

Military War Study

Faults McNamara

By George C. Wilson
Washington Post Staff Writer

Bombs for the Vietnam war were in such short supply by April, 1966, that they had to be rationed for air missions, according to a report just issued by the Pentagon.

At that very time—on April 20, 1966—former Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that reports of such a bomb shortage were “baloney” and “completely misleading.”

This new post-audit of what the American military was up against in trying to wage a war on a civilian economy is contained in three volumes prepared by the Joint Logistics Review Board headed by Army Gen. F. S. Besson, now retired.

The civilians who insisted on running the Vietnam war, the report complains, never addressed it as a real war. As a result there was neither enough men nor material to do the job right, according to the report.

The bomb shortage is but one of many instances in which the report differs from the explanation given to the

American people at the time. The Pentagon, in releasing an unclassified version of the review Friday after the service newspaper Army Times had revealed it, said Gen. Besson's group made 265 recommendations.

Besson, working as a special assistant after his retirement from the Army, helped implement some of the recommendations. But the Pentagon said there are still 125 pending.

See REPORT, A11, Col. 6

REPORT, From A1

Here are some of the highlights of the report sent in June to Barry J. Shillito, assistant secretary of defense for installations and logistics:

• Bomb shortages — Because of Navy shortages in 1966, “bombs that were optimum in size and effect on jet aircraft performance could be used on only a fraction of the missions. The situation deteriorated” even after bombs and other air munitions were taken out of stocks in other parts of the world.

“The lowest point,” the report states, “was reached in the summer of 1966 when assets were further depleted by the need to transfer munitions to cover Air Force shortages which had become critical.”

The American commander in the Pacific in April, 1966, “as a result of these shortages established monthly allocations of critical air munitions” and set limits on how many bombs one airplane could carry on a raid and on how much air munitions could be used in a month.

• Civilian control — The Secretary of Defense through the Program Deployment Plan went beyond limiting the number of troops which could be sent to Vietnam and used it as a “major control mechanism” over “program objectives and project goals” for the war.

Also, the civilian-dictated war strategy of graduated response “created turbulence and instability that have been detrimental to efficient logistic planning.” (Logistic planning amounts to taking the steps to give troops what they need when they need it.)

The review panel in this same section on U.S. strategy for the Vietnam war said the failure to activate Reserves contradicted standing war

plans. The group also said that trying to bomb out war goods moving cross-country from North to South Vietnam, rather than knocking out such supply points as Haiphong harbor, was the “less efficient” tactic.

• Faulty assumptions — In its section on how the Vietnam war stripped the U.S. military in other parts of the world, the review panel said “the major reasons for readiness difficulties” stemmed from the assumptions that the war would be short, that no special emergency powers would be needed, and that the United States had enough military resources to meet enemy escalation without cutting into its strength elsewhere.

The necessity to take skilled military men out of other American commands to meet war requirements degraded the readiness of all the military services, the panel said. “It is doubtful,” said the report, that American commands — because they had lost skilled manpower to Vietnam — could have reacted as quickly to an emergency elsewhere as plans called for.

That risk was taken, said the report, “on the premise that the United States would not become engaged in another major contingency during the Vietnam conflict . . . A major European command contingency or a large-scale Communist incursion in northeast Asia would have required not only mobilization of Reserve and National Guard forces but diversion of major naval, air and ground combat and support forces and materiel from Southeast Asia in accordance with national objectives and priorities . . .”

• Operating constraints — In a summing up chapter, the Besson panel said: “The continuance of the state of national emergency declared in the Korean War permitted the use of National Priorities and Defense Materials System and the Military Urgencies System for industrial contracts.

“However,” the panel said, “major restrictions existed because there was no declaration of war, no national mobilization and no call-up of reserves until the limited steps at the time of the Tet Offensive of 1968.

“Political, economic and social considerations in Vietnam led to extraordinary control at the Washington level and to tight limitations on

many specific resources incremental funding and the requirement for detailed approval of personnel ceilings and manning levels, at times down to the unit level.

"These controls and limitations," said the post-audit focused on logistical problems, had a major impact on logistic support in times of emergencies and surges in combat operations, and had an unbalancing effect on long-term programs.

Despite the many problems cited in one 200-page volume of the three reports, the panel said "overall logistic support in Southeast Asia was highly effective and responsive to the needs of the operating forces."

Deputy Defense Secretary David Packard, presiding the Joint Logistics Review Board on Feb. 17, said the board's report "points out the strengths and weaknesses and make appropriate recommendations for improvement."

Other military services were represented on the board by uniformed officers as well as appointees of the civilian

As distinguished from the more general criticisms sounded in the body of the report, the panel's recommendations were largely technical in nature—such as better ways to ship and maintain war supplies.