

Confronted With New Testimony, Stennis Orders

By SEYMOUR M. HERSH

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WASHINGTON, June 28 —

Senator John C. Stennis, confronted with new testimony linking Gen. Creighton W. Abrams to the unauthorized bombing of North Vietnam, announced today that the Armed Forces Committee would hold full hearings into the pending retirement of Gen. John D. Lavelle.

In a Senate speech, Mr. Stennis, Democrat of Mississippi, made clear that the committee, of which he is chairman, would not act on President Nixon's nomination of General Abrams as Army Chief of Staff until it had fully investigated the "very serious questions of command and control" raised by the dismissal of General Lavelle.

General Lavelle was relieved in March as commander of the Seventh Air Force in Southeast Asia and later demoted to three-star general rank after having ordered at least 20 unauthorized raids on military targets in North Vietnam and having reported them as officially sanctioned "protective reaction" missions.

Discussion Recalled

Senate sources said General Lavelle had stated flatly at a closed hearing of a House of Representatives subcommittee two weeks ago that he "had discussed the bombings with Abrams" before they became public. In his previous public testimony, General Lavelle had testified only that "I think General Abrams knew what I was doing."

Yesterday, portions of the general's secret testimony were made available—in a summary form—to a closed-door meeting of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

In that testimony, a number

of Congressional informants said, General Lavelle was quoted as having been far more specific about the extent of General Abrams's knowledge of the unauthorized missions.

Although General Lavelle positively asserted that he had discussed the bombings with General Abrams, one Senate source said, it was not clear from the summary of his testimony "whether Abrams was told during or afterwards or before Lavelle began doing it."

Meaning Unclear

The source added, "My impression was that his testimony was also not very clear on this point—did Abrams approve of what Lavelle was doing or did he just know of it?"

In any event, the source said, the summary of General Lavelle's testimony made it clear that General Abrams at least knew of the missions before they became public.

In a move that White House officials said was unrelated to the Lavelle incident, President Nixon confirmed today that Gen. Frederick C. Weyand would be assigned as commander of United States forces in South Vietnam, replacing General Abrams. General Weyand has served as deputy commander of the United States command under General Abrams since 1970.

Senator Stennis's action today threatened to complicate further an already intricate series of changes at the top of the Army's command structure.

Army sources said that General Abrams was not expected to begin his new job until early August, pending Senate confirmation. Since Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the outgoing Chief of Staff, will retire as scheduled next Monday, one Army source said, Gen Bruce Palmer Jr., the present Vice

Chief of Staff, will be named acting chief and "serve about a month."

General Lavelle first mentioned General Abrams in connection with the raids at an open hearing of a House Armed Services investigating subcommittee when he said that he thought General Abrams knew of the unauthorized bombings.

Details Sought

Another Congressional source said that the members of the committee, some of whom are openly pro-military, all agreed that "we had to find out exactly what happened before we could go any further with Abrams."

General Lavelle was unavailable late today for comment on the new disclosure. A member of his family indicated by telephone that none would be forthcoming.

In an interview shortly before the initial account of the unauthorized bombing was published in The New York Times, a high-ranking military source with close knowledge of the events said that General Lavelle was known to have received no written orders authorizing the strikes but "thought it was implied in the instructions that were given him." The source also said that the general believed his superiors "had to know" what he was doing.

In his floor speech, Senator Stennis said that the Lavelle situation raised very basic questions of "the supremacy of civilian authority" over the military. "Our committee," he said, "must carefully establish all the facts and determine the extent and significance of the violation—or violations of the regulations."

"We want to assure ourselves and the public that incidents of this kind will not recur," the

Senator added. "We will want to know precisely what occurred and what was reported as having occurred."

Until the closed committee session yesterday, a Senate source said, it was unclear whether Senator Stennis would authorize full-scale hearings into the incident, despite growing protests.

Another Senate source, describing Senator Stennis's attitude after the closed-door meeting, said, "John doesn't want to hurt the Air Force, but he

Full Hearing on Lavelle

wants to get to the bottom of this."

Most committee members were said to have openly expressed their respect for General Abrams, who has served in South Vietnam since 1967, but agreed to delay his confirmation hearings.

A staff member of the House Armed Services investigating subcommittee, which is headed by Representative F. Edward Hébert, Democrat of Louisiana, said that its study of the events was not yet completed. Mr. Hébert had told reporters after

the open hearings June 12 that a report would be published within two weeks.

In a separate interview, Representative Otis G. Pike, Democrat of New York, whose protests led to the initial hearings by the subcommittee, said, "I believe that General Abrams was aware of what General Lavelle was doing."

Mr. Pike added, "I don't see any way in the world that the Senate can demote General Lavelle at the same time it promotes General Abrams."

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