

A Question of Command in the Lavelle Hearings

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Sept. 17 —

After a week of hearings into unauthorized bombing of North Vietnam, the Senate Armed Services Committee is far from resolving what some Senators consider the most pressing question raised thus far — did any of Lieut. Gen. John D. Lavelle's superiors know what he

was doing? The hearing will continue tomorrow with testimony from Gen. John D. Ryan, the Air Force

Chief of Staff, who in March dismissed General Lavelle as commander of the Seventh Air Force.

General Lavelle, who was found to have ordered at least 20 raids over North Vietnam in violations of the rules, then, insisted during two days of testimony last week that he kept insisting during two days he kept some of his superiors in the chain of command — among them Gen. Creighton W. Abrams — informed of what he was doing.

General Abrams, whose confirmation as Army Chief of Staff has been delayed by the hearings, had categorically denied such knowledge.

But his denial has raised another question in the eyes of some Senators. Why did he not know?

Command System Doubted

Whether General Abrams or other high commanders did or did not know what General Lavelle was doing, the concept of full military and civilian command and control over the air war has been badly scarred by the hearings. General Lavelle's first raids came less than two weeks before the secret Paris peace talks broke off last fall—raising yet more questions about the significance of his unauthorized attacks.

The overwhelming majority of the members of the Armed Services Committee are known to be ready to approve the nomination of General Abrams. But Senator John C. Stennis, the avowedly promilitary committee chairman, has told newsmen that he will "wait until the hearings are over" before making up his mind.

One reason for Senator Stennis's reluctance to join his colleagues in voicing support for General Abrams was spelled out in the testimony made available by the committee late last week.

At one point, General Abrams acknowledged that in early January he had approved one of General Lavelle's strikes against a radar site in North Vietnam. The attack was subsequently declared to be a violation of the rules of engagement by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General Abrams tes-

tified that he had given orders not to stage such raids again.

His testimony prompted Senator Stennis, a Mississippi Democrat, to say caustically:

"There is something that just sticks out here to me. You and General Lavelle decided under the rules you were operating under to hit those radars and you did. And the Joint Chiefs disapproved of that, and you stopped. And General Lavelle kept on an amazing record of activity here, he was your deputy, and this all happened there with your reach, somewhat within your responsibility and you didn't know about it?"

'This Amazing Record'

After General Abrams repeated that he did not know, Senator Stennis went on: "I just don't know, and I don't know what else to say about it on that point nor anybody else to ask about it. This thing was serious, according to the J.C.S. [Joint Chiefs], it was over bounds, and there was not anything done about it except just correction of both of you. And now Lavelle has already been corrected, and I just do not see how he could, on his own—I am not saying you were the one who encouraged it—but just solely on his own, I don't see how he could have launched out on plans like this."

Adding to Senator Stennis's concern was testimony from General Abrams showing that he and other officers at his headquarters in Saigon had begun meeting daily in December, 1971, to discuss the air war and related intelligence matters. The general explained that along with those meetings, his headquarters maintained its own targeting and operation group for air activity whose responsibility was to review all of the battlefield air reports. A similar group met at the headquarters of the Seventh Air Force.

A close review of the published testimony, which was censored for security reasons, indicates that one of General Lavelle's missions—conducted during secret United States-North Vietnamese negotiations in Paris—received a great deal of military attention at the time.

Abrams and Moorer Named

The attacks, on three North Vietnamese airfields on Nov. 7 and 8, 1971, were ordered by General Lavelle, who testified that he had discussed the raids and received approval for them with both General Abrams and Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Admiral Moorer was in Saigon on an inspection trip at the time.

General Lavelle testified that Admiral Moorer had cleared the way for Air Force permission to attack the Quanglang airfield, which was furthest north of the three and thus normally

in the Navy's area of operations.

The over-all goal of the operation, General Lavelle testified, was to destroy runways and parked MIG's. One specific target was the destruction of a MIG that had been photographed on the ground at Donghoi airfield, the southernmost MIG station in North Vietnam. The plane was believed to be piloted by a top North Vietnamese airman.

Under the rules at the time, the North Vietnamese airplane had to take off and exhibit intentions "hostile" to pilots before it could be engaged in combat.

'He Was Well Aware of It'

General Lavelle testified that he told General Abrams that "we are going to try and get them and he agreed; I don't know that he told me to do it but he was well aware of it." General Lavelle further said that he had a similar conversation with Admiral Moorer and even gave him a packet of photographs of the airfield after the strike.

Investigators for the Senate Armed Services Committee subsequently learned that the attack on the airfields had been carefully planned.

Both General Abrams and Admiral Moorer have denied knowing that the raids were to be anything more than officially sanctioned "protective-reaction" strikes—that is a United States response to North Vietnamese threats to United States pilots.

General Abrams testified last week, according to the official transcript, that General Lavelle had officially told him afterwards that "the mission was complete." He added: "All planes were out" and the North Vietnamese "had fired on the aircraft and the escort had reacted."

Attacks Called Inadequate

Yet over the next few weeks, General Lavelle testified, he began receiving detailed critiques on the purportedly impromptu protective-reaction raid. In essence, General Lavelle testified that he and other commanders at the Seventh Air Force were chastized for not having performed the attacks more adequately.

General Lavelle specifically cited a telephone call and wire from the top Air Force commander at Pacific Headquarters in Hawaii saying that officials there "didn't think we had done a good job on our strike at Quanglang airfield."

The implication of that portion of General Lavelle's testimony was made clear during the hearings by one Senator who read it aloud to General Abrams and then dryly asked: "Does that sound like protective reaction or not?"

Another disturbing element to at least one Senator wast

that the early November raids were officially described at the time by the military command in Saigon as a "warning" to Hanoi forces not to become more active in the air.

There is an obvious contradiction, in the eyes of this Senator, between air raids intended to make a diplomatic point and protective-reaction missions, which by definition should be carried out only without being planned.

Secret Talks Broken Off

Nine days later, North Vietnam told the United States that Le Duc Tho, its top representative at the secret Paris peace talks, was ill and could not meet with Henry A. Kissinger, the President's national security adviser, Nov. 20 in Paris, as scheduled. The secret talks were broken off and did not resume until after the North Vietnamese offensive and renewed American bombing of the North this year.

General Abrams also testified last week, according to the transcript, that he knew nothing of the secret peace talks—American public until Jan. 25, 1972, which were not reported to the

The connection between the November raids and the peace talks have not been explored in the secret Senate hearings thus far, but they may be.

In a speech last week to a conference on "the military in American life," Senator Harold E. Hughes, the Iowa Democrat who initiated the committee hearings, made this point about the Lavelle matter:

"There appears to have been a widespread conspiracy of silence by men who apparently suspended ethical judgments for some reason. Does the President himself know what really happens to his orders?"