

'Washington' OKd Bomb Coverup

Washington

The Pentagon yesterday sought to place the blame on field commanders for false Air Force reporting covering up secret U.S. bombing in Cambodia but later reversed itself and said the orders originated in the top command in Washington.

Retracting a previous statement, Defense Department spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim said the false coverup reports, which said the bombing took place in South Vietnam, were "authorized and directed from Washington."

In a morning briefing, Friedheim had said former Defense Secretary Melvin Laird ordered the secret air war but did not authorize the falsification of records to cover it up.

He said then that the Strategic Air Command "most likely" devised the false reporting techniques in which two sets of books were kept, a false set stating the bombing took place in South Vietnam and a true set that recorded the more than 3500 secret B-52 sorties in Cambodia in 1969 and 1970.

Friedheim refused in his correcting statement to specify where in Washington the responsibility for the false reporting originated.

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saying "we will be responding to the Senate Armed Services Committee questions on this matter, and we will not comment further pending that response."

Other Defense sources said it probably was the responsibility of the Joint Staff, the group of military officers who work for the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The initial false reporting was ordered at a time when the U.S. was taking a public position of respect for the neutrality of Cambodia, even though it was bombing North Vietnamese troop positions there.

The false reports ultimately were transmitted to key Congressional committees, although selected congressmen and senators apparently were given the truth.

The falsified records, which were presented to the Senate Armed Services Committee as if they were accurate, angered members of the committee after they discovered the truth Monday about the secret bombing.

DEMAND

Acting committee chairman Senator Stuart Symington (Dem-Mo.) sent Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger a letter Wednesday asking who was responsible for initiating the cover-up and for the false information given the committee.

Friedheim said Deputy Defense Secretary William Clements and Admiral Thomas H. Mborer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, bore responsibility for the false information sent to the committee.

But he steadfastly refused to name anyone as being responsible for the initial cover-up plan.

Defense Department sources, however, said the committee might force the identification of the plan's creator. These sources said the Pentagon would respond to Symington's letter within the next few days but would try, at least at first, to keep from naming any individuals.