

Wheeler Says Nixon Stressed Secrecy on Cambodia Air War

By Michael Getler
Washington Post Staff Writer

The nation's top military officer during the time a massive secret air war was being carried out over Cambodia testified yesterday that President Nixon personally told him "at least half a dozen times" to "make sure the tightest security is maintained" on the raids to keep them secret.

Retired Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, appearing before a Senate Arms Service Committee hearing on the raids, said he recalled "a number of admonishments both by the President and the Secretary of Defense for using extra secure means to make sure we did not have a diplomatic explosion" if word of bombing a supposedly neutral country got out.

At one point, Wheeler told the senators under questioning that the "special reporting procedures and the extra security measures both came from the President."

But later he divorced Mr. Nixon specifically from ordering the dual-reporting system which was used to cover up the raids by reporting them through normal channels as having taken place in South Vietnam rather than Cambodia.

The concealing of the Cambodia bombing campaign has caused a major outcry on Capitol Hill, since Congress for se-



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veral years was provided official false information on where the air war was being fought.

Wheeler, under questioning, said that "the President of the United States didn't order those particular procedures."

He described the dual reporting system as something "that just grew up." Asked by Sen. Stuart Symington (D-Mo.) who worked out the details, Wheeler said: "We did; the military."

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The committee also released yesterday a letter from Air Force Chief of Staff John D. Ryan, responding to questions submitted by Sen. Harold Hughes (D-Iowa).

Gen. Ryan confirmed that B-52 attacks in northern Laos between Feb. 17, 1970 and April 26, 1972, also had "special reporting procedures" in effect "to restrict widespread knowledge of those strikes." Wheeler testified he believed about 149 such attacks had been made by May, 1970. Wheeler,

who served as JSC chairman for six years, left office in July, 1970.

Again, he said the reason for not disclosing the information was for "diplomatic" rather than military.

Ryan said the raids were covered up, for all but those few people who had a "need to know," by being reported as having taken place in southern Laos where the U.S. was acknowledging bombing against North Vietnamese supply routes. The bombing in Northern Laos was generally in support of Laotian govern-

ment forces in their battle with Pathet Laos Communist forces.

Wheeler, under questioning, said he assumed the White House was informed of the specific dual reporting procedures being used, since he had told former Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird about them, and since he received a subsequent message from the President praising him (Wheeler) "for the high security that has been maintained."

Wheeler's heavy emphasis on the President's demand for secrecy tends to back up an assertion by Laird last week that the National Security Council, which is headed by the President, recommended that the "special reporting procedures" be established.

Presidential national security adviser Henry A. Kissinger, a member of the National Security Council, however, has been quoted in the press as saying that the White House "neither ordered nor was it aware of any falsification of records" on the secret bombing.

The answer may lie in official semantics. Wheeler yesterday said he didn't believe "falsified" was a proper description of what had happened, since all those with the need to know had the accurate information, and the official records were intentionally inaccurate to keep the real information from getting out.

Wheeler said that the "diplomatic explosion" which the administration feared stemmed from Cambodian Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who had "acquiesced" in the secret U.S. bombing and "had a very difficult course to follow to deal with the North Vietnamese, Chinese and his own people. He didn't want to have to acknowledge that we are bombing with his approval."