

Behind the Lavelle Incident, Weak Links in

By CRAIG B. WHITNEY

Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, June 13—“The system is totally dependent on people being honest,” a colonel at the military headquarters here said today in reaction to Gen. John D. Lavelle’s testimony in Washington that he ordered unauthorized strikes against North Vietnam last winter. No special measures have been taken, according to command spokesmen here, to prevent a recurrence of what

News
Analysis

General Lavelle said he did about 20 times between November and May.

General Lavelle testified that he had reported the unauthorized raids as “protective reaction” missions — defensive strikes by pilots who determine that they are threatened by anti-aircraft radar, missile and gun sites in North Vietnamese territory. During the pause in sustained bombing of North Vietnam between November, 1968, and April, 1972, such strikes were often reported in connection with the United States’ continued program of reconnaissance flights.

Reports Widely Distributed

To disguise regular bombing as “protective reaction,” the reports would have to be falsified not only by an officer as high-ranking as General Lavelle but by their originators—in the case of the Air Force the wing commanders, who are Colonels commanding three or more squadrons of 20 planes each. No wing commanders have been relieved of duty in connection with the investigation of General Lavelle’s actions, according to Air Force spokes-

men here. The spokesmen refused to discuss the specific charges made against and answered by General Lavelle in Washington yesterday.

The wing commanders’ reports of missions are, in turn, compiled from individual pilot reports. These “operational reports” are sent not only to the Seventh Air Force headquarters in Saigon but also to intermediate headquarters at Udorn, in Thailand, and to Gen. Creighton W. Abrams’s Military Assistance Command in Saigon as well as the Pacific command in Hawaii, which sends them to the Pentagon.

Since the operational reports are sent to all those addresses simultaneously, an officer at the United States command said, “the only way they can be falsified is at the wing level.”

“Once they get here there’s no way anyone would question them,” he added.

Officers in Saigon said they had no record of the attacks General Lavelle was referring to when he said he had, on his own authority, ordered strikes on targets in North Vietnam without approval from higher headquarters. Consequently, they said, they did not know which wings were involved.

The general’s actions are a reminder, though on a much smaller scale, of what Gen. Douglas MacArthur did in Korea 21 years ago, when he was sacked by President Harry S. Truman for insubordination after having publicly advocated the bombing of Chinese bases.

Now, as then, the greatest check on a military commander’s freedom of action and ability to exercise the power entrusted to him is not external but, rather, lies in his training, discipline, restraint

and unquestioned obedience to orders.

It is at the highest levels—for example in the four-star post of commander of the Seventh Air Force in Saigon, which General Lavelle held until his relief in March—that an officer’s internal qualities become most important, for there are fewer outside checks on such high-ranking positions.

It is no secret that President Lyndon B. Johnson’s suspension of regular bombing of North Vietnam on Nov. 1, 1968, was unpopular among the military men here who command and fly the Air Force and Navy planes.

Many Air Force and Navy officers who disagreed with the political reasons for the action chafed because they could not strike back at enemy territory. The pause was interrupted more and more frequently in its last year by protective reaction strikes and, less frequently, by “limited duration” strategic campaigns against airfields, supply build-ups and surface-to-air-missile sites.

Before the North Vietnamese began their current offensive south of the demilitarized

zone at the end of March, the air officers lobbied hard for permission to strike at the build-up they could see just north of the zone—long-range artillery and record numbers of surface-to-air-missiles and movements of supply trucks.

Two such campaigns, involving a thousand strikes, were announced and carried out before the offensive—one for five days beginning the day after Christmas and the second against North Vietnamese artillery positions in and just north of the demilitarized zone in February.

Recommended by Abrams

Both campaigns were authorized by the White House after being recommended by General Abrams’s headquarters, in which the commander of the Seventh Air Force is also deputy commander for air operations and supervises the activities of Navy jets from aircraft carriers at sea as well as those of the Air Force planes based in Vietnam and Thailand.

A degree of latitude was always given not only to General Lavelle and his subordinate commanders but also to individual

the Chain of Command

pilots in deciding when to undertake protective reaction strikes on targets in North Vietnam and there were many of them. Since the Nixon Administration resumed sustained bombing of the North on April 6, the term "protective reaction" has not been used.

At the end of the pause pilots were permitted to fire missiles at or drop bombs on North Vietnamese anti-aircraft radar sites that took their planes under observation—a threat, in the eyes of military commanders here, even if the planes were not under fire—without asking Saigon for permission.

The difficulty that General Lavelle apparently got into was in conducting bombing of strategic targets outside the framework of the officially approved limited duration strikes and in reporting them as protective reactions.

Rules of Engagement

There is an extensive set of rules of engagement to instruct the American forces on the conditions under which they may take targets under attack. General Lavelle's actions once again call attention to the rules,

which have been central to most of the scandals in which the Army has been involved in Vietnam over the years, most especially at My Lai four years ago.

Rules of engagement on when civilian targets may be bombed or shot at are very strict, generally requiring both advance warning to enable civilians to get out and extreme provocation from the enemy. The rules are also troublesome, and many officers and men have ignored or violated them because of weakness or because they thought the rules endangered their lives.

A Navy commando officer in the Mekong Delta said before his unit was withdrawn late last year, "The rules of engagement kept getting stricter and stricter, and I finally stopped all operations because you would have to disobey them to do anything."

Reports of violations are supposed to be investigated by military channels up the chain of command, but as General Lavelle's case shows, it is sometimes outside of channels that such reports have the best chance of being acted upon. It was a letter that disclosed what General Lavelle admitted in his testimony yesterday.