

Senate Probes New Coverup Of Viet Raids

By James McCartney
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WASHINGTON — The full story of U.S. secret bombing in Indochina goes far beyond the secret air war in Cambodia which was exposed in recent weeks, Senate investigators believe.

They now have hard evidence that U.S. officials covered up on fighter bomber attacks on North Vietnam in 1970, and perhaps later.

They also practiced deception on B-52 raids in northern Laos for more than two years.

The senators are beginning to piece together a complex story of government deceit, misrepresentation, figure-juggling — and sometimes outright lying — about the aerial war all over Indochina.

"We have been deceived," says Sen. Stuart Symington (D-Mo.), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Investigators have learned, from Gen. John D. Ryan, Air Force chief of staff, that what the Air Force publicly called "protective reaction" air strikes against North Vietnam in 1970 were actually described, in secret classified

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cables as "pre-emptive strikes" on North Vietnam — in other words, attacks.

At the time Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, now a presidential counselor, repeatedly insisted that U.S. planes fired only when reconnaissance flights were endangered.

Gen. Ryan has acknowledged that the same kind of secrecy procedures were used for North Vietnam as had been used to hide 14 months of massive aerial warfare in Cambodia in 1969 and early 1970.

In Cambodia, attacks were covered by falsification of records, a so-called "dual reporting" system in which one set of records was true, the other lies, Symington's committee discovered.

Falsification of records also occurred on a wide scale for B-52 attacks on northern Laos between February, 1970, and April, 1972, according to a statement given the committee by Gen. Ryan.

The big-bomber attacks in northern Laos, some of them reaching close to the Chinese border area, were falsely reported as taking place in southern Laos, in the Ho Chi Minh trail area.

These attacks in northern Laos were never admitted by the U.S. government. In fact, a high White House official told reporters, on the record, at a White House briefing in 1970 that the U.S. had conducted "only one raid by B-52 bombers, on a single day, in northern Laos, that one with presidential authority."

Senate investigators now believe that statement was a lie. The Armed Services committee has classified documents in its possession showing "a large number of aerial sorties and munitions drops" in northern Laos.

On Sept. 26, 1969, Nixon was asked in a news conference about the use of U.S. air power in Laos.

The President replied that "we do have aerial reconnaissance; we do have, perhaps, some other activities. I won't discuss those other activities at this time."

He said that "as far as American manpower in Laos is concerned, there are none there now on a combat basis."

But once secret, official Defense department figures delivered in recent days to the Armed Services committee show graphically that the aerial war in Laos sharp-

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ly escalated under Nixon — and vast numbers of combat missions were being flown.

The "other activities" Nixon mentioned turned out to be a major escalation of the aerial war.

At the time Nixon spoke, U.S. combat aircraft had flown nearly 100,000 missions against Laos, in his presidency, and had dropped more than 400,000 tons of bombs.

Under Nixon the number of B-52 bomber strikes had doubled in Laos and the number of fighter bomber attacks nearly tripled, compared to a comparable period the year before he became president.

The peak of the aerial war in Laos, in fact, was reached

in 1969 and 1970, under Nixon, Pentagon figures show.

Deception also was practiced in Cambodia, beyond the secret 14-month aerial war disclosed recently from March of 1969 to May of 1970.

Both Nixon and Secretary of State William Rogers publicly pledged in early 1970 that the U.S. would not use its air power in support of the Lon Nol government in Cambodia.

Rogers said in May that the U.S. would not become "militarily involved" with air support to defend Lon Nol. Nixon added in June that the "only remaining American activity in Cambodia" after July 1 of that

year would be to try to stop troop and supply movements, solely to protect U.S. troops in South Vietnam.

Those pledges have been grievously broken, for the U.S. today is openly supporting and defending the Lon Nol government with air power on a massive scale.

And there are no more U.S. troops in South Vietnam.

The new escalation of the aerial war in Cambodia did not occur until March of this year, after the Vietnam peace agreements were signed.

According to the latest Pentagon figures obtained by the Senate committee,

U.S. combat air activity in Cambodia is the heaviest in the entire history of the Indochina war, including the time of the Cambodian invasion by U.S. troops in 1970.

Bomb and munitions tonnage in March, the latest month for which figures are available, was about double the munitions expenditure at the height of the U.S. invasion.

Although the administration now admits aerial attacks in Cambodia, many senators have not been aware of how massive they have been.

That problem, in many ways, is the whole story of the aerial war in Indochina.