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AIDES TO ABRAMS SILENT ON RAIDS

Refuse Comment on Effect
of Lavelle Controversy
NY Times

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, June 21—Air Force and Army officers in Saigon are maintaining silence on the controversy about unauthorized bombing raids on North Vietnam last winter, despite the implications for Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, who has been nominated to be Army Chief of Staff.

The controversy centers on Gen. John D. Lavelle, who commanded the United States Air Force in Vietnam—reporting directly to General Abrams—before his sudden departure from Saigon without explanation last March. On June 11 The New York Times reported from Washington that General Lavelle had been demoted and retired for having ordered bombing raids on North Vietnam without authorization.

On June 12, in Congressional testimony, the general confirmed this account, but he also contended that he had kept his superiors informed of his actions. "I think General Abrams knew what I was doing," he told a House Armed Services investigating subcommittee.

Since then General Abrams's official spokesmen at the United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, have maintained that the responsibility for the unauthorized raids did not lie on General Abrams's shoulders.

Interviews Are Refused

All requests for interviews with officers concerned with the investigation of General Lavelle have been turned down. "Our position here is that we don't want to get involved at all," a spokesman said.

Part of their justification for remaining aloof comes from the complicated command structure of the air war here.

General Lavelle was commander of the Seventh Air Force, which is now flying almost entirely from bases in Thailand, where another general, Maj. Gen. Dewitt R. Searles, is the senior Air Force officer and deputy to the command of the Seventh Air Force in Saigon. The Seventh Air Force commander is General Abrams's deputy for air operations.

Since the Johnson Administration the bombing of targets in North Vietnam has been planned by the Pacific Command's headquarters in Hawaii, working with the Seventh Air Force in Saigon.

The argument of the military command here is that General Abrams delegates the authority to conduct air operations to his deputy for air, so that whatever strikes General Lavelle carried out on his own are his affair alone.

Authority and Responsibility

Other officers here who have talked about the case in philosophical terms remark that, normally, delegation of authority does not mean the same thing as delegation of responsibility—that a military commander is usually held to share responsibility for the actions of his subordinates.

One source at the command, speaking privately, said that as far as he knew no special investigation had been carried out at the command level here into the extent of the knowledge of the more than a score of unauthorized raids that General Lavelle admitted to carrying out last winter under the guise of "protective reaction."

A senior pilot at the American air base in Danang, from which many of the missions were flown said last week: "I didn't know much about the reason why General Lavelle was fired, but what I did know was that we were all instructed not to breathe a word about it."

A fighter pilot at Danang said last week: "Everyone had 'hip pocket' targets, places we wanted to hit and would occasionally hit on the way back from other missions, even without provocation. We would sometimes just roll in on them and when they started shooting up at us that would allow us to report them as protective reaction raids."

General Lavelle is said to have ordered planned strikes on missile sites, radars and airfields in North Vietnam more than 20 times between Nov. 8 and March 8. The raids reached record levels in the first three months of this year, with 122 of them, some involving hundreds of planes, reported by the command before sustained bombing of North Vietnam was resumed in April.

The protective reactions continued until March 19 at that rate of several daily. Then there were no more until March 30, the day the North Vietnamese offensive began in Quangtri Province. Informed officers here say that during that period General Lavelle's unauthorized raids had been discovered and, while an investigation was under way, all such missions were halted.

Laird Denies Abrams Knew

WASHINGTON, June 21 (Reuters)—Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird said today that General Abrams did not know of unauthorized air strikes on North Vietnam in late 1971 and early 1972.

The statement was apparently an attempt to clear the general of involvement in the issue before the Senate Armed Services Committee considered his nomination to be Army Chief of Staff.