

The Green Beret Mystery

Group Insists Chuyen Worked as 'Double Agent'

By KEYES BEECH

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SAIGON — One day early last June some interesting slides were flashed on the screen in the highly secret precincts of the B-57 detachment, U.S. Fifth Special Forces, at Nha Trang, a coastal city 200 miles northeast of here.

One picture showed the inside of a North Vietnamese base camp in Cambodia. To at least one of the American viewers, one of the faces in that picture looked familiar.

"That looks like Chuyen," he said. The speaker was Sgt. First Class Alvin L. Smith, 41, of Naples, Fla., and as it turned out he had started a course of disturbing events.

'Real Shocker'

Members of the B-57 detachment were appalled. The idea that Thai Fhac Chuyen, a 31-year-old North Vietnamese refugee who had worked as an interpreter-translator for Special Forces since 1965, was a double agent was a real shocker.

If true, it meant that the Communists had penetrated the innermost secrets of their operations. For the B-57 detachment was part of SOG (Special Operations Group).

SOG has its headquarters in Saigon on Cong Ly street in a building next door to the Italian embassy. Its specialty is transborder intelligence operations into neighboring Cambodia, Laos and North Vietnam. (Its excursions into North Vietnam have been discontinued so as not to irritate Hanoi.)

SOG's teams, usually composed of five men, including three Vietnamese and two Americans, are infiltrated into enemy territory by helicopter, by foot or both. Their job is to monitor enemy troop movements — taking pictures, collecting an odd prisoner if possible.

Chuyen was the leader of a team that had enemy troop-watching duty in Laos. But was Chuyen really the man in the

picture of the North Vietnamese base camp?

Was He Or Not?

The truth probably will never be known. CIA sources say he was not, that his citation was a case of mistaken identity. Special Forces officers, including the just-released Berets, swear that he was.

Special Forces used to work for CIA in South Vietnam, but that is no longer true and hasn't been for more than a year at least. Still the two groups enjoyed — or did enjoy — friendly relations.

So it was natural when on June 12 Special Forces officers went to a CIA representative at Nha Trang and asked for help and guidance. They said they had a suspected double agent but did not disclose his name — Chuyen — to the CIA until four days later, on June 16.

By this time, according to CIA sources, Special Forces had already made up its mind con-

cerning Chuyen. CIA advised against rash action, but at the same time refused Special Forces' request to take Chuyen off its hands.

'He's Your Baby'

"He's your baby," CIA said in effect.

Meanwhile, Special Forces had submitted Chuyen to five days of intensive interrogation. Two standard Special Forces truth-seeking methods were employed — the lie detector (polygraph) and injections of sodium pentothal, a so-called truth serum that has a hypnotic effect.

According to Special Forces sources, Chuyen never confessed he was working for the Communists. But the Green Berets were convinced, on the basis of the tests, that Chuyen



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was lying. The decision was then made to "terminate" his employment.

Col. Robert B. Rheault, 43, leader of the accused Berets, was asked Tuesday upon his release if Chuyen had "penetrated" his operations. "I believe so," Rheault replied.

(Earlier, on July 24, Capt. Robert F. Marasco, accused triggerman in the case, wrote his wife that, "We determined the guilt of Thai Khac Chuyen. There were numerous reasons why we could not let him go.")

By this time officials in Saigon had alerted senior officers of the U.S. military command, including Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, to what was happening in the Chuyen case.

"There were some strong vibrations at Pentagon East (Abrams' headquarters) about this time," one source remarked. "Some high-ranking guys had their antenna out."

On the night of June 20 the body of Chuyen allegedly was dumped from a 30-foot boat into the South China Sea in a heavy weighted bag. No body has been recovered.

On June 21 Rheault, as commander of all Special Forces in South Vietnam, was summoned to Abrams' office for questioning.

Abrams Lied To

Where, Abrams asked, was Chuyen?

Rheault replied that Chuyen had been sent on a top-secret mission to North Vietnam. (Some sources said he mentioned Cambodia, not North Vietnam.)

Not until 10 days later did

Abrams learn the truth. On June 30 Sgt. Smith walked into the office of the senior CIA man in Nhatrang, told him about the Chuyen's case and asked for protection from his former comrades in Special Forces.

"Smith was full of remorse," one intelligence source said. "Chuyen was his man. They had worked together for more than a year. He was no longer sure that it was Chuyen in the picture."

Smith, described later by his lawyer as "no ordinary non-com but a well-read man who can quote Shakespeare by the yard," was allowed to stay on CIA premises overnight.

The next morning he was flown to Saigon in the company of two Army criminal investigations agents to repeat his story.

'Blew His Stack'

"That was when Abrams blew his stack," said one source intimately familiar with the case. "The idea that Rheault, a fellow West Pointer and a full colonel, could lie to him was more than he could stand. He ordered Special Forces cleaned out — not because he had anything against them personally but because he didn't approve of their methods.

"In any event, quite apart from his emotional reaction to being lied to, Abrams had no choice, after hearing Smith's story, but to go ahead and order a full-scale investigation of Smith's story.

Literally Home Free

Not until July 21, a month after the killing, did Abrams relieve Rheault of his command.

Only the accused Berets can know whether this account is correct. And they are literally home free.

Meanwhile, intelligence op-

erations are in for a severe overhauling as a result of the case.

The man in charge of the overhauling is Col. Michael D. Healy of Chicago, a fighting Irishman with an excellent combat record and Abrams' personal choice as the new Special Forces commander.

"Ninety per cent of Special Forces operations are in the open," an intelligence source said. "It's the 10 per cent on the dark side that got them into trouble."

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