

Secrecy Feeds Speculation

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SAIGON, Aug. 13 — Of the many baffling questions still unanswered in the Green Beret murder case, one seems most baffling of all: Why has the U.S. Army handled the case in a way that assured maximum bad publicity for the Army and maximum latitude for the wildest speculation?

By announcing tersely that Col. Robert B. Rheault, the commander of Special Forces troops in Vietnam, had been relieved of his command and jailed on suspicion of murder — with seven of his men — the Army has opened the can or worms and thrown the top away.

Newspapers around the world have run front-page stories about the mysterious case of Col. Rheault, the clean-cut and highly respected West Pointer who is now resting Longbinh jail. The old rumors about the Green Berets—that they are hired assassins, master kidnapers, CIA enforcers—have been revived enthusiastically. The Vietnam war looks uglier than ever.

All of this, it seems from here, can be attributed to three decisions the Army has made: To relieve Rheault of his command before gathering enough evidence even to charge him formally with a crime; to confine all eight suspects under maximum security before they have been charged, and to announce these arrests and confinements in a curt statement that allows for almost no charitable interpretation.

Curious officials and outsiders here speculate on two possible explanations for the Army's behavior. The first, which is by no means impossible to believe in the midst of this bizarre war, is

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that someone in the Army hierarchy has made a catastrophic mistake.

This theory is sustained by the following line of speculation:

High U.S. officials here have said that the inquiry that led to the arrest and detention of the Green Beret suspects was initiated by Gen. Creighton W. Abrams himself, the U.S. commander in Vietnam. Perhaps Abrams gave a vague order to "look into this situation" or "clean this up," and an eager subordinate, went ahead independently with an inquiry that resulted in the arrests.

Those who suggest this possibility assume that the case was brought to Abrams' attention by an outside agency, presumably the CIA. Leaks from official sources and the charges made Monday by George Gregory, an attorney for

Proponents of the catastrophic-mistake theory suggested that once Rheault had been removed from his command the Army was caught in an inevitable process that led to public revelation of the case.

The most obvious weakness in this theory is the implicit assumption that the commander of one of the major fighting units in Viet-

nam could be abruptly relieved after two months on his job without full consultation with both Gen. Abrams and the Pentagon.

This weakness can be overcome if one is prepared to believe that either Gen. Abrams or his superiors in Washington—and not some overeager underling—perpetrated the mistake.

The second explanation

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one of the accused officers, have convinced many people in Saigon that the CIA is deeply involved in the case.

As usual, once the agency's name is mentioned it seems easier to believe in CIA involvement than to doubt it.

for the Army's behavior that is being discussed here goes something like this:

Bad as the consequences have been, the Army had no choice but to relieve Rheault suddenly and jail the eight Green Berets merely on suspicion. The incident they were involved in—whatever it was—demanded swift and decisive action.

This theory explains the Army's decision to bring up-

on itself so much bad publicity, but it also raises innumerable tantalizing possibilities. What kind of incident could be so important? Who could the victim of such a crime be? If the victim was so important, how could his identity be kept a secret until now?

That last question has an obvious answer: The victim must have been a crucially important intelligence opera-

tive who, though unknown outside, played a vital role in the war.

But vital to whom? Perhaps to the North Vietnamese; perhaps to the South Vietnamese, or perhaps to another American agency.

There is a third explanation, but it is one which nobody this reporter has talked to is willing to accept. It is that the army simply will not tolerate murder.