

5 Pilots Say Their Group Flew Unauthorized Raids

Navy Men Assert Squadron Took Part in 3 Planned Strikes at Airfield Under Guise of 'Protective Reaction'

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 9—Five Navy pilots said in interviews today that their attack squadron participated, under the guise of "protective reaction," in at least three planned raids on a North Vietnamese airfield beginning last December.

Under the rules of the war at the time, "protective reaction" was permitted, that is, United States warplanes could respond if hostile fire was encountered or if electronic signals indicated that North Vietnamese forces were preparing to fire at reconnaissance craft on picture-taking intelligence runs.

The Navy pilots, three of whom have since resigned from the service, flew in the same unit with a former lieutenant, William T. Groepper, whose Senate testimony two weeks ago about unauthorized raids was vigorously denied by other Navy officers on active duty.

Quangland Called Target

The pilots, interviewed by telephone, said the three planned missions were aimed at Quanglang airfield about 180 miles north of the demilitarized zone in North Vietnam. The first of Maj. Gen. John D. LaVelle's more than 20 unauthorized missions also was aimed at the airfield, then a forward base for North Vietnamese MIG fighters.

As many as 20 aircraft, some armed with 1,000-pound bombs, took part in the raids, the pilots said.

All five pilots said that on at least one of the raids, the reconnaissance plane—needed to justify the official report of "protective reaction"—flew behind the warplanes and served mainly to take photographs after the strike.

"The recce [reconnaissance missions] was more or less a secondary thing," said James D. Hyberg, a former lieutenant who now lives in Fresno, Calif. "They just run it through to make it look good. Our intention was to get rid of the bombs whether or not we were fired upon."

Pilots on Constellation

The names of Mr. Hyberg and the other pilots were supplied by a Senate source, to whom one pilot had complained after the hearings two weeks ago, and by Mr. Groepper, who also lives in Fresno.

The pilots were assigned to Attack Squadron 165, stationed aboard the Constellation, an aircraft carrier that began its tour in the Gulf of Tonkin in September, 1971.

After Mr. Groepper's appearance before the Senate Armed Services Committee, his former roommate, Lieut. Charles W. Moore Jr., and his former squadron commander, Comdr. John A. Miller, denied in testimony that there had been any planned protective-reaction missions.

Adm. Thomas H. Moorer,

Continued on Page 9, Column 1

RAIDS RECALLED BY 5 NAVY PILOTS

Continued From Page 1, Col. 7

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, also told the committee—then in the midst of its investigation into the LaVelle case—that the Navy had not conducted unauthorized bombing strikes against North Vietnam.

But Lieut. David A. Garner, a 1967 graduate of the Naval Academy at Annapolis, said in an interview today that he personally took part in one of the missions and added, "We were briefed that we were going to hit the airfield, period."

'No Question At All'

"As far as I was concerned," the career officer said, "there was no question at all whether we were going to drop bombs or not."

Lieutenant Garner, who is now a flight instructor at LeMoore Naval Training Base in California, said he had recently listened again to a tape recording of the mission in question, which took place on Dec. 18, 1971, and discovered that there had been no enemy fire reported until the planes began diving toward the airstrip.

"As far as the radio transmissions go," he said, "nobody called out any fire before we rolled in."

"I thought it was a tough target that needed to be hit," the Lieutenant said, "but we were all surprised to read things in the newspapers as they came out—you know, the usual story that the unarmed reconnaissance had been fired on."

"It just didn't sit right," he said, in explaining why he was willing to be quoted.

Floor Debate Coming

The interviews came as the Senate prepared for a floor debate on the pending nomination of Gen. Creighton W. Abrams to be Army Chief of Staff.

In action today, the senators routinely approved the nomination of Adm. John C. McCain Jr. to retire in four-star grade and of Maj. Gen. Alexander M. Haig to become a full general. Admiral McCain recently retired as commander of the Pacific forces and General Haig has been serving as a deputy to Henry A. Kissinger, President Nixon's advisor in National Security. General Haig will become Army deputy chief of staff.

Last week the senate Armed Services Committee completed its inquiry into the Lavelle matter by stripping the general of an additional star and voting unanimously to approve the nomination of General Abrams, who had been Vietnam commander and, therefore, General Lavelle's direct superior at the time of the unauthorized raids.

Proxmire to Lead Fight

Senator William Proxmire, Democrat of Wisconsin, was known to be preparing to lead a floor fight against General Abrams' nomination. Senate sources said the debate could take place tomorrow or Wednesday.

Senator John C. Stennis, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, announced at the close of the hearings that there had been no evidence indicating that any of General Lavelle's superiors had either ordered the attacks or learned of them until they were officially reported.

Spokesmen for the Armed Services Committee said that there would be no immediate comment on the allegations of the Navy pilots.

The first unauthorized Navy raid reportedly took place last Dec. 13, slightly more than a week after a commander's conference in Honolulu that was attended by high-ranking Navy and Air Force officers.

General Lavelle, in a private letter to Senate Stennis that was released last week, declared that his representatives had been told at the meeting that the Joint Chiefs of Staff "would not question" the targets struck in protection-reaction missions. The general also declared that "in the event of adverse publicity" his deputies were told that "we could expect full backing" from the Joint Chiefs.

In-Joke Among Pilots

David E. Pinkham, a former Lieut. who now lives in Exeter, Calif., did not recall participating in the controversial protective-reaction flights, but said briefing as a back-up pilot.

"I memorized the layout of the field and the route into it and what I was supposed to hit," he said. "We were briefed specifically on targets. And in every briefing I participated in, the A-5 was scheduled to come in after the strikes." The A-5 was the reconnaissance plane.

Mr. Pinkham also said that some of the pilots in the squadron "used to joke" about protective reaction and even designed a patch about it. "It had 'The Old Protective Reaction Ploy' written along the top," Mr. Pinkham said, "with a drawing of the top of a blue tree broken in half." Blue Tree was the squadron's code name for reconnaissance flights.

"It was sort of an in-joke," he explained, "but enough well known so that everybody knew what it meant."

Another former pilot, Andrew A. Anderson of Caldwell, Idaho, described the missions as "just blatant."

"As far as I'm concerned," he said, "it was stretching the rules so we could destroy an airfield."

Mr. Anderson said he and Mr. Groepper eventually turned in their wings because of disillusion with the war.