

SFChronicle

A Report That Lavelle Accused The High Brass

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Washington

Lieutenant General John D. Lavelle has told the Senate Armed Services Committee that he received permission from Admiral Thomas H. Moorer and General Creighton W. Abrams before ordering a series of attacks on North Vietnamese airfields, in November, 1971, well-placed sources said yesterday.

Moorer is chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Abrams, whose confirmation by the Senate as Army Chief of Staff is being held up by the Lavelle hearings, was then commander of United States forces in South Vietnam.

The missions, later reported as "protective reaction strikes" — that is, raids against targets posing an immediate threat to pilots — were the first of at least 20 attacks against North Vietnam by Lavelle's Seventh Air Force at a time before renewed heavy bombing of the north was authorized.

SERIOUS

The seriousness of Lavelle's accusations was underscored by Senator John C. Stennis, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, when he told reporters that he had summoned Abrams to appear before another closed session of the committee today.

Stennis said the committee, which heard more than four hours of testimony from Lavelle yesterday, would not proceed with consideration of the nomination of Abrams as Army chief of staff until the Lavelle matter is cleared up. He refused to say how long that would take.

In response to a question, Stennis acknowledged that the closed hearings had raised an issue: "What was Abrams' duty and what should he have done?"

DEMOTION

Lavelle was relieved of his command and demoted from full general last March after an Air Force sergeant wrote a letter of complaint about the raids. The unauthorized

See Back Page

From Page 1

raids ended on March 8, less than a month before President Nixon ordered the sustained bombing of North Vietnam.

Congressional sources said they did not know whether Abrams' or Moorer's alleged knowledge of the unauthorized attacks was limited to the early November raids.

Abrams could not be reached for comment yesterday, and an aide said none was likely in view of the Senate hearings. An aide to Moorer confirmed that the admiral was in Saigon on November 8, the day of the first raid, and also acknowledged that he had been briefed by Lavelle.

RULES

But the aide quoted Moorer as saying that "there was no indication of anything that did not conform" with the rules of engagement during the Lavelle briefing.

Earlier this summer, during the confirmation hearings on his reappointment as chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Moorer testified that his staff had noticed an Air Force attack on an unauthorized radar site sometime in December, and had ordered Lavelle to stop such raids.

According to congressional sources, Moorer told the Senate Armed Services Committee that, after a review by Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird, it was decided to place radar sites on the list of approved targets.

Lavelle returned to the capitol yesterday for another closed session with the committee.

SYMINGTON

At one point during the afternoon, Senator Stuart Symington (Dem-Mo.) stepped out of the hearing room and told reporters: "I'm convinced that a lot of people below him and a lot of people above him knew of the attacks."

Symington added, in response to a question, that higher commanders "knew of the nature of the raids" and "knew what he was doing." He declined to elaborate.

Congressional sources said that Lavelle, in his testimony before the Senate committee, contended that he had received permission for the raids from Abrams and Moorer at a meeting in Saigon.

TARGET

One target — Quang Lang airfield, about 180 miles north of the demilitarized zone — was in an area of North Vietnam usually attacked by Navy planes from aircraft carriers in the Gulf of Tonkin. Congressional sources said Lavelle told the Senate committee that Moorer had personally assured him that he would get permission for the Air Force to stage the raids.

Lavelle was quoted by congressional sources as testifying that on the next morning as the admiral was preparing to board a flight at Tan Son Nhut airfield in Saigon he presented Moorer with a series of reconnaissance photographs taken after the raids.

Lavelle is known to have told others, a source close to the general said, that during a visit in mid-November to Honolulu he also discussed the mission with Admiral John S. McCain, who was then commander-in-chief of the Pacific forces. McCain retired this month.

REASON

The airfield attacks were considered necessary, one military source said, because in November North Vietnam began to shift a number of MIG fighters and some of its best pilots to airfields further south.

Monday, after Lavelle's three-hour secret appearance, Stennis told reporters that the officer had maintained he "committed no wrong" in connection with the unauthorized bombing.

Stennis further quoted the

general as saying that "he considers he was authorized" to make the attacks for which he was punished.

That testimony contradicted Lavelle's public assertion before the House Armed Services Committee on June 12 that "in certain instances, I made interpretations that were probably beyond the literal intention of the rules."

OATH

Yesterday Symington said that, at his suggestion, Lavelle and other witnesses before the committee would be placed under oath for their testimony.

A civilian source close to Lavelle said that his testimony before the Senate Committee was more candid than his House statement.

The source added that the Senate statement reflected the general's own view of his innocence. "I think the general had some bad advice at the outset of this thing," the source said.

"It looks to me," he added, "that the Air Force is trying to make a patsy out of him on these things."

Congressional sources said that Lavelle, in his secret House testimony in June, made no mention of discussing specific missions in advance with higher-ranking officers.