

Airman Says Raid Reports Were Falsified on Orders

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By SEYMOUR M. HERSH JUN 14 1972

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WASHINGTON, June 13—The sergeant whose letter led to the dismissal of the top Air Force general in Vietnam charged that members of an American photo-reconnaissance team had been ordered to falsify classified documents concerning air strikes over North Vietnam.

"We have been reporting that our planes have received hostile reactions whether they have or not," said the letter, which was released today by Senator Harold E. Hughes, Democrat of Iowa. "We have also been falsifying targets struck and bomb damage assessments."

Under the rules of "protective reaction" early this year, United States pilots were permitted to bomb and strafe enemy missile and antiaircraft gun sites in North Vietnam if fired upon first. Making such an attack without an initial enemy action was in violation of the rules of engagement.

Dismissed in March

Gen. John D. Lavelle was dismissed in March as commander of the Seventh Air Force with headquarters in Saigon and demoted for having ordered unauthorized attacks on military targets in North Vietnam and having reported the engagements as "protective-reaction" strikes.

General Lavelle testified at a hearing of a House Armed Services investigating subcommittee yesterday that his planes made "in the neighborhood" of 20 such raids between Nov. 8, 1971, and last March 8. The current bombing of North Vietnam was authorized by President Nixon in April.

The sergeant's letter made public today was mailed from

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Airman Says False Data Were Ordered

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Udorn Air Force Base in Thailand on Feb. 25, while President Nixon was on his visit to China. Senator Hughes requested that the sergeant's name be withheld to avoid any reprisals against his family in the United States.

The sergeant wrote that "authorization for this falsification of classified documents comes from secure telephone communications from the Deputy of Operations, Seventh Air Force." Air Force officials in the Pentagon identified the officer as Maj. Gen. Alton D. Slay, who is still on duty with Seventh Air Force Headquarters in Saigon.

An Intelligence Expert

The sergeant described himself as an intelligence specialist for a technical reconnaissance wing at Udorn. He wrote Senator Hughes that "I do not know where the original authorization comes from—and this is my major concern." The letter then quoted his immediate superior, an Air Force captain, as saying "that the President probably doesn't even know about the situation."

"I am writing this letter," the sergeant wrote, "to inform you of what is happening and to find out if this falsification of classified documents is legal and proper."

Senator Hughes said the sergeant was a constituent of his, but he refused to reveal where in Iowa his family lived.

Gen. John D. Ryan, the Air Force Chief of Staff, told the House subcommittee hearing, yesterday that his investigators had discovered three fraudulent "after-action reports" in connection with 28 unauthorized strikes into North Vietnam.

The sergeant's role in the in-

vestigation was first made known by General Ryan yesterday. The Chief of Staff testified that he first received a copy of the letter on March 8, five days after it arrived in the office of Senator Hughes, and had ordered an immediate investigation by the Air Force Inspector General. Two weeks later, he said, General Lavelle was relieved.

Under sharp questioning from Representative Otis G. Pike, Democrat of Suffolk County, whose protests led to the Congressional inquiry, General Ryan acknowledged that his investigators had stopped their work after finding the three fraudulent reports.

An overseas telephone call today, placed by The New York Times, confirmed that the sergeant was still on active duty in Thailand in the same job he held when he wrote the letter. One Congressional source also said that Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird had personally issued an order commending the sergeant and insuring that no official or unofficial action would be taken against him in connection with the protest letter.

Senator Hughes said in an interview today that after first reading the letter, "I didn't know whether to believe it or not."

'A Flagrant Violation'

"It was such a flagrant violation of the principle of command and control that I didn't want to believe it," the Senator said. "Obviously, if what the sergeant was saying was true—and it was—there was a high command officer involved."

Senator Hughes, who is a member of the Armed Services Committee, said he had sent a copy of the sergeant's letter to Senator Stuart Symington, an-

other committee member and a former Secretary of the Air Force, who forwarded it to the Pentagon.

A later request by Senator Hughes for a full hearing on the matter by a Senate Armed Services subcommittee was not acted upon, but Senator Hughes said he had requested that the committee delay action on confirming the retirement of General Lavelle as a three-star lieutenant general.

Despite his demotion, Air Force sources said that General Lavelle's retirement pay would be \$2,250 a month, the amount due a retired four-star officer, since such allotments are made on the basis of rank before retirement.