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## Mistakes Don't Count

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Yes, said the State Department official matter-of-factly, American pilots do bomb hospitals, schools and dikes in North Vietnam, but they don't mean to. These are unauthorized targets.

\* William R. Sullivan, under-secretary of State for Far Eastern affairs, was testifying before the Refugee subcommittee headed by Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass. On display in the hearing-room were a dozen photographs of civilian havoc in North Vietnam, taken by Ramsey Clark.

In Sullivan's smooth and bloodless bureaucratise, there were no flaming villages or screaming children — only "collateral civilian damage," "regrettable by-products of the violence inherent in warfare," and "part of the cost."

"Operation Linebacker," the murderous air assault launched last April, is not terror, he said, because "terror would imply intent."

Kennedy pointed out that the Pentagon could supply no end of statistics and pictures of destroyed trucks and blown-up bridges. Why were no num-

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bers and photographs available on schools and hospitals, to counter North Vietnamese claims and eyewitness reports of their destruction?

A Pentagon official had the answer.

Dennis Doolin, deputy assistant secretary of Defense for East Asian and Pacific affairs, explained, "We keep the book on the targets; if a school is hit, it is a mistake."

Sullivan assured the committee that the pilots operate under strict rules of engagement and that the "overwhelming proportion of damage they cause is not to civilians."

He could not "quantify" the number of hospitals and schools that were hit, but he assured the senators that the number was "small" and that the destruction was "minor" and unavoidable but unintentional.

So much for authorized bombing and its uncounted victims. The Senate Armed Services Committee was meanwhile grappling with the problem of unauthorized bombing. It heard two pilots, one of whom testified that the Navy had pulled a few free-lance raids in the style of Gen. John Lavelle, the former commander of the 7th Air Force. The other denied it.

Nobody knows whether Lavelle, who falsified his reports, bombed unauthorized targets on his unauthorized runs, but nobody in the Nixon administration seems particularly perturbed about either the bombing or the lying. The Com-

mander-in-Chief thought that demotion and retirement were fitting punishment.

One reason for the hail of explosives is, of course, the deliverance of American POW's. Yet the release of three pilots, who were flying back home while the senators were inquiring about the air war, had been treated by the Pentagon as a crisis comparable to the outbreak of World War III.

The secretary of Defense, suffering the worst propaganda defeat of his career, had managed to drain most of the joy out of their dramatic return. He darkly hinted at court-martial for them, although their offense seemed mostly to consist of having been sprung by members of a peace group and of preferring to travel home by commercial airliner.

Later the secretary retreated, and magnanimously promised "justice with mercy," certainly one of the most ogreish greetings yet extended to freed captives.

The secretary had, by contrast, borne with exceptional equanimity the insubordination and falsification of reports by Gen. Lavelle. Only last weekend did he suggest that a court-martial was under consideration. But the sight of the three pilots in the custody of Cora Weiss of the peace movement sent him scrambling for the book. By the time they landed, the country was sorry for them.

The three could endanger the air war. In Hanoi they made statements about the humanity of the villagers who had found them. Such recitals could remind the American people that there are human beings under those bombs and cause doubts that they require daily pounding from above.

Said Lt. Norris Charles, the black pilot who has so far proved the most outspoken war



Sen. Edward Kennedy

critic of the three, "I don't believe the military holds truth against anyone."

That remains to be seen. But there seems little hope that the truth about the air war is going to be told any time soon.

\* Schools, Hospitals Bombed  
'by Accident,' by  
Morton Kondracke,  
SF Examiner 29 Sep 72,  
filed Indochina.