

Death in Phucloc

By ANTHONY LEWIS

PHUCLOC, North Vietnam—At the southern boundary of the city of Haiphong the rice fields begin. The vista of watery green stretches out to the horizon, broken only by the occasional island of a tiny village.

About five miles out, down a dirt track in the middle of nowhere, is the village of Phucloc. In Vietnamese Phuc means peace and happiness; Loc means prosperity.

The houses in Phucloc, as in most villages of the Red River delta, are made of mud with straw roofs. Until April 16 the population was 611.

At 2:20 A.M. on Sunday, April 16, according to the North Vietnamese, American B-52's bombed Phucloc, killing 63 people and injuring 61. Of the 121 houses in the village, 78 were destroyed.

That is what the North Vietnamese say. After a visit to Phucloc one has no reason to doubt that such an attack occurred. The rubble and bomb craters are still there, a month after the attack, with some new houses built or going up amid the wreckage. But the physical evidence is less convincing than the emotional.

As we entered the village there was an old frail woman sitting on a pile of rubble, moaning and swaying. When she saw the foreigner she started to come over. My interpreter, embarrassed, took her gently by the arm to another mound where she stood, still wailing. The interpreter came back and explained: "Since the loss of her family she is mad."

Another woman, who refused to be kept away from me, was Mrs. Pham Thi Viet, 38 years old but looking much older. She said she was away the night of the bombing and came back to find four of her six children dead. So were her father, uncle, sister-in-law, niece and nephew.

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"Why does Nixon send B-52's to kill our children while they are asleep?" she asked.

Often in North Vietnam people whom the authorities arrange for an American correspondent to meet say they know there are different kinds of Americans—some against the war. That did not happen in Phucloc.

The American strategists of the Vietnam war tend to think in large abstractions uncluttered by human beings. They say the war is necessary to preserve the prestige of the President, or to assure the sea routes to Australia—Walt Rostow wrote that recently. But would those objectives seem "so persuasive" if the cost in human terms were really understood?

Death is always less painful in the abstract. I was critical of the means used by the United States in this war before coming here. But tallying the numbers of bomb craters is not the same as seeing Phucloc.

The North Vietnamese believe that American bombing of such targets as villages and hospitals is done intentionally, to terrorize the population. I do not; I think it is a mistake. But that does not resolve the moral problem.

If Phucloc was hit by mistake, there is still the question of why it happened. Was American intelligence wrong? Were the pilots careless? Or is it simply impossible for men flying planes five miles above the earth in the middle of the night to know exactly what they are going to hit?

We cannot call back that early morning of April 16. But we can stop talking about precision bombing of military targets. We can avoid saying what others have after wars: We did not know.