VELOCITY
SPEED WITH DIRECTION

THE PROFESSIONAL CAREER
OF GEN JEROME F. O'MALLEY

Aloysius G. Casey and Patrick A. Casey
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Speed with Direction
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Chapter 10

Combat Operations in North Vietnam

Jerry O’Malley entered combat in Vietnam in 1971 when the war was a raging political issue. His one year of combat service, leading reconnaissance missions into North Vietnam, catapulted him into one of the most controversial issues in US Air Force history. This would be one of the most disconcerting events of Jerry O’Malley’s Air Force career.

Pres. Richard Nixon had narrowly defeated Hubert Humphrey in the 1968 election in part on a promise to end the war. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird devised a program of Vietnamization that envisioned training the South Vietnamese to protect themselves, while the United States systematically reduced its force levels. The ultimate objective was to train and equip the South Vietnamese so they could prevent Communist invasion, thereby enabling the United States to pull out of Vietnam. A great concern of President Nixon during the Cold War pressures was that his administration did not appear to be defaulting on an American ally.

The Department of Defense (DOD) was proclaiming to the American public that Vietnamization was a success. In support of his claims of success, the US secretary of defense pointed to the significant force reduction of American soldiers. In 1968, 545,000 American soldiers were stationed in Vietnam, but by 1971 that force had been reduced to 64,500. The undisclosed reality, however, was that the force reduction was only possible because of a massive increase in American airpower. The troop ceiling statistic published by the DOD included only those soldiers on the ground in South Vietnam. It did not include the thousands of Air Force and Navy personnel carrying out airborne attacks in South Vietnam, Laos, North Vietnam, and Cambodia. The dramatic increase in bombing missions
buttressed the false impression that the South Vietnamese could keep the North Vietnamese at bay as the American soldiers were sent home.

Col Charles A. Gabriel assumed command of the 432d TRW on 29 October 1971 and picked Col Jerry O’Malley as his vice-commander. Colonels Gabriel and O’Malley led a major element of the US airpower then operating in Southeast Asia. The 432d TRW had over 4,000 people, including approximately 500 officers, 600 civilians, and 3,000 Airmen. Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base was the most northerly location of US fighters in Southeast Asia. The sheer number of landings at this fighter base in August 1971 was 193,466—statistically the busiest single runway in the world. It had proximity to Laos and the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the principal channel for the enemy to transport people and materiel from North Vietnam to South Vietnam. A wartime map of the operational area of the 432d TRW details the combat zone. Figure 36 outlines wing operations.

Colonels Gabriel and O’Malley had complementary styles of management. Gabriel was the strong, stoic persona. O’Malley was articulate, and he radiated competence and professionalism. O’Malley was the detail man, and Gabriel was the authority figure.

The overall American military commander in Vietnam was Army four-star general Creighton T. Abrams. The responsibility of the air war was delegated to Air Force four-star general John D. Lavelle. General Lavelle operated out of the command center of the Seventh Air Force at Ton Son Nhut, Vietnam. The Seventh Air Force operationally controlled all fighter and bomber aircraft in Vietnam. As General Lavelle’s operations officer, Maj Gen Alton D. Slay implemented that control (fig. 37). The Seventh Air Force commanded the air war through orders to multiple wings, including the 432d TRW led by Colonels Gabriel and O’Malley. Table 1 outlines a simplified chain of command.
Figure 36. Wartime map of the 432d wing operations area. (Reprinted from History, 432d TRW, January–March 1972.)
Table 1. Seventh Air Force chain of command

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commander</td>
<td>Pres. Richard M. Nixon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secretary of Defense</td>
<td>Melvin Laird</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint Chiefs of Staff</td>
<td>Chairman – Adm. Thomas H. Moorer (Air Force member) Gen John Ryan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) commander</td>
<td>Amb. Ellsworth Bunker Gen Creighton T. Abrams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MACV deputy for Air (Seventh Air Force commander)</td>
<td>Gen John D. Lavelle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh Air Force director of operations</td>
<td>Maj Gen Alton D. Slay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>432d wing commander</td>
<td>Col Charles A. Gabriel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>432d vice-commander</td>
<td>Col Jerome F. O’Malley</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Figure 37. General Lavelle assumes command of the Seventh Air Force from General Slay. (Reprinted with permission from Air Force Magazine.)

The stated political objective of the military action was, in theory, to protect South Vietnam from invasion by North Vietnam. It was sometimes referred to as a police action as opposed to a war since the military objective did not include defeating the North Vietnamese. The objective was to keep the North Vietnamese from imposing their will on the South Vietnamese.

The Johnson administration suspended bombing in North Vietnam on 1 November 1968 to induce the North Vietnamese to come to the negotiating table. The unilateral American suspension of bombing in North Vietnam created a safe haven to which the enemy retreated after attacks. The issue in which Gabriel and O’Malley became involved arose from the rules of engagement (ROE). The ROEs specified guidelines within which aircrews were required to operate in the prosecution of the war. They were consolidated at Seventh Air Force into a manual of operating authorities and disseminated to the flying units. Aircrews received briefings on the ROEs before each mission. A highly stringent set of rules applied to missions in North Vietnam.

The key ROEs prohibited American warplanes from firing at targets in North Vietnam unless the American aircraft were either “fired” at or “activated against” by enemy radar. At the time the rule was written (June 1968), surface-to-air missiles (SAM) were controlled at the missile site only. US aircraft that were locked onto by radar would receive an alarm in the cockpit to provide warning time to the pilot to enable the pilot to take evasive action. If the American aircraft were fired upon or activated against, they were then permitted to execute a protective-reaction strike. The American aircraft were permitted to “protect” themselves by responding to the enemy reaction. The North Vietnamese exploited this self-imposed US restriction to the fullest. The enemy massed large arsenals of weapons and built several fighter bases close enough to launch on US bombers and gunships flying in northern South Vietnam. The rule never induced the North Vietnamese to negotiate.

This limitation became more and more hazardous to US flyers. In 1968 the enemy had limited ability to track American aircraft. By late 1971 the enemy had integrated its radar systems. The search (early warning) radars that in 1968 gave only general information of American planes traveling into North Vietnamese airspace were now interconnected and fed much more
specific targeting data regarding US aircraft traveling into North Vietnam.\textsuperscript{13} Thus, the enemy early warning radar that was previously not considered an immediate threat to US aircraft was now an instrument of grave danger to US flyers. Interconnecting enemy radars significantly reduced the time necessary for a targeting fix. Consequently, aircrews attempting to execute missions with cumbersome ROEs were exposed to an enemy technology leap that exposed them to SAM or antiaircraft artillery (AAA) attacks virtually without warning. This hazard was compounded by the comparison of the maximum velocity of a SAM, Mach 3.5, to the maximum velocity of an F-4, Mach 2.17.

The enemy’s response to the gradual withdrawal of American forces was to significantly build up its forces and materiel in the safe harbor of North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese accumulated thousands of additional SAMs and antiaircraft batteries.\textsuperscript{14} For example, in the three months before that—July to September—only two SAMs were fired.\textsuperscript{15} By comparison, only two SAMs were fired the previous three months, July to September 1971.\textsuperscript{16} The only rebuttal to the unmitigated North Vietnamese buildup was the air combat missions into North Vietnam. In the winter of 1971–72, the air war became the focal point of the Vietnam War.

Within the 432d TRW, two strike squadrons were equipped with close to 25 F-4D fighter-bombers each. These aircraft held the capability to deliver napalm and cluster, regular, or laser-designated bombs on assigned targets. They also could be equipped to fire air-to-air missiles that were either radar-guided or infrared seekers to target enemy aircraft.\textsuperscript{17} The third squadron of the 432d TRW, with which O’Malley most frequently flew, was the tactical reconnaissance squadron. The reconnaissance squadron flew RF-4Cs that were equipped with highly sensitive cameras and other sensors to collect topographical and intelligence about enemy forces.

As vice-commander, O’Malley helped to plan air operations and to personally lead missions. Many of these missions were high risk and critical. By 1971 North Vietnam served as a sanctuary for enemy aircraft; it was heavily defended with antiaircraft weapons: SAMs, antiaircraft batteries, MiG fighters, and sophisticated radars.
The RF-4C had a two-man crew: a pilot (aircraft commander) and a navigator (weapons systems operator). The “R” in RF-4C meant reconnaissance, and the “F” stood for fighter; the “4” was the sequence of the development of fighter aircraft, and “C” was the model (fig. 38). Equipped with sensitive cameras to conduct surveillance of military targets on the ground, the RF-4C provided critical intelligence for targeting troop movements, existence of radars, location of tanks, and increase of antiaircraft batteries. When crews were completed, film was developed, and the target-selection process started again.

When flying combat missions, personal items, rings, name-tags, and other identification were left behind. Flyers carried military identification cards and the normal array of life-support equipment. This included a revolver, 20 to 30 rounds of ball, and/or tracer ammunition.

Reconnaissance tactics required that the RF-4C be flown straight and level over its objective to get a clear image for targeting photos. Photo distortion could be created by fluctuations in altitude. Consequently, pilots were required to adhere to preordained altitudes. The inherent risk of the RF-4C was the need to fly unarmed, level, and directly over enemy targets.
To counter this obvious risk, reconnaissance aircraft were always escorted by F-4D fighter-bombers. The fighter-bombers protected the reconnaissance aircraft by expelling ordnance on such active threats as radar-tracking flights, guns firing, or SAM sites.

In the eight months that Colonel O’Malley was in Vietnam, he flew an ambitious 115 combat sorties. Seventy of the missions were in the RF-4C reconnaissance aircraft, and 45 were in the F-4D fighter bomber.

In the fall of 1971, the 432d TRW suffered several attacks from AAA fire in North Vietnam. On 2 September 1971, an F-4D was on its second pass over the target when it was hit. Immediately, it went into a violent rapid roll at low altitude, and both Airmen bailed out. Air America later was able to pick up the crew members by helicopter, and they were hospitalized.

A week later, on 9 September 1971, another plane in the 432d was hit and went down. This time though, crew members could not be retrieved. They were never found. Also in September four additional planes were hit by ground fire but were able to return to the base.

The intensity of the North’s air defenses continued to increase in October. On 7 October 1971, an RF-4C from the 432d was flying at 7,000 feet above ground level when the crew felt a jolt aft of the rear cockpit. Moments later the aircraft began to have violent, uncontrolled flight. The aircraft broke out of the clouds, and the pilot made several unsuccessful attempts to regain control. When the pilot gave the command, the navigator ejected successfully at approximately 1,000 feet. The pilot never got out and was found by Army Special Forces still tied into his ejection seat within the fuselage. The crash site was located near an active Vietcong trail, and Special Forces in the vicinity killed five enemy troops in the immediate area. An attempt to examine the wreckage from the ground was considered hazardous. Special Forces blew up the nose section of the aircraft before departing. It was clearly becoming a more hazardous environment in North Vietnam.

Friction between planners in Washington and commanders in the theater of combat was apparent through the top secret messages exchanged between Vietnam and the Pentagon. Combat commanders realized that it was increasingly vital to give
discretion to their forces to defend themselves by attacking high-priority targets (SAM sites and MiG airfields) instead of waiting for a SAM site to launch a missile or a MiG to attack. Military chiefs in Washington were frequently informed of the “emphasis the enemy has placed on integrating [its] air defense system.” Washington urged commanders in Vietnam to “take all possible measures to protect our aircrews.” \(^\text{37}\) Yet Washington superiors limited the measures available. Communiqués from General Abrams in Vietnam to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) in Washington requested authority “to destroy the MiG threat and recommended that immediate authority be granted to conduct strikes against Bai Thuong, Quan Lang, and Vinh Airfields.” \(^\text{38}\) These requests were repeatedly denied by the JCS. \(^\text{39}\)

However, on 8 November 1971, when chairman of the JCS (CJCS), Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, traveled to Vietnam, he immediately appreciated the danger presented by the dramatic increase in SAM attacks. Admiral Moorer responded to a request from General Lavelle to attack a MiG airfield in the North: “I encouraged him to go ahead and make the mission as long as he coordinated with the Navy.” Admiral Moorer personally cleared the mission. \(^\text{40}\) Four strike F-4D aircraft accompanied one RF-4C as they left Udorn and flew to North Vietnam on 8 November 1971. \(^\text{41}\) Lieutenant Colonel Kittinger led the strike mission, saying, “We were given just a few minutes to assemble the aircraft and crews for the mission.” \(^\text{42}\) The US strike aircraft flew to the North Vietnamese airfield at Dong Hoi and released ordnance on the airfield target. The RF-4C photographed the area to get bomb-damage information. Before leaving Vietnam the next day, Admiral Moorer reviewed the results of the mission and the bombed airfield. \(^\text{43}\) The bomb mission results also were sent to the JCS in Washington where Gen John Ryan, chief of the Air Force, critiqued the mission results. No member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff questioned whether General Lavelle had appropriate authority to order these preplanned strikes. Instead of questioning the fact that the mission was preplanned, the JCS suggested more careful planning. \(^\text{44}\)

A couple of weeks later, on 21 November 1971, the commanders in Vietnam attempted to use Admiral Moorer’s November 7–8 endorsement of preplanned strikes as an accepted precedent in an effort to obtain authority to strike airfields
again. The need for this request was prompted by a MiG attack on a B-52. Past strikes on North Vietnam airfields south of 20 degrees north were protective-reaction strikes conducted in accordance with current air operating authorities. Three such protective-reaction strikes were conducted against Dong Hoi and Vinh Airfields on 8 November 1971 and on Quan Lang on 9 November 1971. That MiGs continued to deploy to these airfields in spite of the recent strikes provided strong evidence that the existing authorities were inadequate to deter the enemy from continuing attacks against the American B-52 aircraft. A strike against all four airfields south of 20 degrees north (latitude) in North Vietnam would clearly demonstrate a US resolve to protect aircrews and aircraft in spite of a US force drawdown.  

The Pentagon again provided no additional authority. The JCS reacted by ordering a conference to develop procedures to minimize the risk to B-52s. Meetings were held in Honolulu, Hawaii, on 4 and 5 December 1971. The JSC issued instructions to theater commanders to be more aggressive. The JCS representative, Lt Gen John Vogt, chastised combat commanders for not making full use of the authorities. The JCS instructed commanders to increase the number of escort aircraft from two to four, eight, or 16 to ensure maximum damage to the enemy on protective-reaction strikes. Critical to the field commander’s concern for the appropriate authority was the unambiguous verbal assurance that they could expect full backing from the JCS. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird reaffirmed this support on a visit to South Vietnam in December 1971. Laird specifically suggested to General Lavelle a liberal interpretation of the ROEs and that he would be backed up (fig. 39).

The US military knew by December 1971 that the North Vietnamese were preparing for a massive attack on the South. O’Malley’s wing was attempting to pressure the North Vietnamese by flying an average of over 200 combat sorties a week. MiG warnings increased during this time to a level greater than any corresponding time since 1968. Gunships were being fired upon more frequently. The wing commander, Colonel Gabriel, sent the following message to Seventh Air Force: “With the increased aggressiveness of enemy MiG forces, it has become in-
increasingly evident that recently arrived [pilots] are not adequately trained in the air-to-air mission before their arrival.”

A rotation of new and inexperienced pilots, combined with a
dramatic increase in enemy fighters, created alarm in the 432d. This was compounded by enemy tactics. At night, when most enemy logistical movements occurred, enemy gunners would hose the sky with antiaircraft fire. Based upon the amount of AAA fire, 432d TRW crews were flying into the most heavily defended airspace since World War II in Berlin. By January 1972, AAA sites were estimated at 194,200. MiG and SAM alerts in the 432d TRW alone, from January to March, totaled 1,197.

The Nixon administration was conducting secret negotiations with the North Vietnamese during the fall of 1971. In November 1971, the United States sent a note offering to meet with any member of the Hanoi leadership to end the war on a basis just for all parties. The North Vietnamese did not reply. Out of frustration, the Nixon administration response was to authorize a period of limited-duration bombing. The condition of requiring protective-reaction strikes or restraining attacks until they saw enemy reaction was officially and publicly suspended from 26 to 30 December 1971. During this five-day period, 245 aircraft flew 1,100 sorties. On 29 December 1971 O’Malley led a mission of 12 F-4D tactical fighters against one of the most heavily defended airfields in North Vietnam. For this mission, he was awarded his ninth oak leaf cluster to the Air Medal.

A disastrous day hit the 432d TRW on 18 December 1971 when three aircraft were shot down in one day. At 5:50 AM on 18 December 1971, an F-4D from the 432d TRW, identified as Falcon 66 was assigned to protect against the MiG threat. After topping off with a tanker, Falcon 66 headed for high orbit. Immediately thereafter, a radio transmission was heard: “Falcon 66 is down, position unknown, have two good chutes.” No further transmissions were heard. Despite a rescue effort, the crew was never recovered.

At the same time, Falcon 75 was diverted to chase MiG fighter bandits. They were unable to close, even though they punched their external tanks and hit Mach 1.6. Running low on fuel, Falcon 75 turned to return to the base when three MiGs appeared on their tail. After two hard turns, the bandits disengaged. Running out of fuel, the crew of Falcon 75 decided to go feet wet into the gulf so the Navy could pick them up. They didn’t make it. Falcon 74 began to have instrument trouble and was calling a tanker to refuel when it took evasive actions.
to avoid a SAM launch. Though the crew avoided the SAM, the aircraft flamed out, and the crew ejected. After a night on the ground with enemy forces nearby, however, both crew members were recovered.

On 19 December 1971, Falcon 82 and Falcon 83 departed Udorn at 0923 hours to strike several antiaircraft gun positions. While they were orbiting seeking target information, from their airborne forward air controller (FAC), 37 mm antiaircraft rounds were fired at them. Falcon 82 was transmitting but stopped abruptly. When Falcon 83 reacquired Falcon 82, the aircraft was enveloped in flames and headed for the ground. Falcon 82 impacted within seconds. No chutes were observed nor were any beeper signals received. The crew did not survive.

On 5 January 1972, a strike in North Vietnam again raised the issue of authority to execute preplanned protective-reaction strikes. Located at Moc Chau, North Vietnam, was a radar site that controlled MiG aircraft. The radar was a major threat, as it provided current information on the slower-moving American gunships. After a briefing, General Abrams authorized a preplanned strike. Air-to-surface missiles hit the Moc Chau radar on the night of 5 January, completely disabling the radar. The JCS sent a message from Washington saying that while they were sympathetic with conducting preplanned strikes, the raids should not be conducted unless the JCS could get approval from higher authority.

On 8 January 1972, wing vice-commander Colonel O’Malley led a strike near Tchepone, Laos. Tchepone was a main terminal on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and was notorious for its concentration of antiaircraft batteries and mobile SAMs. O’Malley was able to take the high-priority photoreconnaissance needed over another target area blanketed with SAMs and AAA. He was later awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for this mission.

American aircraft losses continued to mount. On 17 January, the enemy hit two AC-130 gunships, each carrying more than 10 crew members. Even though there was no loss of life, O’Malley’s unit lost an RF-4C on 20 January 1972. The pilot started a normal maneuver; at 8,000 feet antiaircraft fire struck the aircraft, causing the stick to go dead and the plane to enter
a negative–G spin. The pilot hit the eject function, and both crew members bailed out. They were later recovered by Air America.\(^82\)

Colonel O’Malley had firsthand experience with netted radars setting up a SAM attack of US aircraft. On a protective-reaction mission over the North, O’Malley was flying in formation just ahead of legendary fighter pilot Lt Col Joseph Kittinger. A SAM missile was launched and burning directly towards the belly of O’Malley’s aircraft. O’Malley apparently did not receive any electronic warning from his aircraft that the SAM had locked on to his aircraft, thus he received no warning that the SAM had been launched toward him. The missile was traveling at three times the speed of sound and carrying 430 pounds of high explosives. Colonel Kittinger radioed O’Malley to dive. At just the right moment, Kittinger instructed O’Malley to break right.\(^83\) O’Malley scrupulously followed Kittinger’s rapid guidance and defeated the SAM.\(^84\) The maneuver demonstrated O’Malley’s high confidence in Kittinger.

MiGs previously had launched from Dong Hoi Airfield and attacked B-52s.\(^85\) On 23 January 1972, General Lavelle targeted a MiG at this airfield.\(^86\) The strike on Dong Hoi was successful; however, a miscue within the Seventh Air Force headquarters command post caused some misunderstandings. During the flight back, the pilot reported over the radio, “Expend all ordnance, the mission was successful, no enemy reaction.”\(^87\) General Lavelle, sensitive to the need for enemy reaction to properly justify each strike, snapped at the director of operations, Major General Slay, saying, “We can’t report no reaction.”\(^88\) Lavelle instructed Slay, “He must report reaction.”\(^89\) Although Lavelle intended the pilot to report hostile radar as the basis to report enemy reaction, he did not take the time to explain himself.\(^90\) Lavelle’s order was interpreted literally and passed down through the chain of command. General Slay told Gabriel and O’Malley\(^91\) that “you must assume by General Lavelle’s direction that you have reaction and hopefully you can see the bursts and tell us what it is.”\(^92\) Major General Slay talked about this definition of reaction directly with Colonel Gabriel on two separate occasions.\(^93\) General Lavelle personally told Colonel Gabriel that illumination by enemy radar was
reaction under his view of the ROEs. Gabriel instructed Colonel O'Malley accordingly.

All the preflight briefings conducted by O'Malley were classified as secret or top secret. Dutifully following the orders from the Seventh Air Force, O'Malley ordered crew members to record that reaction regardless of whether it had been received from the enemy. Out of thousands of sorties, nearly every mission flown over North Vietnam caused AAA, SAM, or MiG reaction. Only an infinitesimal number of missions failed to create observable enemy reaction. But on the few that did not, these instructions caused crews to report receipt of hostile enemy fire when none was observed.

General Lavelle earnestly believed that recording hostile radar complied with the ROEs since the netted enemy radar constituted activation against US aircraft. However, he never took the time to explain to Major General Slay, director of operations, how he wanted the reaction documented.

O'Malley was aware of General Lavelle's opinion that illumination by enemy radar was de facto enemy reaction. O'Malley assumed that the Seventh Air Force was conducting these preplanned protective-reaction strikes based upon higher authority.

Colonel Gabriel recognized that there was a valid military purpose for the strikes since every target was a valid military objective. Colonels Gabriel and O'Malley recognized that wartime environments required secrets. It was not unusual to make false denials to preserve that secrecy. Concealing the absence of reaction would not have been inconsistent with acceptable military tactics.

At times post-mission reporting on the few missions on which no reaction was detected became a complex and cumbersome process for the 432d TRW. The customary debrief of the aircrew created consternation when crews were required to report enemy reaction when there had been none.

On 25 January 1972, a sergeant attached to the current intelligence division was tasked to debrief the crew that had just returned from a mission. When he asked the crew if they had received hostile fire, a crew member said, "No, we didn't, but we have to report that we did." The sergeant objected to the reporting of false information, but two superiors told him that orders were to report fictional enemy reaction. Although
disturbed with the response of superiors, the sergeant returned to the crew and complied with the order by finishing with a bogus description of 23 mm ground fire.\textsuperscript{104} Had the sergeant sought advice from the next highest supervisor in the chain of command, he would have been directed to the 432d TRW, Colonel O’Malley, wing inspector general (IG).\textsuperscript{105} Regrettably, the sergeant did not pursue his concern beyond the captain who was his immediate supervisor.\textsuperscript{106} As the wing IG, Colonel O’Malley would have had the authority to bring the issue directly to General Lavelle, who had no idea at the time that his impassioned order was causing a chain reaction with the ultimate result of inaccurate reporting. A month later, the sergeant was confronted with the situation again. Instead of speaking to the IG about it, he wrote to his US senator in Washington. This letter would ricochet around Washington, resulting in military inquiries, congressional hearings, and demotion of the Seventh Air Force commander.

The issue of authority to bomb in North Vietnam without the need for enemy reaction was heating up at the highest levels of government. In the Oval Office of the White House, on Thursday, 3 February 1972, at 10:53 AM, US ambassador to Vietnam, Ellsworth F. Bunker, met with the president and the National Security Council (NSC) (fig. 40).

The ambassador was seeking great strike authority devoid of the precondition of enemy reaction. He explained to the president that it was too dangerous for US crews. Ambassador Bunker pressed the president, saying, “If we could get authority to bomb these SAM sites. . . .”\textsuperscript{107} “Now the authority is for bomb when, when they fire at aircraft” or “when the radar’s locked on.”\textsuperscript{108} Explaining the vulnerability of American flyers, he continued, “The problem is, that that’s, that’s late to start attacking.” National Security Advisor Dr. Henry A. Kissinger suggested that the president authorize US forces to hit any SAM that ever targeted a US aircraft. Dr. Kissinger asked the president to say that “Abrams can hit any SAM site that has locked on even if it is no longer locked on.”\textsuperscript{109}

After a lengthy discussion, President Nixon instructed Ambassador Bunker to relay the following presidential orders to General Abrams in Vietnam: “He [General Abrams] is to call all of these things protective-reaction. Just call it protective reaction.
Alright? Because preventive reaction. I am simply saying that we expand the definition of protective reaction to mean preventive reaction where a SAM site is concerned. And I think that, that, to be sure that anything that goes down there, just call it ordinary protective reaction. Who knows or would say they didn’t fire?"\textsuperscript{110}

Aware of the inevitable hostile public reaction from an expansion of the ROEs, Dr. Kissinger recommended to the president that the change of the ROEs be kept secret: “Now, could they stop from blabbing it at every bloody briefing?” The president agreed, saying, “I want you to tell Abrams when you get back that he is to tell the military not to put out extensive briefings with regard to our military activities from now on until we get back from China.”\textsuperscript{111} (Ultimately the American public would never be informed of this presidential change in the rules of engagement.) Figure 41 captures a meeting between President Nixon and Dr. Kissinger.

The president agreed: “You’ve worked out the authority. He can hit SAM sites period. Okay? But he is not to do it with a public declaration. Alright? And if it does get out, to the extent it does, he says it’s a protective-reaction strike. He is to describe

\textbf{Figure 40. Ellsworth Bunker, advisor to Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson.} (Reprinted with permission from Wikimedia Commons.)
it as protective reaction. And he doesn’t have to spell it out, they struck, that’s all he needs is a SAM site, a protective-reaction strike against a SAM site.” The president concluded, “Do it, but don’t say anything.”

Because of the president’s actions, the US military now had authorization from the highest level to strike without the precondition of enemy reaction. Yet, operating forces were not permitted to disclose an official change in the ROEs. This conundrum ultimately would pit planners in Washington against commanders in Vietnam. The chairman of the JCS confirmed the order of secrecy on 7 February 1972 in a top secret communication. In a message to the commanders in Vietnam, Admiral Moorer said, “To help minimize the possibility that the North Vietnamese [will] build a military capability within the DMZ for sudden strikes across the PMDL, you are authorized to conduct tactical air strikes into the northern portion of the DMZ whenever US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV) determines the North Vietnamese are using the area in preparation for an attack southward. Public Affairs
Guidance. No public announcement of any kind will be made with regard to these actions.\textsuperscript{114} The White House and the JCS were working together to conceal the rule change, which undoubtedly would be met with significant political opposition. The message appears below (fig. 42).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Joint Chief of Staff message from Admiral Moorer to McCain advising him not to release any information. (Reprinted from Joint Chiefs of Staff messages as listed in the appendix.) (Note: This message appears in its entirety in the appendix.)}
\end{figure}
A second round of publicly acknowledged limited-duration strikes were executed on 16 February 1972.\textsuperscript{115} Seventh Air Force issued orders suspending the need to have enemy reaction before striking.\textsuperscript{116} On this 16 February mission, 14 escort fighter-bombers accompanied a reconnaissance aircraft. Nine of the bombers expended ordnance.\textsuperscript{117} The targets were 130 mm and 122 mm heavy guns located just north of the DMZ.\textsuperscript{118} The first wave of American aircraft struck the defending SAMs sites and then proceeded to hit the heavy guns.\textsuperscript{119}

The 432d TRW suffered losses. In this February raid, Falcon 74 was the lead aircraft in a flight of three fighter aircraft over North Vietnam when the cockpit alarms sounded to indicate a SAM attack.\textsuperscript{120} A SAM was launched: it went high, and three more SAMs were launched.\textsuperscript{121} Falcon 75 called “SAM,” but the Falcon 74 did not take expected evasive action and was struck. Since the SAM approached from directly below the aircraft, there was no way of it being seen from the cockpit. The crew was lost.\textsuperscript{122} The number of preplanned protective-reaction strikes increased considerably in February 1972 with strikes on 18, 21, and 22 February.\textsuperscript{123}

The media did not question the use of the term \textit{protective-reaction} strike. On 24 February 1971, the \textit{New York Times} reported from Saigon, South Vietnam, that the US Military Assistance Command to Vietnam (MACV) “disclosed yesterday that 50 American fighter-bombers flew ‘protective-reaction strikes’ against missile and antiaircraft artillery positions in North Vietnam last weekend.”\textsuperscript{124} The MACV spokesman said that news of the raids last weekend had been withheld until yesterday “mostly for security reasons.”\textsuperscript{125} The US command said that the plane instruments told the pilots that radar-controlled guns on the ground were tracking them preparatory to firing.\textsuperscript{126} The raids had the sole objective of striking positions in North Vietnam that previously had fired on American planes.\textsuperscript{127}

On 25 February 1972, the sergeant sent his critical letter about issuing false reports: “I and other members of the 432nd TRW have been falsifying classified reports for missions into North Viet Nam. That is, we have been reporting that our planes have received hostile reactions such as AAA and SAM firings whether they have or not. We have also been falsifying targets
struck and bomb damage assessments. I have been informed by my immediate OIC, Captain Murray, that authorization for this falsification of classified documents comes from secure telephone communications from the Deputy of Operations, 7th Air Force.”

On 25 February, the 432d TRW conducted three preplanned protective-reaction missions, utilizing 17 escort aircraft. The preplanned protective-reaction strikes went unabated until the arrival of the letter in Washington. Preplanned protective-reaction strikes occurred on 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8 March. On 8 March 1972, however, Senator Harold E. Hughes received the letter in Washington. The next day, Gen John Ryan dispatched an Air Force IG to Vietnam to investigate.

General Lavelle met with the IG and told him, “You never go over North Vietnam that that system isn’t activated against you” because the North Vietnamese radar system was totally netted. The discovery of false reports came as a surprise. However, as the person who gave the order “not to report ‘no reaction,’” General Lavelle stepped up and assumed full responsibility for the miscommunication within the Seventh Air Force. He said that “[M]y instructions were not clear and were subject to misinterpretation and, in retrospect, were apparently interpreted by my subordinates as an exhortation to report enemy fire when there was none. ‘Hostile action, enemy radar,’ would in my judgment, have been an accurate report.” General Lavelle remarked that “it happened in my command. . . . It was my fault.” As the issue exploded upon the national scene, his unwavering assumption of responsibility was to provide protection for the careers of all those officers below in the chain of command.

On 21 March 1972, Admiral Moorer sent an odd top secret message to the Seventh Air Force warning that “the increased number of protective-reaction strikes since 1 January 1972 has attracted a considerable amount of high-level interest here and is receiving increasing attention from the press.” In reality the number of strikes was not getting increased attention; however, Admiral Moorer had to communicate to those in Vietnam that the secret change in the ROEs could no longer be utilized. He proceeded to underscore the “extreme sensitivity” of this subject and requested that all crews be “thoroughly briefed
that current authority permits protective reaction to be taken only when enemy air defenses either fire at or [are] activated against friendly forces.”

On 23 March 1972, the IG’s report found that “some missions had not been flown in accordance with the ROEs and that there were irregularities in the operational reports.” General Lavelle was summoned to Washington immediately. He was instructed to go directly to the quarters of Gen John Ryan. The chief told General Lavelle that he had two options: he could then be given a new assignment in the grade of major general; or he could retire as a lieutenant general. General Lavelle wished to speak directly with the secretaries of the Air Force and DOD. The meeting concluded with an understanding that General Lavelle would meet with one of the secretaries. Lavelle spent the following week at the Pentagon, waiting for an audience with one of the secretaries, but neither the secretary of defense nor the secretary of Air Force could find the time to discuss the basis of his removal. Realizing he would not get to explain his position to the secretaries, General Lavelle agreed to retirement on 5 April 1972.

On 30 March 1972, the North Vietnamese poured over the DMZ in full force with its resources in a massive invasion by conventional forces. The South Vietnamese were losing ground rapidly and fighting for their lives. The niceties of protective reaction were promptly scuttled. On 7 April 1972, American forces received unrestricted authority to bomb in North Vietnam. During April 1972 the US forces would fly more than 700 heavy-bomber (B-52) missions over North Vietnam. Back in Washington, General Ryan released an Air Force statement, saying that General Lavelle was retiring for “personal and health reasons.” No mention was made by the Air Force of bombing without authority or of false reporting.

On 2 May 1972, Jerry O’Malley departed Vietnam for the United States to assume command of the top-rated 9th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing at Beale AFB, California. The command was a reward for a job well done in combat. Jerry had no understanding of the brewing national story.

On 15 May 1972, Cong. Otis Pike said the following on the floor of the House: “Mr. Speaker, it is time the Air Force and the
Pentagon told the American people the truth about the so-called retirement of a four-star general who was removed as the head of all of our Air Force operations in Vietnam.” The “Air Force put out a little story that the general had retired for ‘personal and health reasons.’ The Air Force did not tell the truth.”

General Ryan quickly tried to get ahead of the controversy with the release of a second statement saying that he “personally relieved Gen. John D. Lavelle as commander of the Seventh Air Force in Vietnam because of irregularities in the conduct of his command responsibilities.” Immediately the national press jumped into the fray. On 10 June 1972, New York Times investigative reporter Seymour M. Hersh revealed that General Lavelle was “demoted after ordering repeated and unauthorized bombing attacks of military targets in North Vietnam.” It was the first time in modern military history that a four-star general or admiral has been nominated to retire at a lower rank.

Undoubtedly, Colonel O’Malley was affected by this burgeoning political and military scandal. The New York Times and the Washington Post were national news sources. And, both papers were raising serious questions about military leadership. The criticism was being directed at missions that Jerry had led. “Is it possible for a battlefield commander to grossly violate operations orders and not be detected for three months?” is the question that was posed in the New York Times. This question had direct application to Colonel O’Malley. It was the first time in Jerry’s professional career that his integrity had been directly or publicly questioned. Friends of Jerry reported that he was greatly disturbed by what was happening. He was confounded by the suggestion that General Lavelle, a very experienced senior officer with an impeccable record, made such an egregious mistake. O’Malley was offended at the inference of improper actions. Congressional hearings were announced. Serious questions were to be explored regarding the primacy of civilian control of the military, the ROEs, false reporting, and the role of the wing IG. As the wing IG, the young colonel saw the tornado-like national story was taking a path directly towards him.

The House Armed Services Committee summoned Generals Lavelle and Ryan to testify on 12 June 1972. Instead of end-
ing the controversy, the House hearing sparked calls for a Senate inquiry. Senator William Proxmire called for courts-marshal for violating the principle of civilian control of the military.\textsuperscript{156} Other senators called for courts-marshal of junior officers who participated in preparing false reports. On 13 June Senator Hughes announced that he was planning to seek a full hearing on the matter before the Senate Armed Services Committee.\textsuperscript{157}

Behind the scenes at the White House, the political issue of General Lavelle’s treatment became a point for discussion. On Wednesday, 14 June, during an NSC in the Oval Office, the president said, “Well let me ask you about Lavelle. I was, I had it on my list this morning. I just don’t want him to be made a goat. We all know what protective reaction is, this [expletive deleted] Laird.”\textsuperscript{158} Dr. Kissinger blamed Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird for the removal of General Lavelle, “And he had him already removed by the time I even learned about it.”\textsuperscript{159} President Nixon said in an aggravated tone, “Why did he even remove him? You, you destroy a man’s career.”\textsuperscript{160} Dr. Kissinger did not answer the question, but rather diverted the conversation to the Russians. President Nixon interrupted and demanded, “Come back to Lavelle, I don’t want a man persecuted for doing what he thought was right. I just don’t want it done.”\textsuperscript{161} President Nixon insisted, “Can we do anything now to stop this [expletive deleted] thing, or? Why’d he even remove ‘em?”\textsuperscript{162} Dr. Kissinger said, “Lavelle was removed at the end of March.”\textsuperscript{163} The president asked incredulously, “Because of this?” Dr. Kissinger responded, “Yea.” President Nixon was furious, “Why the [expletive deleted] did this happen? A decision of that magnitude without? I should have known about it, Henry. Because this is something we told. You remember we, we, we told Laird to keep pressure on there in March.” President Nixon concluded: “Because Laird knows [expletive deleted] well, that a, I told him, I said it’s protective reaction. He winks, he says, ‘Oh I understand.’”\textsuperscript{164}

As each day passed public positions became polemical. Senator William Proxmire said on 15 June 1972: “I call on the Air Force to begin formal proceedings against Gen John D. Lavelle under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, leading to his court-martial. The time has come to determine wither [sic] a civilian or a military finger is on the trigger . . . .” Senator Proxmire publicly opined that General Lavelle “countermanded the rules laid down
by the President of the United States. He definitely violated the principles of civilian control of the military.” On 21 June 1972, 1st Lt Delbert R. Terrill Jr., a 1970 graduate of the Air Force Academy, preferred charges against General Lavelle for disobedience of orders for violation of the ROEs.\(^{165}\)

Dr. Kissinger and the president met in the White House on 26 June 1972 at 8:57 AM. The president had been advised not to become involved in the Senate inquiry. President Nixon said, “Frankly, Henry, I don’t feel right about our pushing him into this thing and then, and then giving him a bad rap! You see what I mean?” President Nixon closed the discussion, “I want to keep it away if I can, but I don’t want to hurt an innocent man.”\(^{166}\)

From 11 to 28 September 1972, the Senate Armed Services Committee conducted hearings.\(^{167}\) At issue were four concerns: (1) the retirement of John D. Lavelle as a lieutenant general; (2) inquiry into matters relating to authority for certain bombing missions in North Vietnam between November 1971 and March 1972; (3) the appointment of Creighton W. Abrams to Army chief of staff; and (4) the renewal of Adm Thomas H. Moorer’s position as CJCS.\(^{168}\) Witnesses included Col Charles A. Gabriel, 432d TRW wing commander; Maj Gen Alton D. Slay, Seventh Air Force, director of operations; Capt Douglas J. Murray, 432d TRW, branch chief of operational intelligence; and Sgt Lonnie Franks for intelligence serving the 432d TRW.

Colonel O’Malley spent two days with Senate staffers who were conducting interviews, but ultimately he was not called as a witness.\(^{169}\) Like Major General Slay and Colonel Gabriel, O’Malley felt that he had acted with integrity throughout his combat service.\(^{170}\) He felt so strongly of the propriety of his conduct while executing these missions into North Vietnam that he considered resigning his commission before acknowledging any wrongdoing.\(^{171}\)

In dramatic terms, General Lavelle testified that all his actions were authorized.\(^{172}\) He said, “All of my judgments were made as a field commander acutely mindful of my often-anguishing responsibility for the protection of the lives and safety of thousands of courageous young Airman in my command.”\(^{173}\) He rejected the assertion that he had exceeded his authority and said that he had applied the ROEs as he had been urged to by the JCS.\(^{174}\) He testified to his understanding that the enemy’s
netted radar system established “reaction,” which authorized force when the enemy radar “activated against” US aircraft.\textsuperscript{175} He explained that a commander is always ultimately responsible for the consequences of his orders.\textsuperscript{176} “The young men who made these reports were daily risking their lives for their country; they had been asked to fight an onerous war under morale-shattering handicaps which, as fighting men, they found difficult to understand. Under these circumstances I could not and would not recommend that they be disciplined and, as their commander, I have never suggested that the responsibility was other than my own.”\textsuperscript{177}

General Lavelle told the Senate Armed Services Committee that he conferred with General Abrams on all missions. He also consulted with the CJCS, Admiral Moorer, before ordering attacks on North Vietnamese airfields in November 1971.\textsuperscript{178} General Lavelle concluded: “Mr. Chairman, it is not pleasant to contemplate ending a long and distinguished military career with a catastrophic blemish on my record—a blemish for conscientiously doing the job I believe I was expected to do, and doing it with a minimum loss of American lives.”\textsuperscript{179}

The Senate suspended General Abrams’ nomination to be chief of staff of the US Army until the completion of the hearings. On 13 September 1972, General Abrams testified that General Lavelle “acted against the rules” of engagement.\textsuperscript{180} Generals Lavelle and Abrams who had worked well together in combat in Vietnam were now at odds on the crucial issue of authority to strike.

On 15 September 1972, the president met in the Oval Office with NSC advisor Brig Gen Alexander M. Haig. The president told General Haig, “We’ve got to be able to do something on this a, this Lavelle.” General Haig responded, “I don’t think so sir. I’ve been watchin’ it.” The president said, “We told Laird that if your guy Moorer isn’t sure if it is protective-reaction that to protect yourselves, we would back you to the hilt. The way I look at it.”\textsuperscript{181} The chief of staff of the Air Force, Gen John D. Ryan, was summoned before Congress on 19 September 1972.\textsuperscript{182} “I can unequivocally say I never gave him the authority,” General Ryan said when asked whether General Lavelle received encouragement or implied authority by superior officers to execute preplanned protective-reaction strikes.\textsuperscript{183}
The wall of testimony against General Lavelle was capped off on 29 September 1972 with the appearance of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Admiral Moorer’s renomination as chairman of JCS was put on hold by the Senate until the vote on the Lavelle issue. He testified that “at no time did I suggest to General Lavelle that we should preplan these strikes against these fields,” even though he was present for the Quan Lang strikes of 8 November 1971. “But I think where General Lavelle made his mistake was to give that direct order to release the weapons regardless of whether they were fired upon or not,” said Admiral Moorer.

On 6 October 1972, General Lavelle’s nomination to be retired as a lieutenant general was disapproved by the Senate Armed Services Committee in a 14–2 vote, recording the first time in modern military history that the Congress rejected a Pentagon recommendation on retirement for a general officer. Lavelle was retired at the rank of major general, a demotion of two stars.

Two weeks later in the Old Executive Office Building, President Nixon complained to General Haig, “All of this [expletive deleted] crap about Lavelle! And I feel sorry for the fellow, because you and I know we did tell him about ‘protective reaction’ being, very generally.” General Haig responded, “Very liberal.” President Nixon continued, “Ya, very liberally, very liberally. Remember I said it was, if they, if they hit there, go back and hit it again. Go back and do it right. You don’t have to wait till they fire before you fire back. Remember I told Laird that. And I meant it. Now Lavelle apparently knew that and received that at some time.”

Six years after these events, General Lavelle was interviewed at his home. “The Senate vote,” he said, “condemned me as being wrong.” “But,” he maintained, “I did what was right. I did what was authorized.”

On 3 November 1972, the complaining sergeant from the 432d preferred court-martial charges against Col Jerome F. O’Malley and 22 other Air Force officers. The list of charges included inter alia (1) violation of the rules of engagement; (2) false reporting; (3) wrongfully hazarding aircraft units by making unauthorized strikes; and (4) inducing others to disobey the rules of engagement. Eighteen days later the secretary of
the Air Force dismissed all charges. The secretary ultimately also threw out all charges filed against General Lavelle.\footnote{191}

From 7 November 1971 to 9 March 1972, more than 25,000 strike sorties were flown from Udorn.\footnote{192} Twenty-nine of those missions were later questioned by Congress and dubbed in the press as the “Lavelle Raids.”

Neither Colonel O’Malley, Colonel Gabriel, nor Major General Slay suffered any permanent negative consequences from these events. The three eventually became four-star generals.

\section*{Notes}


5. Ibid., 8, fig. 2.

6. Ibid., 70.

7. Charles Munroe to Aloysius G. Casey, e-mail, 12 September 2000.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. The technical term was \textit{Military Assistance Command Vietnam} (MACV).


12. Ibid., 34.


16. Ibid.

19. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 52.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 51.
30. Ibid., 53.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 47.
39. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
46. Ibid., Top Secret (special category), Admiral Moorer, to Admiral McCain, 28 November 1971.
49. Ibid., 12 September 1972, 50.
50. Ibid.
51. Kissinger, Ending the Vietnam War, 229.
53. Ibid., 47.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid., 21.
56. Ibid., 25.
59. Ibid.
60. Kissinger, Ending the Vietnam War, 229.
64. Ibid.
65. Falcon was the call sign for these fighters.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid., 55.
69. Ibid.
70. Ibid.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid.
74. Ibid., 56.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid.
78. Citation to Distinguished Flying Cross (First Oak Leaf Cluster), n.d., Department of the Air Force records.
79. Ibid.
82. Ibid.
83. Joe Kittinger to Aloysius G. Casey, e-mail, 3 February 2000.
84. Ibid.
86. Ibid., 7.
87. Ibid.
88. Ibid., 31.
92. Ibid., 290–7635.
94. Ibid. “Not only did I discuss this with Charlie on at least 2 occasions, he was actually told the same thing by General Lavelle in Saigon in my presence and in Bones Marshall’s presence,” recounted General Slay.
96. Ibid.
97. Slay to Lt Gen A. G. Casey, e-mail, 28 February 2006.
99. Ibid.
100. Ibid.
102. Ibid.
103. Ibid.
104. Ibid.
108. Ibid.
109. Ibid.
110. Ibid., 9:50–12:27 min.
111. Ibid.
112. Ibid.
113. Ibid.
117. Ibid., 281.
119. Ibid.
120. History, 432d TRW, January–March 1972, ii.
121. Ibid.
122. Ibid.
125. Ibid.
126. Ibid.
127. Ibid.
130. Ibid.
132. Ibid., 654.
133. Ibid.
134. Gordan A. Ginsberg, The Lavelle Case: Crists in Integrity, Air War College Study 5255 (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air War College, April 1974), 50.
137. Ibid., 3 March 1972.
139. Ibid.
140. Ibid.
143. Ibid., 83.
145. Ibid., 683.
148. Ibid., 8.
149. Ibid.
150. Ibid.
152. Ibid.
153. Ibid.


156. Ibid.

157. Hersh, “Reaction Strikes Called Cover-up.”

158. WHT, C-2240 RC-2; 14:21–26:33 min.

159. Ibid.

160. Ibid.

161. Ibid.

162. Ibid.

163. Ibid.

164. Ibid.


166. WHT, CD 742-5; 16:25–16:30.

167. Members of the Armed Services Committee included Senators Stuart Symington (MO); Henry Jackson (WA); Sam J. Ervin (NC); Thomas McIntyre (NH); Harry F. Byrd (VA); Harold E. Hughes (IO); Lloyd Bentsen (TX); Margaret Chase Smith (ME) Strom Thurmond (SC); John Tower (TX); Peter Dominick (CO); Barry Goldwater (AZ); Richard Schweiker (PA); and William Saxbe (OH). See Senate, *Nomination of John D. Lavelle, General Creighton W. Abrams, and Admiral John S. McCain*, 11–22 September 1972.


169. Al Caldwell to Aloysius G. Casey, e-mail, 18 December 2001.


171. Ibid.


183. Ibid., 247.
185. Ibid.
186. Ibid., 490.
188. WHT, President and A. Haig.
190. Ibid., 692.