

Unauthorized Raids 'Protective': General

WASHINGTON — (AP) — An ousted U.S. commander in Vietnam confirmed to congressmen today that he ordered possibly unauthorized air strikes against the North Vietnamese for "the safety of the crews" and "at the same time trying to stop the buildup" that led to the enemy incursion into South Vietnam.

But retired Air Force Lt. Gen. John Lavelle said he ordered the strikes halted March 10 when he learned three reports of the strikes had been falsified, and there appeared to be now way to continue them without filing false reports.

Buildups

Gen. John Ryan, Air Force chief of staff, told the subcommittee he fired Lavelle as commander of the 7th Air Force in Indochina when he learned of what he said were 28 unauthorized air strikes into North Vietnam involving 147 planes.

Lavelle said he thought

there were less than 20 such missions.

Lavelle said his pilots saw and photographed massive buildups of North Vietnamese planes, tanks, artillery and supplies near the demilitarized zone and said that when he requested permission to strike them he did not receive it but neither did he receive a denial.

Lavelle said he could understand Ryan's viewpoint from Washington that "I had exceeded my authority."

Justifiable

But he added: "At that time as the commander on the spot concerned with the safety of the crews and at the same time trying to stop the buildup that was going on, I felt that these were justifiable actions."

Lavelle said he judged that under the rules prohibiting all but "protective reaction" air strikes into North Vietnam in line with the 1968 bombing halt, he had the authority as the commander on the spot to order the air strikes.

But he said that when an investigator showed him the three false reports on the strikes "I couldn't believe them." He said he halted the strikes because he and his staff could not find any way to prevent further such inaccurate reports.

Protective

His and Ryan's testimony indicated that the falsification involved reporting that units had taken some kind of military action justifying "protective reaction" retaliatory strikes.

Lavelle told a House Armed Services investigating subcommittee he ordered his staff to make no such false statements but said "I believe someone got over-eager."

The general said the false statements were made by someone at a low-level who was among the pilots and other Air Force people in Vietnam that he described as "wonderful, hard working" people who were under the strain of working 15 hours a day, seven days a week.