VANDERGRIFT, South Vietnam, Feb. 14—An enemy rocket made a direct hit two nights ago on an American bunker at this artillery base on Route 9 between Khesanh and Quangtri.

Three Americans inside the bunker were killed. They had been in another bunker when rockets started coming in and had spied what they thought would be a more secure refuge a short distance away. They had hardly ducked inside it when a rocket demolished the bunker killing them instantly. Four other G.I.'s at the base were wounded.

The daily morning and afternoon communiqués from the U.S. military command that are supposed to list all significant war actions and casualties have made no mention of the incident. Questioned about it, a command spokesman in Saigon said he had no report of the deaths, but later confirmed that there had been "light casualties" at the artillery base.

The episode calls into question again the accuracy of the official American casualty reports.

The omission of the deaths was presented as inadvertent. However, similar omissions have been noted from time to time.

Because there is no independent way of checking the daily casualties from all over Indochina, the press is forced to rely on the command's tallies. Incidents are witnessed or learned of that are not mentioned in the communiqués.

For example, before word of the three deaths at Vandergrift was related today by base command must include a settlement on "access free of disturbances, there had been reports

that the base was being shelled by the enemy almost nightly.

But command spokesmen made no mention of the incident at the afternoon briefing at Quangtri. Several days ago, the chief spokesman there, Lieut. Col. Perry Stevens, said, "There was not no action to report today."

"Wasn't there some shelling of Vandergrift last night?" he was asked.

"Yes, I believe there was," he said. "Shouldn't that have been in your report?" a newsman persisted.

"I suppose," he said.

Similarly, for the first 10 days of the operation, no United States helicopter losses were announced. When newsmen began reporting unofficial tallies from field accounts, a command spokesman announced at Quangtri that 12 American helicopters had been lost in the operation in support of the incursion into Laos.

He did not mention that 37 other helicopters, according to

military sources, had been shot down and later recovered. Command policy is not to list the helicopters that are shot down and then recovered.

The South Vietnamese have reported two of their helicopters lost over Laos. Actually, reliable South Vietnamese sources reported, the losses total at least seven shot down and not recovered.

The South Vietnamese casualty reports in recent days have been so one-sided as to invite skepticism. For example, the Government spokesman announced in Saigon that in a battle in Laos yesterday morning, 43 enemy soldiers were killed while only one South Vietnamese soldier was killed and 10 were wounded.

That day, near the Laotian border, a United States helicopter pilot reported having evacuated 25 to 30 wounded South Vietnamese from a battle zone. Those casualties were never officially explained.

The latest official South Viet-

namese casualty figures for the operation stand at 449 enemy and 66 South Vietnamese troops killed with 9 enemy soldiers captured and 231 South Vietnamese soldiers wounded.

The latest official United States figures show 22 Americans killed and 50 wounded.