

General Lavelle's "Catch-22" War in Vietnam

By George C. Wilson

READERS OF "Catch-22," that World War II novel by Joseph Heller, will remember that pilots who thought they were going crazy could not be grounded unless they asked to be grounded. And as Doc Daneeka explained the rules to the war weary Yossarian: "Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy" and thus must keep flying after asking to be grounded. "That's some catch, that Catch-22," Yossarian told the doctor after his futile attempt to get out of the war.

And now we have a new kind of Catch-22 for Vietnam, one that Air Force Gen. John D. Lavelle came up with to get into the war in a bigger way.

Lavelle, as commander of the Seventh Air Force in Vietnam, felt frustrated as his reconnaissance pilots brought back pictures of a big pileup of military equipment in North Vietnam late last year. He wanted to bomb the stuff before it moved south. And yet the protective reaction rules in force at the time said Lavelle's warplanes could not bomb unless the North Vietnamese fired first or missile radar zeroed in on them.

Sen. John C. Stennis (D-Miss.), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, sounded like Doc Daneeka talking to Yossarian as he told reporters in Denver on Sept. 19 how Lavelle got around his problem with a Catch-22:

"In the course of this offensive buildup and the efforts to block it," Stennis explained, "why, the testimony was that Gen. Lavelle conceived the idea and said that if you go into North Vietnam, you're going to get struck at, you're going to get a hostile reaction and you just better assume it before you go."

BECAUSE the general assumed the hostile reaction was present even before his planes took off for specific targets in North Vietnam, all his pilots had to do was drop their bombs and declare for reporting purposes that there was a hostile reaction. After all, the general himself said so.

"In that way," continued Stennis in explaining Lavelle's rationale, "why, he considered he was complying with the directives from Washington, his rules of engagement." Also, said Stennis, he was responding to pressure from the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington to hinder the North Vietnamese buildup "the very best he could, in every way he could" without breaking the rules.

Lavelle's Catch-22 launched 28 bombing missions against North Vietnam which the Air Force ultimately decided went beyond the rules of engagement. The only person in the 11,000-man Seventh Air Force who formally protested was a 23-year-old sergeant named Lonnie Franks. He wrote his senator, Harold E. Hughes (D-Iowa), about it—a letter which triggered two separate Pentagon

investigations, culminating in Lavelle being stripped of his command.

In what might sound like a burlesque of the situation, Stennis and three fellow Senators flew to the Fitzsimons Army Hospital in Denver to hear Lavelle's Catch-22 explained in full by his operations officer, Maj. Gen. Alton D. Slay, who was under the care of Dr. John Messersmith. (Slay had undergone minor surgery.)

The "Catch-22" parallels don't stop with the catch itself. There is the way, for example, the Air Force decided to punish Lavelle for his transgressions beyond removing him from command: recommend him for a promotion from his permanent rank of major general (two stars) to lieutenant general (three stars).

ORDINARILY, a general who held a four star job like Lavelle did would be recommended for retirement at that rank. It is a matter of prestige in the record book, not money. Lavelle will receive four-star retirement pay regardless because he went out on a 70 per cent physical disability. But the Air Force leadership argues its recommendation to retire him with the rank of lieutenant general, rather than full general, is in reality a humiliating slap—a demotion.

The Congressional Record, in its listing of Congress' business for the day, noted that the Senate Armed Services Committee on Sept. 11 held executive hearings on the Lavelle nomination "for the promotion of lieutenant general on the retired list." One

week later, the Record's listing for the committee's hearing had changed to "hearings on matters relating to authority for certain bombing missions in North Vietnam between November, 1971, and March, 1972 . . ."

The change symbolized how the Lavelle nomination was just the technical reason for the hearings. The real focus was on the unauthorized bombing and who really ordered them. And now that most of the evidence is in, the committee must express itself on the Catch-22 war Lavelle ran in Vietnam.

Most of the members on the Senate Armed Services committee respect the military and resent the burden the rules of engagement put on American commanders in Vietnam like Lavelle. Yet the members also respect the code: Military orders, however burdensome, must be obeyed. The testimony is that Lavelle did not obey them, certainly not to the letter.

Promoting Lavelle to three star rank on the retirement list is not comfortable for the committee because he broke the code. Leaving him at two star rank further punishes a commander who, in the opinion of several senators on the committee at least, already has suffered enough by being stripped of command and exposed in the press.

Yet what Lavelle did—taking a war into his own hands—has obviously grave implications for the nation in this nuclear age where world incineration is 30 minutes away by guided missile. Lavelle is not a fictional Col. Cathcart, but the general of the Air Force selected to run the air war in Vietnam. What to do is a big dilemma for the Senate Armed Services Committee. It is the reason the hearings have been suspended to allow time to think this one through.



Sen. John C. Stennis (D-Miss.), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee with Maj. Gen. John D. Lavelle (right).