

Pentagon Is Charged With Delays In Developing Ground Support Plane

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By John G. Norris

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A House subcommittee charged yesterday that "American lives are being lost" because of "inexcusable" Pentagon delays in developing an adequate warplane for the close support of ground troops in Vietnam.

The chief blame for the situation was put on the Air Force, with the Army and top Defense Department officials sharing the responsibility, in a report submitted by a House Armed Services subcommittee headed by Rep. Otis G. Pike (D-N.Y.).

The nine-man subcommittee, which visited Vietnam and held lengthy closed hearings here, unanimously condemned both the tactics and types of aircraft used by the Air Force to support ground troops in such "close proximity to their frontlines" as to affect their fire and maneuverability.

Navy Praised

In contrast, the Pike subcommittee praised the Navy and Marine Corps for their development of successful doctrine, tactics and aircraft for close support of ground troops. It noted that only since the subcommittee's investigation last August had Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara ordered the development and production of such a plane—already started by the Navy Bureau of Weapons—for all services.

"Perhaps the most appalling fact which came to the attention of the subcommittee," said the report, "was the fact that until very recently the Air Force, which has the responsibility for providing close support to the Army on the ground, could not talk to the Army on the ground because the Air Force radios were not compatible with the Army radios."

In substantiation of what it

called this "communications fiasco," the report quoted testimony from Maj. Gen. Deik M. Oden, a top Army aviation official, as stating that an Army platoon's call for air support had to be routed back through company headquarters to battalion headquarters.

Two Studies Made

The subcommittee said there had been two recent major studies of the close support situation, a secret report in 1963 and a current study known as "Project Forecast." It added that it seems "an unbelievable tragic thing" that it took so long for the Army and Air Force to learn that they "were unable to communicate with each other in the field."

It was also noted both on Capitol Hill and at the Pentagon that the Army and Air Force encountered similar close air support troubles in World War II and Korea, while Navy and Marine Corps air-ground action then won praise.

The report declared that the subcommittee was reluctant to be so critical of the Air Force in light of its excellence in other types of aircraft, but suggested that perhaps the Army should be allowed to develop its own close support craft.

In other defense developments on Capitol Hill:

Retired Air Force Gen. Curtis LeMay urged that the United States step up its bombing of North Vietnam to wipe out "more expensive targets" such as power plants, oil storage and industrial plants. He spoke after giving a House Armed Services subcommittee testimony in support of developing new heavy bombers. He said he was not advocating the bombing of Hanoi, or use of nuclear weapons.

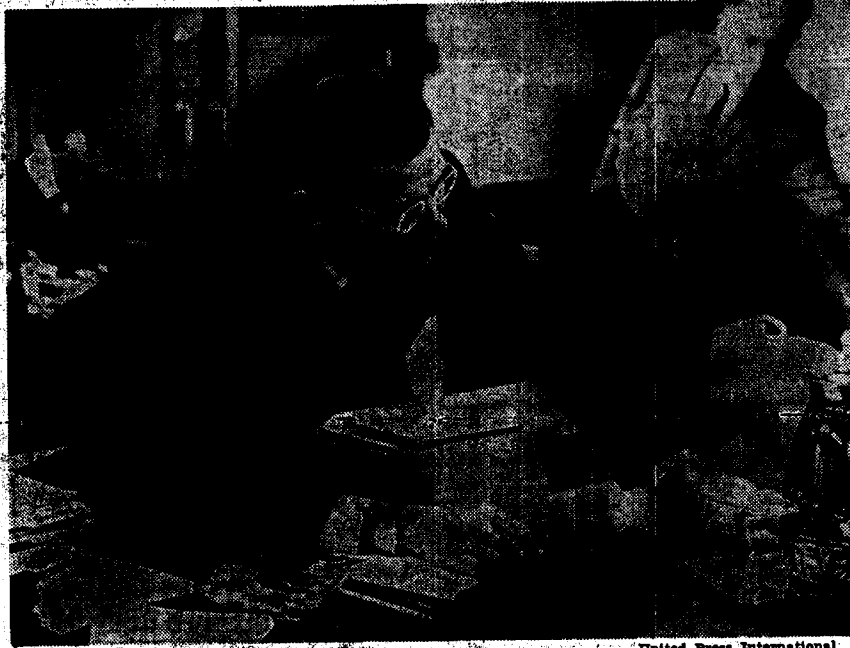
Chairman L. Mendel Rivers (D-S.C.) of the House

Armed Services Committee tangled with Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus R. Vance, when Vance appeared before the Committee to explain the Pentagon's decision to postpone \$620 million worth of base construction projects already voted. Rivers said the deferrals were forcing soldiers at Ft. Gordon, Ga., to sleep in tents in zero temperatures, were denying adequate hospital care to servicemen wounded in Vietnam, and were "nothing short of a disgrace." Vance denied hospital care for Vietnam wounded was inadequate.

McNamara told newsmen after testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee and Defense Appropriations Subcommittee that the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam was being limited "to military targets and military targets only."

Both the Secretary of Defense and Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, denied reports that Communist "main force" units had not been encountered lately. They said that both Vietcong and North Vietnamese regulars have been met in the last six days and some prisoners were taken.

The two officials said that the proposal of retired Army Gen. James M. Gavin that U.S. efforts in Vietnam be limited to defending coastal enclaves had been rejected by all active-duty senior officers concerned with Vietnam. Wheeler added that the major French defeat at Dien Bienphu came in defending an "enclave."



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WITNESS— Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara leans over to talk to a committee member as he arrives to testify before joint Senate committees on supplemental authorization and appropriations. At right is Sen. Sam J. Ervin Jr. (D-N.C.).