

Gen. Abrams Contradicts Lavelle

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General Creighton W. Abrams, President Nixon's nominee for Army Chief of Staff, flatly denied yesterday that he had any knowledge that his top air commander in Vietnam was conducting illegal bombing raids and then writing false reports to cover up the violations.

Abrams made those and other statements in a closed session of the Senate Armed Services Committee one day after Major General John D. Lavelle, former commander of the Seventh Air Force in Vietnam, testified. Lavelle was relieved after bombing unauthorized targets in North Vietnam.

The question several senators pressed Abrams on was whether he winked at Lavelle's violations of the rules at the time and now is participating in an Air Force - Pentagon effort to make Lavelle the scapegoat. That question is the key one as the Senate decides whether to confirm Abrams as head of the Army.

Interviews with several senators on the Armed Services Committee, which makes its recommendation on confirmation to the Senate as a whole, indicated that Abrams will win committee approval.

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A gruff general of few words, Abrams in his appearance yesterday remained in character by giving a series of short and direct answers which added up to an impressive performance, according to several senators who heard him.

"Were you ever briefed on the illegal raids?" asked one senator. Abrams gave a one word answer: "No."

Did you get any reports or

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other information indicating unauthorized raids? Again a one word "No."

Did you ever visit the Udorn Air Force Base in Thailand — the place where 23 - year - old Sergeant Lonnie Franks sat down and wrote Senator Harold Hughes (Dem - Iowa) about the illegal bombings and phony reports? "Yes," Abrams told the senators in the closed hearing. But he said he went there to discuss B-52 matters and received no information about bombing violations.

Several senators, with Hughes at the forefront, pressed Abrams on why, as field commander in Vietnam and Lavelle's boss, he did not detect the violations long before Franks blew the whistle on them in his letter.

Abrams replied at one point that the raids reported to him were in militarily active areas where enemy fire could have been encountered by U.S. warplanes, thus allowing them to drop bombs under the "protective reaction" rules in force during the period of violations.

Lavelle was removed as Seventh Air Force commander, a four star job, and allowed to retire after his superiors concluded that about 20 bombing raids conducted from November, 1971, into March, 1972, went beyond the rules of engagement. Those restrictions were lifted on March 30 — and liberalized for brief periods before that.

Abrams did make a significant disclosure in the closed hearing by declaring he approved one bombing strike that the Joint Chiefs of Staff notified him afterward exceeded the rules.

It was a raid in early January against North Vietnamese radar near the Laos border used to guide their fighters to take on American planes. One Senate source said the raid was flown January 5 against the Mocchau radar site.

"Since Abrams himself broke the rules of engagement in the view of his superiors," said one senator after hearing the testimony, "the whole Lavelle thing boils down to how these complicated rules are interpreted. It's a hullabaloo about nothing."

Senator William B. Saxbe (Rep-Ohio) told reporters last night that the conflict between Abrams and Lavelle boiled down to how the rules were interpreted regarding the right to strike the ground control intercept (GCI) radar which guides fighters to another plane. Abrams considered them off limits and Lavelle considered them on, said Saxbe with no reference to the Mocchau raid.

As Saxbe explained the rules existing during the disputed November to March period, American planes flying over North Vietnam could strike back with bombs and rockets under any one of these three conditions: receiving fire by anti-aircraft, sighting an enemy MIG fighter flying in the vicinity, or getting the indication a surface to air missile had focused its fire control radar on them. That last condition causes lights to go on in the pilot's cockpit to warn him he has been made a target by a missile.

Once any of these conditions exists, said Saxbe, "anything goes" in the way of retaliation. The American bombers scouting reconnaissance planes can "blow up a mess hall if they want to."

Lavelle told the committee, said Saxbe, that he thought the rules also allowed striking the radar. "I interpreted the rules this way, and I thought everybody did," Saxbe quoted Lavelle as testifying.

That statement seems to indicate Lavelle is backing away from his earlier testimony before the House Armed Services Committee that "I made interpretations that were probably beyond the literal intention of the rules."

If Abrams did not know about the illegal raids and phony reports on them by Lavelle, as he testified yesterday, still another question is the knowledge of officers and men below Lavelle about the cover-up. Sergeant Franks is scheduled to testify on that question in another closed hearing today. General John D. Ryan, Air Force Chief of Staff, will testify later in the committee inquiry, chairman John C. Stennis (Dem-Miss.) said.