

Sergeant Says 200 Men Helped Falsify Bomb Data

NYTimes By SEYMOUR M. HERSH **SEP 7 1972**

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ORLANDO, Fla., Sept. 6—A young Air Force sergeant who first reported the unauthorized bombing of North Vietnam took issue today with the Air Force contention that

Gen. John D. Lavelle acted alone and said more than 200 men were involved in falsely reporting the raids.

General Lavelle was relieved in March as commander of the Seventh Air Force.

No other officer has been punished in connection with the incident and Air Force spokesmen have repeatedly told newsmen both in Washington and Saigon that "investigations have revealed that General Lavelle alone was responsible for the air raids."

'Everybody Was Doing It'

Sgt. Lonnie D. Franks, a 23-year-old intelligence specialist whose second one-year tour of duty in Thailand ended last week, said during a four-hour interview at his home here that pilots and officers stationed at Udorn Air Base in Thailand spent up to three hours daily falsifying the highly classified after-action reports before routinely sending them to higher headquarters.

"Everybody knew we were falsifying these reports," the sergeant said. "Everybody was doing it. I kept on saying 'Why' and they said, 'That's the way we do it.'"

Both the advance planning for the raids and the actual results were reported orally and in secret cablegrams to a high-ranking general stationed at General Lavelle's Seventh Air Force headquarters in Saigon, Sergeant Franks said.

Senate sources said that the sergeant is expected to testify at Senate Armed Services Committee hearings this month

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about the Lavelle matter. Senator John C. Stennis, Democrat of Mississippi, has delayed action on the nomination of Gen. Creighton W. Abrams to be Army Chief of Staff pending the hearings. General Abrams was commander of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam, and thus General Lavelle's superior, at the time of the illegal raids.

Maj. Gen. Winant Sidle, chief of Army information, said that General Abrams "would have no comment on this" because of the Senate hearings.

He Charges 75 Strikes

Sergeant Franks, who has 11 more months to serve in the Air Force, asserted during the interview that more than 75 illegal "protective reaction" strikes—three times as many as were publicly acknowledged by General Lavelle during a Congressional hearing in June—were staged by aircraft stationed at Udorn.

"The only reason I waited so long before doing something was that I honestly thought somebody else would do it," Sergeant Franks added. "I was the lowest ranking guy there."

Sergeant Franks's account of elaborate false reporting was subsequently confirmed by an Air Force officer who served with him at Udorn. "All I can say is, yes, we did it," said the officer, who requested anonymity, in a telephone interview today. "But I didn't like what I was doing."

"I was right in the middle of it," the officer added. "It was kind of a shock. I was just doing what I was supposed to do."

The officer said that Sergeant

Franks rated as "one of my better workers," adding: "I trusted him more than anybody else."

Told that it was the sergeant's letter that prompted the investigation, the officer said, "I didn't have the gumption to write one myself."

Franks Writes to Hughes

Sergeant Franks was assigned in August, 1971, to the intelligence office of the 432d Technical Reconnaissance Wing at Udorn. On Feb. 25, 1972, he wrote to Senator Harold E. Hughes, Democrat of Iowa, telling of the unauthorized raids.

Senator Hughes forwarded the letter to Air Force officials and within three weeks the Air Force inspector general had completed an on-the-spot investigation in Thailand. It was determined, as Gen. John D. Ryan, the Air Force Chief of Staff, said at a House of Representatives hearing in June, that 20 to 28 illegally ordered raids against truck depots, airfields and oil stockpiles in North Vietnam had been made and three reports falsified. The raids began in November, General Ryan testified, and ended in March—shortly after the letter from Sergeant Franks was acted upon.

In the interview, however, Sergeant Franks said he first began knowingly falsifying reports on Jan. 25, 1972, in connection with his job as an intelligence sergeant. At the time, he was responsible for briefings and also for debriefing pilots and navigators after their missions.

On Jan. 25, he said, "a pilot and navigator came in and debriefed a bombing mission over North Vietnam and said they

were also supposed to report some triple-A [antiaircraft artillery] fire."

Sergeant Franks went to his senior sergeant to ask what was going on, he said, and was told, in effect, that "if the pilots told you to report it, that's the way we're doing it—write it up."

It was the first time in his career that he had been asked to falsify a report, Sergeant Franks said. He said he checked again with Capt. Douglas J. Murray, who was in charge of the intelligence office, and again was told to "go on and report it."

Throughout February, Sergeant Franks said, the illegal missions settled into a fixed pattern, with 16 planes assigned to escort Air Force reconnaissance craft over their objectives in North Vietnam—four times as many as usual. The aircraft would then attack enemy targets and the operations would be reported as "protective reaction," the Sergeant said.

"The easiest way to tell if it was a pre-planned strike was to see how many escorts there were," Sergeant Franks said. "If you send up 16 birds to escort one recon [reconnaissance flight], well"—the Sergeant ended the sentence with a shrug.

"After a week or two," he recounted, "the North Vietnamese started shooting when they saw that second flight of four."

From Jan. 25 until early March, Sergeant Franks said, when the false reporting was stopped—apparently as a result of his letter—the daily procedur for receiving targeting orders for North Vietnam was changed.