

Lavelle Raids Broke the Rules, Sergeant Says

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North Vietnamese gunners often held their fire even while being bombed by warplanes sent out on unauthorized raids by Gen. John D. Lavelle, according to the Air Force sergeant who protested the false bombing reports he was ordered to write to make the raids look legal.

Sgt. Lonnie Franks' testimony to that effect adds new fuel to the argument over whether it was Washington or Hanoi that violated the "understandings" of 1968.

Part of those understandings, according to Johnson administration officials, was that Hanoi would tolerate American reconnaissance planes flying over North Vietnam in exchange for a halt in the bombing.

Franks told the Senate Armed Services Committee that it "amazed me" how long North Vietnamese took Lavelle's bombing before shooting back. Franks' testimony was given in closed session on September 14 and was released Monday.

Lavelle, according to the Air Force, ordered 28 bombing missions over North Vietnam between November, 1971, and March, 1972, which broke the rules for "protective reaction" in force at the time. Most of the raids were launched from Udorn air base in Thailand where Franks served as an intelligence specialist who debriefed pilots after their flights over the North.

Protective reaction rules said pilots could not bomb unless the North Vietnamese threatened reconnaissance missions by firing or locking anti-aircraft radar on American planes.

"At the beginning," said Franks of the January and early February period of unauthorized bombing of the North, "most of the strikes did not receive hostile reactions.

"In fact," continued Franks in his testimony, "it was obvious to me or it seemed logical to me that their orders in North Vietnam were not to shoot at our aircraft, because even when they were bombing they weren't receiving hostile reactions.

"... A flight would come back from North Vietnam and not get shot at after they had bombed," said Franks, "and I couldn't believe it because there was a great deal in the way of guns in North Vietnam. So it amazed me."

That forbearance finally gave way, said Franks, "after the middle of February. And it seemed to me that the North Vietnamese were finally reacting and finally allowed their gunners to shoot."

Another section of the previously secret testimony portrays Lavelle personally picking out targets in North

Vietnam and ordering them bombed whether there was the required hostile reaction or not.

Maj. Gen. Alton D. Slay, formerly Lavelle's operations officer in the Seventh Air Force command in Vietnam, said Lavelle immersed himself deeply in the details of the raids.

Lavelle would examine an aerial reconnaissance of a surface-to-air missile (SAM) site, Slay asserted in giving one example, and say: "I would like a strike mounted against this particular SAM site."

Slay said Lavelle's instructions "were always that, 'You will assume reaction, that you will do no trolling [sending in a reconnaissance plane to draw fire so the bombing could be done without technically violating the protective reaction rules], that you will plan the route in, you will plan the route out, you will plan your dive angle, you will plan your aim points, each individual section or each individual element of the flight will have its particular aim point.'"

Also, continued Slay in describing Lavelle's personal direction of the raids, "in many cases he would have alternate targets..."

Slay added that except for the rails on the Donghoi and Quangland air fields in North Vietnam, Lavelle's premeditated strikes were conducted away from population centers "in isolated areas."