

Dike Bombing Denied By U. S. Carrier Pilots

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ABOARD U.S.S. SARATOGA IN THE GULF OF TONKIN, Aug. 8—The pilots aboard this aircraft carrier swear that they have never tried to bomb the dikes of North Vietnam and they say they are hurt and irritated that so many Americans at home do not seem to believe them.

The pilots are troubled, too, they say, that some Americans apparently think they are deliberately bombing other civilian targets like schools and hospitals and residential areas.

"The thing that hurts us," said Comdr. Richard Bardone of Pittsburgh, the stocky, curly-haired leader of the pilots on this ship, "is that we make every effort to avoid the dikes. We do not, absolutely not, go after dikes."

Lieut. Comdr. Lew Dunton's eyes flashed, "There are a lot of prisoners in the Hanoi Hilton," he said, "because they were shot down trying to avoid civilian targets. It really galls me."

The pilots and their senior

officers scoff at the foreign visitors to North Vietnam who have been quoted as saying they have seen dikes damaged by bombs and that they believed the United States had "deliberately tried to destroy the dikes."

The airmen argue that only isolated damage has been reported—the kind that might likely result from an accident—and they say none of the visitors so far appears to have been qualified to determine whether the damage was done by bombs or other explosives.

"The absurd part about it," one senior officer said, "is that somebody comes up with a hole in a dike and he translates that as meaning we're going after the dikes."

"If we were hitting the dikes with malice or aforethought," the officer continued, "we could clean all of them out in a week without many bombs."

The dikes, the pilots say, are not in well-defended areas

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and "they'd be a piece of cake."

It seems important to the pilots that they be believed. They put their lives on the line every day and they stand together under an old-fashioned code of military honor. They see themselves as patriots in the service of their country and their President. They would like to have been respected and appreciated. Now they will settle for being believed.

They insist that the President has proscribed the dikes as targets and that they have sometimes increased the risk to themselves to comply with his orders.

An insight into the minds of the pilots came from one senior air officer who said, "Probably the best reason for not hitting the dikes is the fact that the President of the United States has advertised to the whole world that were not hitting the dikes, and we don't want to make a liar out of him."

Not only are the pilots under standing orders not to bomb the dikes, they say, but before each mission they are

specifically told again to stay away from them.

During prestrike briefings, the pilots say they pore over detailed maps and reconnaissance photographs. Dikes and other "no-no's"—hospitals, churches, clusters of homes and P.O.W. camps, for example—are pointed out and the paths for approaching and departing the targets are planned so as to minimize "collateral" damage.

In some instances, the pilots say, the North Vietnamese have incorporated into the dike system roads, gun positions and missile sites which the United States generally regard as fair game. But, the pilots say, these targets are "off limits" when they are on a dike.

Still, Bardone concedes, "there can be mistakes, especially in a hot environment"—where there is heavy anti-aircraft fire.

"There is a possibility of a dike being hit," he said. "But I think this is very remote. If it did happen it would be purely accidental."

One pilot on the Saratoga is said to have reported that he accidentally bombed a dike, but reconnaissance photographs showed no damage.

Discussing the effect of the bombing on the civilian population of North Vietnam, Commander Bardone said, "most of the targets are isolated, but some are near the civilian population. There is a tremendous amount of secondary explosions and there is debris. There is a lot of overflow and I'm sure this gets over into the populated areas."

"I can't say absolutely that we do not put bombs outside the target area," he continued, "if we put a bomb a couple of hundred feet away from the target it might get into civilian areas. But I'd say 99 per cent of the time it's debris overflow that gets into the civilian areas."

The pilots say that the so-called "smart bombs" that are guided by laser beams and television have greatly reduced the margin of error in bombing. But, they add, even the smart bombs sometimes go astray.

It is routine procedure for pilots under attack by enemy planes to jettison their bombs so they can pick-up speed. These bombs are not armed

and are not supposed to explode when they land, but since they weigh several hundred pounds they may have damaging impact.

Another danger to the civilian population, the pilots say, is debris and flak from North Vietnamese anti-aircraft guns and missiles. "It all has to come down," said Commander Dunton, who is from Melrose, Mass. "and sometimes it comes down on their heads."

At least once foreign diplomats in Hanoi have said that damage attributed by the North Vietnamese to American planes had actually been caused by Communist missiles.

Citing an example of the official concern for civilian casualties, one senior officer said that before the first big

raid this year in the Hanoi-Haiphong area, the attack plan was routinely reviewed in Washington and "they knocked off some targets—some damn fine targets, because they were too close to civilians."

Lieut. Comdr. Grady Jackson, a bombardier-navigator from Indianapolis, said that he and his pilot turned back from a target in the vicinity of Haiphong a few weeks ago because they felt it was too close to civilians.

The pilots know, though, that no matter how painstaking they are, some civilians are likely to be killed.

"Let's face it," said Commander Dunton, who is a boyish-looking 32, "some of the military targets are probably manned by civilians. If you rolled in on the Bos-

ton navy shipyard there'd be a lot of civilians hurt. But they are working for the Government war effort. We don't go after those people in their suburban homes and supermarkets."