

U.S. CONFIRMS PRE-1970 RAIDS ON CAMBODIA

Bombing Protected G.I.'s, Says the New Defense Secretary

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WASHINGTON, July 16 — Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger acknowledged today that Air Force B-52 bombers were secretly attacking Cambodia in 1969 and 1970 while the United States was publicly professing its respect for that nation's neutrality in the Vietnam war.

In a letter sent to Senator Stuart Symington, acting chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Dr. Schlesinger defended the unannounced and unreported raids that ceased with the invasion of Cambodia in May, 1970—as “fully authorized” and necessary for the protection of American servicemen.

The Defense Secretary also said that “because of the sensitive operational and diplomatic situation, special security precautions were taken to insure that the operations would not be compromised,” referring to operations inside Cambodia.

Tells of Fake Reports

Some of those “precautions” were described to the committee today by a former Air Force major, Hal M. Knight of Memphis, who served as operations officer for a secret Strategic Air Command radar site in South Vietnam that was responsible for electronically guiding the B-52's to their targets.

Mr. Knight, who left the Air Force this spring after he was twice passed over for promotion, told the Senators that he and others had deliberately falsified highly classified reports made after missions to prevent any official recording of the Cambodian bombings. He also said that he had destroyed all

evidence of the actual targets in a special “burner” constructed near his unit.

After Mr. Knight's testimony and the Pentagon's response to it Senator Symington, Democrat of Missouri, announced that he would continue the inquiry in an attempt to determine why high government officials had deemed it necessary to order subordinates to violate military law by falsifying official documents.

Left unanswered by today's hearing was a key question: How widespread was the falsification of documents? For example, did the B-52 pilots and crews, who actually dropped the bombs, know they were striking targets inside Cambodia? Did they describe their targets in debriefings? If so, were the debriefings records destroyed? What about the reconnaissance photographs of the attacked areas—which, according to Senate testimony, were filmed the day after a bombing? Were those destroyed or distributed through normal channels?

Most significantly, if officers attached to the Strategic Air Command, like Mr. Knight and

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all B-52 crewmen, are willing to falsify and destroy classified reports on orders from higher-ups, how can the military provide assurances that its nuclear fail-safe policies—designed for nuclear-armed B-52's — are workable?

“It's hard to see any justification for falsified reports,” the former officer said, in explaining why he had decided to testify in public. “I just don't believe that the military should be given that authority.”

When Senator Strom Thurmond, Republican of South Carolina and a strong supporter

of the Vietnam war, suggested that the decision to testify was linked in some way to the major's lack of advancement, Mr. Knight replied calmly, “Sir, I didn't take an oath to support the military; I took an oath to support the Constitution.”

Some of Mr. Knight's description was published Sunday in The New York Times in an interview. That dispatch apparently prompted Dr. Schlesinger's statement today and a strong letter, denying any falsification, from Gen. George S. Brown, whose nomination as the Air Force Chief of Staff was approved by the Senate last week.

General Brown, who commanded the Seventh Air Force in Saigon at the time of the unreported bombings, said that the destruction of documents and other procedures outlined by Mr. Knight had been authorized at higher levels. “Responsible higher authority knew in fact what was done and judged it to be in accord with instructions,” the letter said.

Sees No Deception

General Brown also said that there was no violation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice in connection with the falsification—as charged by Mr. Knight—because, he said, the military legislation requires “proof of intent to deceive.” Since Mr. Knight acted according to orders designed to conceal the secret bombing operations, the general said, he “has committed no offense” and “his actions lack the requisite intent to deceive.”

“I feel sure,” General Brown added, “that the special security was designed to provide for maximum security, not to mislead those who had a need to receive accurate information.”

Asked about the general's analysis, Mr. Knight told the senators that he assumed that there was an intent to deceive at the time he falsified the reports. “I didn't know who had intended to deceive whom,” he said. “I just knew there was an intent to deceive.”

Fear of Fulbright Unit

The former major testified that one of his superior officers had told him that the object of the falsification was to keep the facts from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, whose chairman, Senator J. W. Fulbright, Democrat of Arkansas, was a strong critic of the Vietnam war.

At one point, Senator Thomas F. McIntyre, Democrat of New Hampshire, expressed dismay over the destruction of official records. “Did it ever occur to you,” he asked the witness rhetorically, “that the falsification was for the purpose of deceiving the Congress and the people of the United States about these raids?”

Senator Harold F. Hughes, Democrat of Iowa, who was in-

strumental in arranging for Mr. Knight to testify, subsequently noted that after more than two years of repeated requests, he was finally provided with a Pentagon list of bombing missions, country by country and weapons by weapon. That document, he said, did not list any

B-52 raids over Cambodia before May, 1970.

“There was no disclosure in what I considered to be an official Defense Department report,” Senator Hughes said. “To me that seems to be official deception.”

He also said that he was “baffled” by the reference in Dr. Schlesinger's letter about the sensitive diplomatic situation, a reference to the conducting of B-52 raids with the tacit approval of Prince Norodom Sihanouk then the Cambodian chief of state.

Noting that Air Force post-strike reports such as those used for the Cambodian operations were routinely handled through secret channels, Mr. Hughes said he would attempt to find out what the Nixon Administration “thought would be [compromised] by the use of secret communications.”

Heard of Other Cases

Mr. Knight was unable to provide any first-hand testimony about the extent of the official deception, although he said that in conversations with fellow officers, he learned of similar falsifications at three other Strategic Air Command radar units in South Vietnam.

Those falsifications, Mr. Knight said, apparently involved unreported B-52 missions into Laos and North Vietnam that could have begun as early as 1968.