

AF Staff Chief's Lavelle Testimony

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General John D. Ryan, the Air Force chief of staff, yesterday defended his decision to punish only Major General John D. Lavelle for the unauthorized bombing of North Vietnam, but told Senate investigators that he "couldn't guarantee that it wouldn't happen again."

Ryan's testimony was relayed to the press by Senator John C. Stennis (Dem.-Miss.), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, after the general's lengthy closed-door appearance.

Lavelle was relieved by Ryan as commander of the Seventh Air Force last March for allegedly ordering the raids and falsifying official reports about them.

SHARP

Stennis, in his sharpest public statement since the hearings began a week ago, said that the testimony thus far made it "difficult" for him to understand why "something didn't happen that would have brought this out."

Stennis said Ryan's testimony indicated that the officer was "genuinely concerned" about the unauthorized attacks, but he also noted that Ryan testified that "he couldn't guarantee that it wouldn't happen again."

"Something must be done to follow through so that

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there couldn't be any disobedience, any more failure to follow the rules of engagement, without being noticed," Stennis told newsmen.

TESTIMONY

Stennis said Ryan had testified that he knew of no orders or any communications from civilian or military officials that would have given Lavelle reason to believe he had permission between November, 1971, and March, 1972 for the more than 20 unauthorized raids that took place.

The testimony by Ryan made it clear, the senator added, "that there'd been no changes by noddings of the head, or suggestions in any way by anyone in authority." Lavelle testified before the committee last week that he had been under increasing pressure from high authorities to be "more aggressive" during the months in question.

But Stennis also indicated that whatever had been told during the more than two hours of testimony yesterday led him to believe the Air Force had ultimate responsibility for learning

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about the unauthorized raids, not the military headquarters in Saigon.

ABRAMS

The military commander in Saigon at the time of the Lavelle missions was General Creighton W. Abrams, whose pending nomination as Army chief of staff has been held up by the hearings. Lavelle has testified that he believed both Abrams and Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, knew about and approved what he was doing. The two officers have denied any knowledge of the unauthorized missions.

Asked if Abrams bore the responsibility for failing to detect the Lavelle missions, Stennis responded. "I wouldn't say I thought he did. It seems to me that the proximity of things was more in the Air Force's knowledge — they were the more immediate party concerned."

"I wouldn't say they lost control," Stennis added, "but things were going on in the Air Force that they said they didn't know anything about."

PRAISE

A committee source said later that Ryan's testimony on the issue of command and control was "not overly impressive," but Stennis publicly praised his testimony as "credible and forthright."

Ryan also was reported to have been asked a number of questions about his decision to punish only Lavelle in connection with the incident.

Committee testimony last week indicated that hundreds of pilots and officers participated in almost daily falsification of secret reports. The officers, according to the testimony, included Colonel Charles Gabriel, commander of the 432nd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing at Udorn Air Base in Thailand, which conducted the unauthorized missions, and his direct superior, Major General Alton D. Slay, who was director of operations for the seventh air Force.

RESPONSIBILITY

One senator said Ryan testified that he decided that only Lavelle — and no other officer beneath him in the chain of command — was responsible for the falsification of orders. Ryan was reported to have said that the lower-ranking officers had no way of knowing whether or not Lavelle's orders stemmed from higher authorities.

"It was just all unsatisfactory," the senator said of that portion of Ryan's testimony. "Hell, maybe no one is responsible," the senator added with obvious disgust.

Stennis said two other members of the committee plan to fly to Denver today to question Slay, who is recuperating from minor surgery at Fitzsimmons Air Force Hospital.

Slay was named by witnesses last week as the officer who directly ordered that combat reports be falsified. His testimony is expected to be critical to Lavelle's contention that higher commands were aware of what was going on.