

Reports by Saigon on Toll Inflicted on Enemy in

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, March 31 — The campaign against Communist supply lines in Laos is over, but statistical warfare continues to rage, reminiscent of the days when American commanders put the stress on "the body count" to demonstrate success in the Vietnam war.

The figures at issue these days are those provided by the South Vietnamese Government on the invasion of Laos—numbers tacitly accepted by the Americans though some are so obviously exaggerated as to be meaningless. As a South Vietnamese lieutenant acknowledged, "the more political the operation, the higher the chances of exaggeration of what we did to the enemy."

It is an old controversy, now attracting new interest because the Saigon Government and, to a lesser degree, the American command are still providing a heavy dose of numbers to try to cure the public discomfort over the Laos campaign. The list is long, from enemy killed and munitions destroyed to field radios, trucks, antimalaria pills and chickens and ducks captured.

Considerable Doubt Raised

Considerable doubt was cast on the statistics all during the 45-day campaign. Official briefers talked solemnly of counting bodies in the jungles of Laos, of estimates of explosives used, of heavy engagements where the toll of the enemy ran into

thousands, as against a few wounded.

There were several days when the South Vietnamese command reported every detail of a fight, down to the number of rifles captured, and then said, "There is no word yet on our casualties."

In a war without front lines, it has long been a practice to measure progress in numbers, credible or not. The Americans, during the period of heavy ground combat, were the original sinners, as underscored in the trial of First Lieut. William L. Calley Jr., who testified:

"It was very important to tell the people back home we're killing more of the enemy than they were killing us. You just made a body count off the top of your head. Anything went into the body count: V C, buffalo, pigs, cows. Something was dead. You put it into your body count."

Lower U.S. Casualties

American commanders say the "body count" period for them is over, largely because the nature of the war has changed. Americans are no longer in massive search-and-destroy operations or big battles and, with the enemy pursuing a protracted war of small units in this country, the engagements involving Americans usually show low casualty figures.

The theory is that the smaller the figure, the more credible it is.

General Michael S. Davison, commander of American forces in the military region surrounding Saigon, who is soon

to become Army commander in Europe, said: "I never liked the body count and the stress on kill ratios because I always found they could lead to bad practices. When I decided to come here I decided never to mention kill ratios and body counts to a single subordinate commander."

American and South Vietnamese commanders like to look at figures as benchmarks of progress, nevertheless, because, in their view, the figures help to show what is happening to the enemy.

What happened to the enemy in Laos is still a big mystery. The South Vietnamese claim 13,815 North Vietnamese soldiers killed. The American command, which limits itself to estimates based on aerial observation, put the figure at 4,100. The clear implication, accordingly, is that more than 9,500 were killed by the South Vietnamese themselves, which is difficult for some officers to believe.

Some 'Minuses' for Hanoi

"Look at it this way," a doubtful American officer said. "The Vietnamese say they have killed nearly 14,000 Communists in Laos.

"If you figure that at least two are wounded for every soldier killed, that means 42,000 Communists were put out of action. Since there were supposed to be only 30,000 Communists in the area in Laos, they are now minus 12,000."

"Now the command says we killed something like 15,000 trucks along the trail since the dry season began in October,"

he continued. "They only had about 12,000, so again Hanoi is minus, this time about 2,000 trucks."

"So, if they are minus 9,000 men and 2,000 trucks, it's a wonder they can still keep going on the trail."

The South Vietnamese casualty figures for the troops in Laos are also open to question. Saigon says that 1,163 were killed and 4,299 wounded, with 240 missing, for a total of almost 5,700 or about 25 per cent of the force involved. Some unconfirmed reports circulating in Saigon put the total casualties at 10,000, or about 50 per cent, which the Saigon command absolutely denies.

Few Chances to Check

Because of the nature of the Laotian operation—no Americans allowed in on the ground—few of the statistics gathered by the South Vietnamese could be checked. The Saigon command insists that its men counted the bodies, but officers acknowledge privately that the figures are estimates. The lower American figure is also an estimate, based on reports by pilots of small observation planes and helicopters.

Duplication is unavoidable, with pilots sometimes counting the same bodies the South Vietnamese on the ground locate.

In a sense, the United States command is more interested in the accuracy of casualty figures for the South Vietnamese than for the enemy. As a result, American officers are assessing the figures with the help of American advisers at the scene who tried to count

Laos Are Arousing Doubts

the members of their units as they returned.

An officer engaged in the work said that the South Vietnamese figures were on the low side but did not appear to be near the 10,000 mark. He said that the figures were probably off by a few hundred in each category, implying that the South Vietnamese probably suffered something under seven thousand casualties.

In any event, the South Vietnamese are not particularly interested in statistics, although they recognize the political possibilities of favorable ones.

"Statistics mean very little to us," a South Vietnamese official remarked. "We only started them because the Americans seem to be interested, along with the press."

Figure on Munitions was High

The most striking example of statistical warfare during the operation in Laos was the figure provided by the South Vietnamese on the amount of munitions destroyed—176,246 tons, or more than the equivalent load of 10,000 of the largest cargo plane at work in Vietnam.

The American command was surprised by the figure, which jumped more than 160,000 in one week, and asked the South Vietnamese for clarification. The answer came back that it was "a verified amount." The American estimate is 14,000 tons.

At the briefing yesterday a Saigon spokesman insisted that the huge figure was accurate but added, "You should use your own judgment in using it."

The Americans are still not without their own attempts at manipulating the figures. The most frequently cited example was the deliberate leak in Washington of low American casualty figures—figures usually disclosed in Saigon on Thursday afternoons—early in election week last November.

During the incursion in Laos the command provided statistics only for the helicopters shot down and destroyed in Laos, not the much larger number shot down and then brought back to Vietnam. The rationale was that such information would help the enemy determine helicopter strength.

The casualties suffered in the "recovered" aircraft were also not reported daily, although they were included in the weekly figures, so the job of isolating the number of American casualties became almost impossible.

"The statistics still seem to be important in this war because of the limited tangible measurements," a diplomat commented. "The only problem is that they don't show whether you are winning or whether you really disrupted the trail"