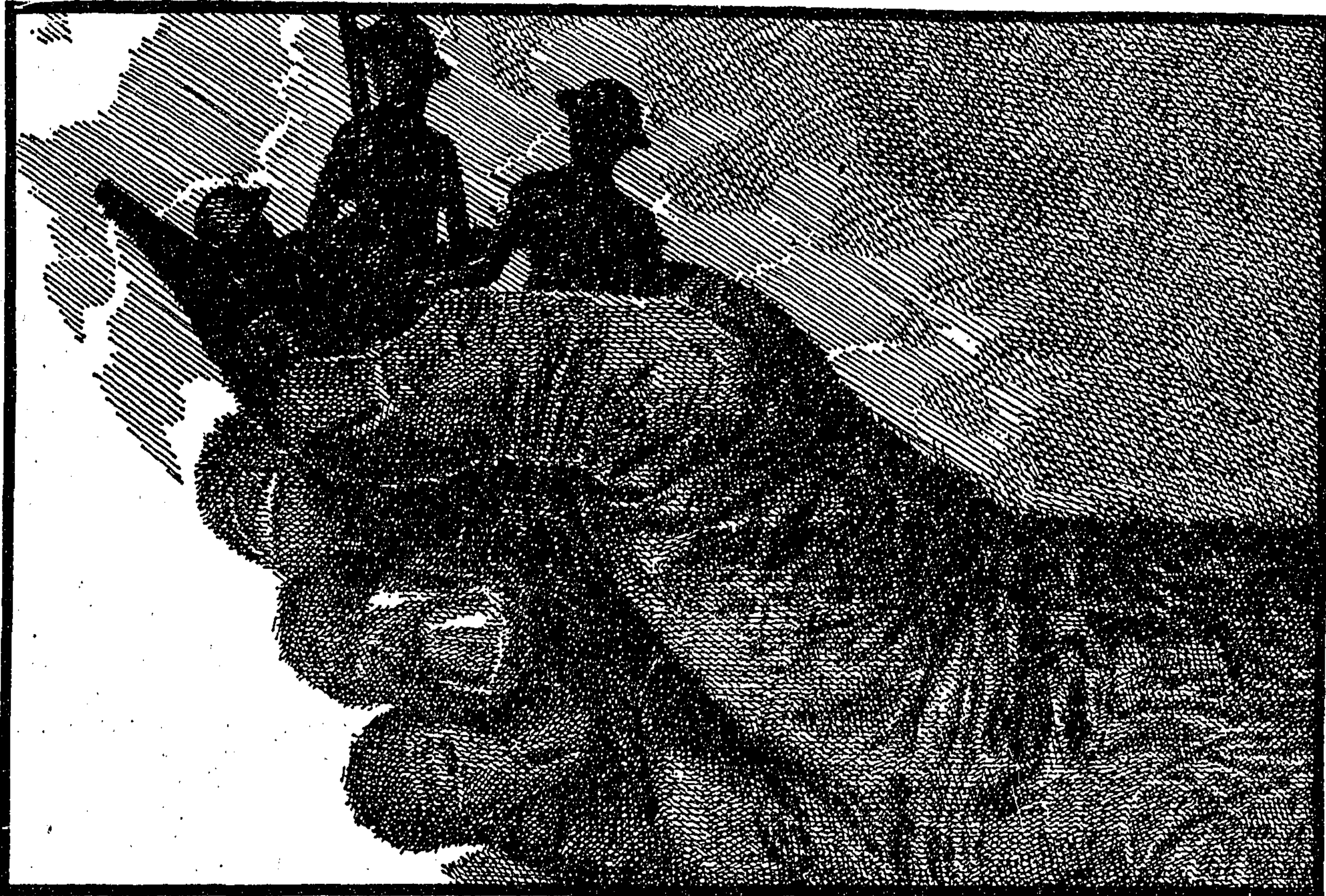


The Search for Peace of Mind—Through Lies



Murray Tinkelman

By Jerome Doolittle

WEST CORNWALL, Conn. — The Pentagon's most recent lies about bombing Cambodia bring back a question that often occurred to me when I was press attaché at the American Embassy in Vientiane, Laos.

Why did we bother to lie?

When I first arrived in Laos, I was instructed to answer all press questions about our massive and merciless bombing campaign in that tiny country with: "At the request of the Royal Laotian Government, the United States is conducting unarmed reconnaissance flights accompanied by armed escorts who have the right to return fire if fired upon."

This was a lie. Every reporter to whom I told it knew it was a lie. The Communist Pathet Lao knew it was a lie. Hanoi knew it was a lie. The International Control Commission knew it was a lie. Every interested Congressman and newspaper reader knew it was a lie.

All the lie did was make us look just as cheap and dishonest as the North Vietnamese, who were also lying about the presence of their troops in Laos and South Vietnam.

Why, then, did we bother to tell it?

A surprising number of reporters thought we bothered because the truth would make men free, and armed with it they would rise up and make us stop the bombing. But our lies weren't skillful enough to keep

the truth from anybody. Everybody knew we were bombing, and nobody cared enough to stop us.

The diplomats in our embassy said we lied because public admission by an American official that we were violating the Geneva accords would damage chances of getting back to the terms of those accords someday. But then in March of 1970 President Nixon publicly admitted the bombing of Laos and many other clear violations of the Geneva accords.

And still the lies and the secrecy continued. American air bases in Thailand remained off limits to the press, sortie figures were juggled or concealed, reporters were not allowed on bombing missions. The B-52 bombing of Northern Laos went on in secrecy so deep that Ambassador G. McMurtre Godley kept knowledge of the raids from his own embassy's political section. Insofar as the executive branch could possibly manage it, the air war in Indochina was kept a secret till Aug. 15, the day Congress ended it.

The bombing didn't shut off enemy supplies. It didn't bomb Hanoi to the conference table. It didn't destroy the enemy's morale or halt his advances.

Consider that in 1969 Laotian Government troops took the Plaine des Jarres with the assistance of massive U.S. bombing. A few months later they lost it despite massive U.S. bombing. Somewhere in that equation is a factor that works out to zero.

Outside the Government, many people knew all along that our bombing

was a bloody, ineffective sick joke. But inside the Government this was less widely understood. The lies and the secrecy saw to that by insuring that the only source of detailed information on the bombing was the bombers themselves.

In 1970, Les Whitten, of the Jack Anderson column, came to Laos and wrote a story based on his tape-recorded interviews with refugees from the Plaine des Jarres. The story was that the U.S. Air Force was bombing Laotian villages, although our ambassadors kept assuring everybody that no such thing was going on. It wasn't the first time this story had been written, but it was the first time it had got the wide circulation that Anderson was able to give it.

The day after a copy of Whitten's story reached the embassy in Vientiane, the country team decided that the U.S. Information Service should go to the refugees and find out what they had really said. Newspaper stories, in that embassy, were considered unlikely repositories of truth.

Acting from motives of purest bureaucratic self-defense, we were finally going to ask the people on the ground at the time just where all those bombs had been falling. Never before—through the years of bombardment, the hundreds of thousands of refugees, the tens of thousands maimed and wounded and killed, the billions of dollars gone forever—had such an idea occurred to the U.S. Embassy.

Now that it had, the fact turned out to be that many of those bombs had indeed been falling on villages, just as Whitten had said. The officer instructed to conduct the poll wasn't any wavemaker, but he wasn't going to falsify the figures collected by his interviewers, either. They showed that a majority of the refugees, so huge as to approach unanimity, had seen their villages destroyed by American bombers.

The embassy coped with this lengthy, detailed and disturbing report by deciding that it wasn't a report at all. It was merely a preliminary study carried out by a junior officer with no training in polling techniques of a subject that turned out on investigation not to be worth pursuing. The U.S.I.S. report was thus awarded the highest security classification of them all—nonexistence.

That secrecy was never so much a way to keep the facts about our bombing from leaking out of the executive branch as it was a way to keep those facts from leaking in. After all, the lies did serve to keep something from somebody, and the somebody was us.

Jerome Doolittle resigned from the United States Information Service in 1970.