

War Reports Hide Truth

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Washington

In war a certain amount of confusion and inaccuracy is unavoidable in news dispatches. This is particularly so in regard to ground fighting in which thousands of men are spread out many miles in imperfect communication with each other under the most hellishly trying circumstances.

**A
Personal
View**

But when it comes to aircraft this doesn't hold. These enormously expensive machines are easy to inventory. You just walk down the airstrip and count. That's what you do if you want people to have the correct information, and it's what you don't do if your intention is to lie, becloud and obfuscate, which is what our Government has been doing in regard to our helicopter losses in the Laotian campaign.

The most careful reader of newspapers can have no way of knowing what in tarnation is going on there. For confirmation of this assertion, let's look at what the Washington Post has printed on the subject from the beginning of the Laotian invasion to the early part of this week.

Totals

On February 9 the Post reported five copters shot down and two crashed due to "mechanical failures." Two days later, on the 11th, the Post printed an Associated Press dispatch reporting two more copters shot down and then followed the next day with another AP report saying eight more had been knocked out of the skies. An unusual method of addition prompted the Post to say this brought the total to 12.

Then on February 13 the Post said that eight more copters were downed and came up with a total of 20, which was consistent with what we'd printed the day before. However, on February 15 the Post printed reports of two more helicopters brought down, and announced that these two additional ones brought the total to 15.

On the 17th the numerical anarchy was complete. The Post wrote that pilots from the Second Squadron of the 17th Air Cavalry reported that some 30 machines had been destroyed or damaged since the end of January. In the same paper the Post carried a dispatch by Jack Foisie of the Los Angeles Times reporting the loss of 13 coptors during the first week of Laotian fighting.

Two days later the Post printed reports of five more downed with another story saying that, since February 8, 12 copters and two bombers had been lost in Laos while seven helicopters had been downed in associated operations in Vietnam proper.

The next day the Post quoted a Reuter dispatch as saying reliable sources in Saigon — if you can conceive of such a contradiction in terms — said over 50 had been shot down.

On the day after that there was an AP story saying that two whirlybirds had gotten it, which set up the readers for the next day's story which announced that: "The U.S. command in Saigon had no report on today's helicopter losses but its figures

show 24 helicopters lost in the two weeks of the Laotian operation — 15 inside Laos and the others in Vietnam."

Comparison

This doesn't mark the Post as an especially lousy newspaper. A check of the American mother paper, the New York Times, during the same period shows a completely different set of figures, all as mutually inconsistent. The problem lies not with the papers or their reporters but the mendacity of the White House and the Pentagon.

Thirty - four newsmen have lost their lives trying to cover this war, but there are limits. We can't station reporters on every hilltop in Southeast Asia to count dying soldiers and falling aircraft.

If the government wants to conceal the truth it can. There's no way we can be everywhere, but, although it can hide what's happening, it can't hide the fact that it's hiding.

A statement from the White House or the Pentagon on the war is a study in the use of misleading technicalities. Thus they say we have no ground troops in Laos, but hundreds of men hover a few inches above the ground in the copters; we have an unknown but doubtless large number of armed persons in many other parts of Laos directing combat of one sort or another. They announce they've performed a "protective reaction strike" because they don't have the nerve to use the word "bomb." They say that one of our unarmed reconnaissance planes was shot down neglecting to point out it was accompanied by a squadron of fighter bombers.

Layers

Every aspect of the war is layered over by mistruth, misinformation, misstatement and silence. It took a reporter to disclose My Lai, and a room full of generals to conceal it. It took a Senate investigating committee to learn about the corruption in the PXs, which now involve the most serious allegations against a general.

It begins to appear that everybody connected with this noble conflict has been getting a payoff, the ones in authority getting theirs in the form of money, booze, sex and favors, and the poor GIs getting theirs in the form of a bullet between the eyes.

Even the cost of the war is now hidden in the federal budget while the full extent of casualties are disguised. Instead of being some thousand since September, 1969, for instance, they may be more than 8000 if our noncombat deaths were counted with our combat deaths. Some weeks these suspicious non - combat deaths are higher than those killed in action.

None of this lying and hiding has a jot to do with military security. The North Vietnamese don't have to read it in the New York Times to know they've been clobbered by the B-52s. It's done to conceal graft, stupidity, bad judgment from our own people; it's done in hopes you can execute policies in secret that you wouldn't dare to attempt if they were known.