

Gen. Lavelle Now Asserts He 'Committed No Wrong'

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 11—Lieut. Gen. John D. Lavelle, in what some Senators considered a change of testimony, told the Senate Armed Services Committee today that he had "committed no wrong" in connection with the unauthorized bombing of North Vietnam for which he was dismissed from the Air Force.

Senator John C. Stennis, the committee chairman, reported General Lavelle's testimony to newsmen after a three-hour secret session this afternoon.

On June 12, in an appearance before the House Armed Services Committee, General Lavelle acknowledged responsibility for having ordered his subordinates to falsify at least

three reports and also said he had authorized at least 20 missions against targets not on the officially sanctioned list. These were later officially reported as "protective reaction," he said. The targets included airfields, oil stockpiles and truck depots.

During his testimony then, General Lavelle made clear that he could understand why his superiors in Washington

Continued on Page 14, Column 3

Continued From Page 1, Col. 3

would think he had violated the rules of engagement. But today, Senator Stennis said, General Lavelle changed that view.

"Under his interpretation of what his authorization was," Senator Stennis said of General Lavelle, "he considers that he was authorized" to make the attacks for which he was punished.

General Lavelle is scheduled to return for more questioning tomorrow in what some Senators privately said would be a widening inquiry into his dismissal in March as commander of the Seventh Air Force.

Senator Stennis told newsmen that General Lavelle had testified that "he had never knowingly disobeyed the orders and guidance" provided by the military authorities behind him.

"In his view," Senator Stennis said of General Lavelle, "he has committed no wrongs, either as to the missions or those reports."

In his appearance before the House committee, General Lavelle said he thought that Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, then commander of all United States forces in South Vietnam, had been aware of his actions. General Abrams's pending nomination to be Chief of Staff of the Army has been held up by Senator Stennis, pending the conclusion of the Lavelle hearings.

Since his appearance before

the House in June, General Lavelle has remained silent and refused all requests for interviews.

Senator Stennis, in his meeting with newsmen, refused to say—as others, both in the Pentagon and on the committee staff have said—that there was no evidence of General Abrams's knowledge of or involvement in the unauthorized missions.

General Lavelle concluded the unauthorized attacks on March 8, three weeks before President Nixon authorized the all-out bombing of the North in connection with North Vietnam's military offensive.

Asked if General Lavelle's testimony today linked General Abrams in any manner with the Air Force officer's actions, Senator Stennis would only say that the testimony was "inconclusive" about General Abrams's involvement or the involvement of any other senior officers in the chain of command.

Comment by Symington

A committee source close to Senator Stennis said in a later interview that the Senator viewed the Lavelle issue as a "very grave matter" and could not at this point rule out the involvement of anyone, either above or below General Lavelle in the chain command.

In another interview after the hearings, Senator Stuart Symington, Democrat of Mis-

souri, said that because so

"much of the entire operation was oral, I recommended that all witnesses be placed under oath prior to their testimony."

This was not done, he added. "If some of General Lavelle's testimony is right," Senator Symington said, "then statements made by others are wrong."

The Missouri Senator refused to amplify his remarks but said he would urge the Armed Services Committee to broaden its hearings to embrace "more than just members of the Seventh Air Force."

The senators met for more than two hours in the morning to be briefed on the issue by two committee staff aides who conducted an investigation in Thailand and South Vietnam earlier this summer.

Afterward, Senator Hughes described the session as "very thorough and very good." But he added that he had not learned anything new.

Committee sources said that Senator Stennis had agreed to have the verbatim transcript of General Lavelle's testimony censored and made public within a few days—pending cooperation from the Air Force and individual committee members.

Testimony Called 'Secret'

General Lavelle's testimony prepared in advance for the afternoon meeting was described by Senator Stennis as "top secret." But a staff aide said later that the retired general

had apparently put that classification on the document himself.

The long delay in the Senate hearings—initially announced by Senator Stennis late in June—has acutely embarrassed the Army, which has been striving for a lower profile in the wake of a series of scandals connected with Vietnam. It has also left General Abrams—who is officially listed by the Army as its Vietnam commander—in an uncomfortable situation, with many Army decisions delayed.

Two key questions some Senators had hoped to resolve at today's hearing were:

Did General Lavelle act alone? If he did, why did the other senior officers in the Seventh Air Force go along with obviously unauthorized activities?

Sergeant Gave First World

Lonnie D. Franks, the 23-year-old intelligence sergeant who first reported the Lavelle raids, has stated that more than 200 men, most of them officers, were involved in the daily falsification of records in connection with the "protective reaction" strikes.

But Sergeant Franks also said that such activity began on Jan. 25, 1972, more than two months after the unauthorized strikes started. Before that, he said in an interview with The New York Times last week, all reports of bombing missions were routinely forwarded to high commands.

Even more significant, in the view of some senators, is the fact that—officially, at least—it was not until a letter of complaint was written by a young Sergeant stationed in Thailand that high Pentagon officers became aware of the Lavelle missions.