

Guardian

By Richard E. Ward

Details of U.S. secret operations in Vietnam are coming to light as a result of the arrest and detainment of the commander and seven other members of the U.S. Army Special Forces in South Vietnam, who are being held on suspicion of murder and conspiracy. Available information on the secrecy-enshrouded case indicates that the arrests for the murder of a Vietnamese, normally a routine matter for the Special Forces, are related to conflicts within the Saigon regime and among U.S. agencies operating in Vietnam.

The eight Special Forces members, seven officers and one sergeant, are being held by U.S. authorities for their role in the murder of a Vietnamese working for the CIA and Special Forces, who was "eliminated" June 20 because he was allegedly an agent for North Vietnam.

When Col. Robert B. Rheault, who had assumed command of the Special Forces in Vietnam on May 29, was informed about the agent he sought instructions from the CIA, which replied that the man might be "terminated with extreme prejudice," a euphemism for execution. Although this CIA recommendation was rescinded, the victim was drugged, shot and then buried in a weighted bag at sea near the Special Forces headquarters at Nha Trang, about 180 miles north of Saigon.



Gen. Creighton Abrams, commander of U.S. Forces in South Vietnam, was informed of the execution and after an investigation Rheault was relieved of his command and he and the seven others were jailed on July 21—a virtually unprecedented outcome, pointing to issues beyond the actual murder. "Such [murder] cases are not unusual in South Vietnam," reported Terence Smith in a dispatch from Saigon in the Aug. 12 New York Times. "While no one talks about it in public, torture and murder are part of the clandestine activities of the Special Forces," Richard Homan wrote in the Aug. 10 Washington Post. In his Times article, Smith also stated that "formal prosecution is virtually unheard of in such incidents. They are usually kept within the military family. Most often they are handled by the South Vietnamese military." On Aug. 15, George W. Gregory, a civilian attorney for one of the officers asserted "that the CIA has ordered the killing and effectuated the killing of over 100 people in South Vietnam in the past year."

Much still remains to be clarified about the present case; even the name of the victim has not been made public. In an Aug. 13 dispatch from Saigon, the Reuters news agency suggested that the murdered man headed a spy ring that reached the highest levels of the Saigon administration, including the offices of the president and premier. At least 65 other persons have been arrested in this affair. Of course, these persons may have simply been political opponents of the Thieu regime who were falsely charged with spying.

For months the Saigon regime has been torn by internal dissension. In part this dissension is a reflection of increasing war weariness and the growing attraction of the program of the Provisional Revolutionary Government. Some of the dissension reflects antagonisms among U.S. "advisors" who dominate the Saigon administration.

In particular, there has been longstanding conflict between the Special Forces and the CIA and also between the Special Forces and the U.S. Army command in South Vietnam. And in the

Rheault case, the Special Forces sought to resolve its disagreement with the CIA by a *fait accompli*. This probably was not the first instance of such an action. However, apparently the recent victim was of sufficient importance that the CIA felt it could use the incident to discipline the Special Forces and obviously Abrams shared this view.

Rivalry between the CIA and the Special Forces, both jealously guarding their own elite status, parallels the growth of the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. U.S. intelligence operations there even predate the founding of the CIA, but remained at a relatively low level until 1950 when the U.S. decided to step up its aid to the French. In that year the U.S. sent to Vietnam a Special Technical and Economic Mission headed by Robert Blum, a protégé of CIA director Allen Dulles. Blum was characterized as "the most dangerous man in Indochina" by Gen. DeLattre, commander of the French expeditionary forces. DeLattre correctly recognized that while aiding the French, the U.S. was at the same time building a base for its own intervention, and that Blum with his CIA ties was a key man in that double game.

The French naturally limited their cooperation with Blum. "Blum's efforts in the 1950-54 period were also impeded by the jurisdictional strife in the United States mission over who was in charge . . . Then, as now, the State Department-U.S. Army-CIA-U.S. Operations Mission-U.S. Information Agency-White House types each pursued his own self-styled purposes," observed Col. William Conon in his book, "The Betrayal," published last year.

After creating the Saigon puppet regime, the CIA remained the de facto head of U.S. operations until the early 1960s when large numbers of U.S. troops were sent to Vietnam.

Special Forces were first sent to Vietnam by President Kennedy in late 1961 "to help the CIA organize mountain tribes as a counter-guerrilla and trail watching force . . . About 46,000 mercenaries work for them [the Special Forces]," William Beecher reported in the Aug. 9 New York Times.

There are now about 3000 men in the Fifth Special Forces Group stationed at about 50 camps in South Vietnam. Some of the officers being held on murder charges worked in a top-secret Special Operations Group which performs missions on direct orders of high level U.S. officials. SOG missions include: "intelligence-gathering, sabotage, kidnapping and, not too infrequently, the 'elimination' of certain persons in South Vietnam and the bordering countries of Laos, Cambodia and North Vietnam," according to James P. Sterbs writing in the Aug. 15 N.Y. Times. Maj. Thomas C. Middleton Jr., one of the arrested officers, headed all intelligence operations for the Fifth Special Forces Group.

Although there is no accurate estimate of the number of CIA personnel in Vietnam, its principal activities are known to include jurisdiction over pacification activities (the so-called Revolutionary Development Program), "advising" various high level Saigon officials, clandestine military operations, military and political intelligence gathering and counter-intelligence. The CIA also sits on most policymaking bodies concerned with Vietnam.

By contrast, even though they act the part of imperial Roman praetorian guards, the U.S. Special Forces occupy a relatively low position and do not make policy. Obviously the arrests were meant as an example to discourage any tendencies in that direction.

However, it will be illusory for the U.S. to attempt to enforce a unity of purpose on the different American agencies in Vietnam. Antagonisms and recriminations among the different U.S. agencies and armed services can be expected to increase as the responsible officials try to insure that the U.S. defeat does not tar their own individual careers.

Green Berets held in Viet killing



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