

Air Force Accused Of Raid Cover-Up

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Sept. 8—Senator William Proxmire made public a letter today from four Air Force intelligence sergeants who asserted that officers of the Seventh Air Force made "a concerted effort" early this year "to cover up all traces" of an accidental bombing of civilian targets in Cambodia.

In a letter dated June 27, 1972, the sergeants wrote that permanent files had been destroyed and reconnaissance film had been diverted from shipment to higher headquarters by officers who were attached to Gen. John D. Lavelle's

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COVER-UP IN RAID LAID TO AIR FORCE

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Seventh Air Force headquarters in Saigon.

They added that although they did not know specifically who had ordered the cover-up, "the results of this bombing mission were known to the Saigon command because two high-ranking general officers from Seventh Air Force reviewed enlarged photography of the area."

The letter said that the accidental bombing and subsequent concealment took place on March 9 or March 10. On March 8 high Air Force officials in Washington began a secret investigation into unauthorized bombing of North Vietnam in the guise of "protective-reaction" that resulted in the dismissal two weeks later of General Lavelle.

An Air Force spokesman, told of the letter, said that the sergeants "could write almost anything but we don't know if it's true or not."

"I do know, however," the officer added, "that every time there is a mistake or a short round there is an investigation."

Senator Proxmire, a Wisconsin Democrat, said in an interview that he decided to turn over the letter to The New York Times rather than ask the Air Force to investigate and thus "jeopardize" the future of the sergeants, who are still on active duty.

Names Are Withheld

The sergeants, who requested that their names not be disclosed, said that the attack took place near Minot Air Field in the Parrot's Beak section of eastern Cambodia. An Air Force spokesman confirmed today that 30 missions were flown by American aircraft over eastern Cambodia that day.

"During this strike," the letter said, "numerous civilian buildings and at least one school bus was damaged or destroyed due to a pilot bombing error."

"That is in itself a terrible thing," the letter added, "but recently acquired information indicates that this incident was covered up here in Saigon and never forwarded up the chain of command to Washington as it should have been."

The sergeants, who jointly signed the letter, described as "inexcusable" the failure to bring the accident to the attention of higher officials.

Specific Data Given

The letter was filled with specific information, including mission numbers, map coordinates and duplicates of official log entries.

The sergeants, assigned to the 12th Reconnaissance Intelligence Squadron stationed in Saigon, wrote that most of the covering-up came in connection with a reconnaissance flight that flew over the area after the attacks to take photographs for bomb-damage assessment.

Copies of that film and of highly classified "special interest photographs" were deleted from the usual distribution lists and stored in a locked closet, the letter said.

The letter added: "The possibility of all the information kept in the closet being destroyed before it can be reviewed is very great if word of this letter to you is disclosed."

Senator Proxmire, who has been involved in a number of disputes with the Air Force over cost overruns, said he was personally satisfied that the information supplied by the sergeants was accurate.