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Westmoreland Aide Says He Doesn't Recall Briefing

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NEW YORK, Feb. 13—Gains B. Hawkins, a key witness for CBS, said today that he does not recall a briefing on May 19, 1967, when retired general William C. Westmoreland has said he told his immediate military superior about higher enemy numbers in Vietnam.

Hawkins, who was in charge of estimating enemy-troop numbers for Westmoreland's command in 1967, said he "may or may not" have prepared documents for the briefing, when Westmoreland said his immediate superior, Adm. U.S. Grant Sharp, was told of new data.

The session with Sharp is important to Westmoreland's claim that CBS libeled him in a 1982 documentary that accused the general of failing to tell his superiors of higher enemy-troop figures. Hawkins, who was in charge of the military "order of battle"—or enemy-troop estimates—for Westmoreland's command, said that "ordinarily" he would have been at such a briefing.

In his first day of cross-examination by Westmoreland lawyer David M. Dorsen, Hawkins said he remembers discussing the higher figures with Westmoreland only on two later occasions—May 28 and June 14, 1967. He testified Tuesday that the general told him at the time that the new enemy data was "politically unacceptable."

"The reason I recall these was because it was a sort of a traumatic experience," Hawkins said today. "I gave many other briefings, but I had no reason, I guess, to remember those [others]."

Hawkins, whose folksy stories and Mississippi colloquialisms drew repeated laughter from the courtroom, appeared to be a tough witness for Dorsen, who is to continue Tuesday trying to elicit testimony favorable to Westmoreland.

In a long conference with U.S. District Court Judge Pierre N. Leval before court today, Dorsen complained that Hawkins had been "prepared to an incredible extent" by CBS. Dorsen said that CBS co-defendant Samuel A. Adams or CBS attorneys had made about 10 trips to Hawkins' home in West Point, Miss., to help the nursing home administrator prepare for this case.

Hawkins, who uses words such as "boondocks" to describe the Vietnam countryside, seemed to undermine easily some of Dorsen's efforts to show the jury that Hawkins had been coached for his appearance on the stand.

"In preparation for your testimony today, were you shown any documents or written material . . . ?" Dorsen asked.

"I have been shown various documents. I read affidavits, I read depositions, I read cables, I read some memoranda that had been prepared," Hawkins began.

Then, cocking his head and squinting through his glasses, Hawkins asked: "Is this evil, sir?"

As it would on several occasions throughout the day, the courtroom filled with laughter.

Asked to read from a manuscript he had written in 1980 about his time in Vietnam, Hawkins read a description of one of the other key witnesses for CBS, retired major general Joseph A. McChristian, who testified last week that Westmoreland balked at sending a cable on higher enemy numbers to his superiors.

"I vaguely disliked him out of what paucity of knowledge I had concerning him," Hawkins read from his analysis of McChristian, one of his bosses in Vietnam. "He was a cold man . . . He was a relentlessly ambitious man. He had a passion to excel. He drove his staff and subordinates unmercifully. He drove himself with no more mercy; he was not a likable man."

Then Hawkins looked across the courtroom to Dorsen and added: "I think General McChristian might be proud of this statement."

Special correspondent John Kennedy contributed to this report.