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Illegal Navy Raids Alleged and Denied

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A former Navy pilot told the Senate Armed Services Committee yesterday that pilots aboard his aircraft carrier off Vietnam in late 1971 and early 1972 had been instructed to bomb targets in North Vietnam regardless of whether they were fired upon first.

This would have been in violation of the rules of engagement war at that time.

But another pilot on the same carrier told the committee that, while bombing raids were planned days in advance, the bombs were not to be dropped if the planes were not attacked.

Senator John C. Stennis, the committee chairman, said after the hearing that he is "deeply concerned about several matters in this whole picture" -- both the testimony yesterday and the

charges that Major General John D. Lavelle of the Air Force had ordered more than 20 unauthorized raids over North Vietnam.

The first pilot to appear before the committee was William Gregg Groepper, who resigned his lieutenant's commission and left

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the Navy this month, after serving a four-year tour of duty.

ALLEGATIONS

A letter Groepper had written to Stennis alleging unauthorized bombing attacks led to the hearing.

According to Stennis and other members of the committee, Groepper said that he and his fellow pilots aboard the aircraft carrier Constellation were given closed-circuit television briefings before their raids were to take place.

The raids were ostensibly reconnaissance missions with armed bombers accompanying the reconnaissance planes in case there was an enemy attack.

North Vietnam, the planes were attacked by anti-aircraft missiles and guns and the bombs were unloaded. The third mission was scrapped because of bad weather.

The second man to testify yesterday was Lieutenant Charles William Moore Jr., a Naval Academy graduate, who is currently stationed in Jacksonville, Fla. According to the senators, Moore acknowledged that the television briefings, often took place as much as two days before the missions were scheduled and that the possible bombing targets were described in detail.

Moore was said to have told the committee that intelligence officers told them to expect to draw enemy fire and to unload their bombs on the targets. But Moore also said that the pilots were told not to drop their bombs over North Vietnam if, in fact, they were not fired upon.

AIRSTRIPS

One Senator who preferred not to be quoted by name said that there was "no question why they were flying the missions -- they wanted to knock out the airstrips."

But Senator William B. Saxbe (Rep-Ohio), declared that he was convinced that the pilots had followed the rules of the war.

Before President Nixon broadened the air war in March, sites in North Vietnam were to be bombed only in reaction to fire on a reconnaissance aircraft.

The commanding officer of the Constellation, Captain J. D. Ward, interviewed by telephone in San Diego denied that there were any orders to drop bombs without first drawing enemy fire and said that Groepper must have been talking about briefings before reconnaissance flights.

Ward added: "All our missions were approved by higher authorities. We didn't just go out and bomb something on our own. But that's not to say that higher authorities would invite us to perform such activities" (bombing in violation of the rules).

Groepper was reported to have told the senators that the gist of the briefings before three different missions in December, 1971, and January, 1972, was that the bombers were to drop their bombs even if they did not draw fire.

On two of these missions, over Quang Lang airfield in