



Two months ago at Longbinh jail near Saigon, Colonel Robert Rheault took regular morning exercise (above) with three fellow Green Beret prisoners. Today, resigned from the Army, he is at home in Brookline, Mass. with his wife Nan (left), talking over the end of a 23-year military career.

The Fall of a 'Lost Soldier'

In France in the 1950s the young men of the elite paratroops returned from the wars in Indochina and Algeria, too early hardened and too early disaffected. They had believed one way, while the people back home, with a more complicated vision, believed another way . . .

In Vietnam last summer a suspected South Vietnamese double agent named Thai Khac Chuyen was killed near Nha-Trang. Within a few weeks eight members of the U.S. Army's Special Forces stood accused of his murder—and at the center of a painful, ambiguous dilemma. They believed their conduct had been dictated by time-honored, pragmatic military doctrine: kill the enemy or be

killed. That doctrine had collided with the broader ethical standards of the civilian world, which in this event the Army command upheld. For Vietnam and for America, the case of the Green Berets would always evoke haunting moral and legal questions.

Had there been a trial with a decisive outcome, that might have produced some answers. But when the charges were dropped by the Army, it meant that henceforth these men would always reside in a moral twilight somewhere between guilt and exoneration. Unconvicted, they remained free men with nothing on their official military records but high marks and decorations. Yet without acquittal, their reputations

and their place in the Army would remain clouded. The most ironic consequences of the whole affair have fallen upon the commander himself, Colonel Robert Rheault. Here was a man whose single-minded purpose from the age of 17 exemplified national ideals of patriotism, challenge and duty. Now his career as a professional officer had abruptly collapsed. Now by the aberrant, equivocal principles of war as it is waged in the shadows, the model soldier had himself become its victim.

. . . Sometimes, usually abroad, these men were called the Centurions. Back in France among themselves, they were called les soldats perdus, the lost soldiers.

A believer in self-reliance and elitism

by FRANK McCULLOCH

On Oct. 31, his 44th birthday, five months after taking a command he had coveted for years, a little more than four months after the death of Thai Khac Chuyen, three months after he had been relieved and arrested, one month after the charges against him and the other Green Berets had been dropped and they had returned to the U.S., Colonel Robert B. Rheault resigned from the U.S. Army. It was the most difficult step, the colonel says, he has ever taken. Since he entered West Point as a 17-year-old cadet, he had done nothing but soldier. The Army had been his work, his challenge, his satisfaction, and he was shocked when Army Secretary Stanley R. Resor, in announcing that the charges against the Berets had been dropped, implied expediency was the reason.

"The charges *should* have been dropped," says Colonel Rheault, "because to conduct the trial would have been dangerous and damaging. It would also have been a travesty of justice to try dedicated soldiers for doing their job, carrying out their mission, and protecting the lives of the men entrusted

to them in a wartime situation."

Colonel Rheault's decision to resign pains him deeply. As he talks, changing expressions chase themselves across his patrician features with amazing rapidity. His gray eyes harden and his brow furrows beneath his graying blond brush-cut, making him look older than his years. "My decision to resign," he says, shifting the six-foot body that carries the same 160 pounds it bore when he was a first-year cadet, "was based on an objective, cold-blooded evaluation of the future." That evaluation revealed two harsh realities as far as he was concerned.

"The Army offered me several pretty good jobs after I got back, but that didn't change the fact that my chances of further promotion were almost nonexistent. I didn't want to become a bitter old fud of a colonel mumbling into my martini about the star I should have had but never got.

"And even if I had been permitted to finish my tour in Vietnam, I would never be able to serve in the Special Forces again—and that experience was so great that it spoiled me for any other Army service."

The second reality was the key to Rheault's decision, for he and the Berets were made for each other. Despite his years in the Army, Rheault is essentially a loner who revels in activities that test the individual. His sports are skiing, mountain climbing and hunting, which pose maximum personal challenge, and Rheault does all superlatively well. "Challenge is what life is all about," he says. "Without it, there is no meaning." Rheault, wearing combat boots, can still run a mile in six and one-half minutes and does sit-ups, push-ups and chin-ups every day. He believes in personal initiative, self-sufficiency and elitism; being a part of, a leader of, "the best of the best" brought him the deepest satisfaction of his career.

The career that ended Oct. 31 began in the summer of 1943, when Bob Rheault left Westwood, Mass. for West Point. Like many officers of his generation, he is still embarrassed that he spent World War II in the security of the Point. After graduating from there, he put in three years as a lieutenant in Europe, followed by an assignment to

Fort Riley, Kansas. He spent the Korean war years there as an O.C.S. and intelligence instructor, unavailingly "beating my head against the wall trying to get to where the action was."

He finally reached Korea in 1953, as a captain, just as the shooting stopped. Promotions came slow in the postwar Army. But after 7½ years as a captain he made major while head of the French department at West Point. During three years of duty there, he became fascinated with the mission and concepts of a new semisecret outfit in the Army, the Special Forces. Rheault was drawn strongly to an all-volunteer elite comprised of the smartest and best the Army had.

At the same time, Rheault discovered that he was "splitting off emotionally from the great mass of the Army, the endless treadmill of trying to get myself and other people ready for World War III, a possibility which for me had faded into the background." He was glad that "there were people who were willing to sit around planning pentomic divisions, and all of that stuff—but it just wasn't for me."

Rheault and the mysterious case of Thai Khac Chuyen

Security restrictions prevent Colonel Rheault from discussing the Chuyen case. But the following facts about his role are known:

Thai Khac Chuyen was the principal Vietnamese agent for a small, highly classified Green Beret sub-unit called B-57, whose mission is intelligence gathering in the border areas of South Vietnam. In late April or early May, a team of Viet-

namese agents working for B-57 in the field suddenly refused to accept direction and quit furnishing intelligence. Obviously an important element in the net had broken down. A few weeks later, in a captured roll of film, developed at Green Beret HQ in Nhatrang, Chuyen's American "handler" saw his agent talking with a known North Vietnamese officer. Chuyen was kept under surveillance. By the time

Colonel Rheault arrived from Okinawa on May 29 to take command of all Special Forces operations in Vietnam, the Berets were convinced that Chuyen was in fact a double agent. It is unlikely, considering the size of his command (3,000 men), that Rheault was told about Chuyen at this time. But he allegedly approved the mid-June Green Beret decision to eliminate the agent. The Berets asked the CIA for advice about Chuyen, but the CIA told them in essence that the agent was a Beret problem. On the night of June 20 Chuyen was executed. A cover story—that he was off on an extremely dangerous mission into Cambodia—was concocted to mask his disappearance. Rheault reportedly okayed it.

For unexplained reasons, the CIA became uneasy about the case, and told U.S. military commander General Creighton Abrams what they thought had happened. On the

evening of June 21, in Nhatrang, Rheault received a call from Abrams. Could the Chuyen mission be recalled? No, sir, it could not, Rheault replied, and asked if he could call back on a special secure circuit to explain. Never mind, the general reportedly said. Come to Saigon immediately yourself.

When Rheault got to Saigon that same night, he related the agreed-upon cover story to an audience consisting of a CIA representative and several high-ranking military officers. Abrams was not present.

There the matter might have rested, had not another Beret—Chuyen's former "handler"—suddenly turned himself in at the CIA headquarters in Nhatrang and refuted the cover story. When word reached Saigon, Abrams reportedly blew up, demanded a full investigation, and one by one eight Berets were arrested. Rheault was the last. On July 21 he was relieved of his command and placed under guard at Longbinh.

In Vietnam last spring Rheault met with Asian Special Forces commanders



'I thought Dad was in Vietnam to kill Vietcong'

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earn a master's degree in international relations from George Washington University; the second at the Pentagon, where he was promoted to full colonel and worked for the Joint Chiefs of Staff on special operations for Southeast Asia; and the last as commander of the 1st Special Forces Group on Okinawa. Berets in his command were involved in operations from Korea to Thailand.

Rheault left Okinawa to take charge of the Special Forces in Vietnam on May 28, electing not to take leave to return his family to the States. He arrived at Nha-Trang on the 29th, and three weeks later Chuyen died. Had Rheault taken his leave, the matter might never have touched his life.

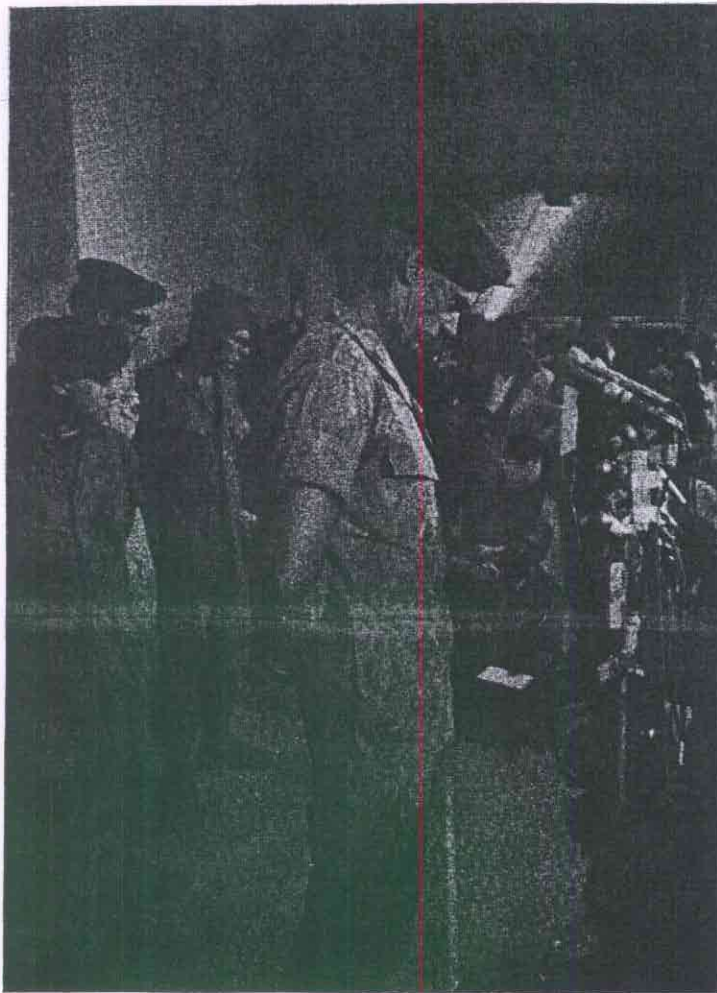
But leave was out of the question. "This was the greatest command in the world for me," he says. "I think I was the best qualified man to hold it, not because I'm so great personally but because it was a job I had been preparing myself for for 10 years."

The men who have served under him, however, leave no doubt how great they think he is. When Rheault and his companions were in custody at the U.S. Army base at Longbinh, one possibly apocryphal story has it that other Berets in Vietnam plotted to break them out, even going so far as to prepare false passports for the men. But word of the plan reached Rheault, and he quietly sent back instructions to drop it. True or not, the story reflects the intense loyalty Rheault inspires in his men.

On the second night of his imprisonment, Rheault wrote to his wife Nan. Within the severe limits of security and a wish not to worry her unduly, he tried to explain what had happened. Nan reacted to the letter, she says, "as though it were a snake that had just bitten me. For a while, I just didn't know what to do, where to turn."

When the news broke and she had her talk with the children—Susanne, 20, Michele, 17, and Robert Jr. or "Skid," 11—they received it calmly. "What's all the fuss about?" Skid said. "I thought that's what Dad was in Vietnam for—to kill the Vietcong."

Together again, Bob Rheault and his family set about "sorting out our thoughts, trying to decide what should come next." Mail came



pouring in in such volume that the Rheaults had to hire a secretary to help answer it. Of the hundreds of messages, all but two of them offered support.

Without any firm ideas of what he wanted to do in civilian life other than a long-standing interest in conservation work and teaching, Rheault says, "I had to find out where I stood with the Army, and where the Army stood with me."

He visited the Pentagon for several days in mid-October, and

some officers received him coolly, but others urged him to stay in. Then a three-star general for whom he has particular respect asked: "Bob, if you could have any job in the Army you wanted right now, what would it be?"

Almost without thinking, Bob Rheault replied, "Command of the 5th Special Forces in Vietnam."

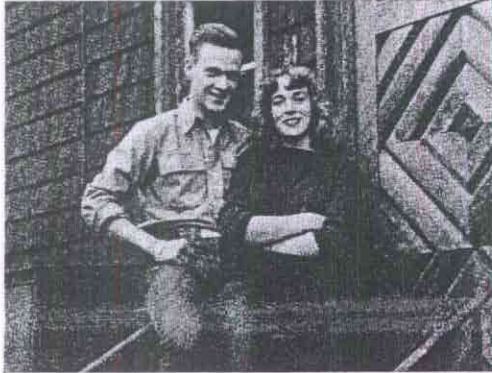
When the general smiled, and spread his hands wide, Rheault says, "I knew then what my decision had to be." ■

On his return to the U.S., Rheault stood bowed before a press conference at Travis air base in California.

At a park across from his home in Brookline, he talks quietly with 11-year-old Skid, his youngest child.



In 1935 at age 10, Bob Rheault and his father, at one time a Canadian Mountie, climbed Mt. Chocorua in New Hampshire. In 1947, after three months of marriage, Bob and Nan Rheault stood laughing outside barracks at Eisenstein, Germany. Rheault was then in the 6th Armored Cavalry Regiment.



Rheault saw clearly that since atomic weapons had made conventional war unlikely, guerrilla warfare had become an exceedingly powerful instrument. If that force was to be checked, then a comparable counterforce had to be created. Rheault joined the 10th Special Forces Group at Bad Tölz, Germany in 1960, and during his three years there, the Berets added counterinsurgency to their original role as guerrillas. His assignment with the 10th was richly fulfilling. He commanded his own Special Forces team for three years and—in serious war games with the U.S. Seventh Army and NATO allies—he learned the hard lessons of guerrilla and counter guerrilla warfare. In such a conflict, he learned, the winner is generally the side with the best intelligence—which is almost always a fruit of winning the trust and confidence of the people on whose land the battle is being waged.

"I'd sit up there in a mountain hideout, and I'd look down on some outfit that was chasing us, and I'd know that if we had done

our jobs right, when they grabbed a local German by the throat and asked him where to find the Green Berets, he'd send them thrashing up the wrong mountain."

He says he also learned a harsh lesson: "You must never let your guard down against infiltration. No matter how well you've done your job, no matter how hard and well you've planned, no matter how tough and competent your people are—one double agent can bug out and do you all in."

Before the Bad Tölz tour had ended, Rheault had been promoted to lieutenant colonel and had volunteered for the growing war in Vietnam. He arrived there in April, 1964 and as executive officer of the Special Forces, he ranged the country from one end to another, to see for himself "what was working and what wasn't." During that year Rheault decided there was one job in the Army he wanted more than any other: to command the Berets in Vietnam. There were three stops on the way, the first at the Army War College at Carlisle Barracks, Pa., where he also found time to



"I was never that young," says Rheault about this West Point picture, taken at his graduation in 1946. In 1959, while he was based at Fort Leavenworth, Kans., the young couple posed in their apartment for a family picture with their children, left to right, Michele, Robert Jr., nicknamed "Skid," and Susanne.



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