

Air Force Relieved Its Vietnam Chief For 'Irregularities'

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WASHINGTON, May 16 (Reuters)—The commander of the United States Seventh Air Force in Vietnam was relieved of his post "because of irregularities in the conduct of his command responsibilities," it was announced here today.

The Defense Department said that Gen. John D. Lavelle had retired April 7. But Gen. John D. Ryan, the Air Force Chief of Staff, said in a statement that he had first relieved General Lavelle of his command because of "irregularities." The Air Force Chief of Staff did not elaborate.

However, General Lavelle, 55 years old, was reported to have been involved in a controversy with General Ryan over whether Seventh Air Force pilots were taking unnecessary risks in bombing targets in Indochina.

The Washington Star said earlier this month that some of General Lavelle's pilots flew below an altitude limit set by the Joint Chiefs of Staff for certain dangerous areas of North Vietnam and Laos. The newspaper said General Lavelle was involved in a bitter personal conflict with General Ryan.

Conflicting Reports

A Defense Department spokesman said at the time there had been conflicting rumors and reports.

"Some said that his pilots flew too low and took too many risks," the spokesman said. "Others said that they flew too high and did not take enough."

Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird was questioned about General Lavelle as he left for NATO meetings in Copenhagen and Brussels.

Mr. Laird said that General Lavelle "had been relieved of his command responsibility because the Chief of Staff of the Air Force had lost confidence in his carrying out the command responsibilities and because of certain irregularities in carrying out those command responsibilities."

General Lavelle, who is 55 years old, was succeeded by Gen. John W. Vogt Jr. Before General Lavelle was relieved it had been announced that General Vogt was scheduled for a command in Europe.