

Sees Sharp Battle With Army

'Beret' Defense Lawyer Confident

By Robert G. Kaiser

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SAIGON, Aug. 10 — George Gregory of Cheraw, S.C., came to Vietnam today as a defense attorney in the Green Beret murder case, and promised that "we're going to have a lot of fun on this one."

Gregory is 31, a young version of the Southern country lawyer who comes on laughing and joking but — at least in the movies — walks away with the city slicker's suspenders. He is here to represent Maj. Thomas Middleton, one of the eight defendants in the case.

If a long, bantering conversation with reporters this afternoon is any indication, Greg-

ory is also here to make life difficult and uncomfortable for the U.S. Army officers who have brought charges of murder and conspiracy against Col. Robert B. Rheault, former Special Forces commander in Vietnam, Maj. Middleton and six others.

"They aren't going to sacrifice one of these good South Carolina boys, you know," Gregory said of his client this afternoon, adding a staccato laugh. "We love foreign relations and that sort of thing, but you know, everything must have its limits."

This was the only hint he gave of the substance of his defense of Maj. Middleton. Gregory said he knew very few details of the case, and

that top-ranking Pentagon officials in Washington told him they knew no details either. He indicated doubt about the truth of their statements.

Monday morning Gregory will meet with army officials and — he hopes — his client to learn all he can about the case.

Gregory's expressed willingness to sacrifice "foreign relations" for the sake of his client is the latest bit of circumstantial evidence suggesting that the victim of the alleged murder was a relatively important Vietnamese, perhaps someone in a trusted position who turned out to be working for the Communists. This is by no means certain, however.

The only new information in the case today was that the U.S. Navy ended a search in the South China Sea off Nha-Trang for the body of the murder victim. The search involved several ships. There have been unconfirmed reports that the victim was dropped into the sea in a weighted sack from a boat or helicopter.

Speaking to reporters at Tansonnhut airport and later at the Caravelle Hotel, Gregory exuded complete confidence.

Maj. Middleton — whom he has known for 28 years, Gregory said — is an "honorable citizen" and "innocent."

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Moreover, he contended, the army has no basis for holding his client in confinement which must be based on a finding that the suspect might flee the jurisdiction of the court martial, or is dangerous. Neither condition applied he added, and he said he would demand the immediate release of Maj. Middleton.

The implication of the talkative lawyer's remarks was that, in his view, the army had made a terrible mistake by charging Middleton and the other seven with the "heinous crimes" of murder and conspiracy to murder.

Gregory claimed some expertise in military law. He was an attorney in the Judge Advocate General's office for three years. "Isn't that great?" he asked behind his ready laugh, his face turning a deep and delighted pink.

Frustrated Reporters

For frustrated reporters here, who have been trying and failing for four days to find out something significant about the case, Gregory's arrival seemed a Godsend.

After reporters told him how thoroughly the army had hushed up the Green Beret case, the lawyer laughed: "A new light is now in focus." He

and his client had "nothing to hide," Gregory added, and he immediately scheduled a press conference for Monday afternoon to report on his first day in Vietnam.

"You're the only story we've got right now," one wire-service correspondent told Gregory. "I'm big enough for everybody," he replied.

Gregory was due here yes-

terday, but the Pan American Airways strike stranded him first in Honolulu, and then in Hong Kong. That second stop was not wasted. "Bought some nice summer clothes and so on" there, he noted, showing off a new pair of blue slacks and a custom-made blue shirt.

Handwritten Letter

He was brought to Vietnam by a handwritten letter from Maj. Middleton. "I got his letter and I thought it was a personal letter . . . probably asking me to look into a deed or a will or something like that." Instead, it informed Gregory that the man he had grown up with was accused of murder.

Gregory charmed the press with his round, laughing face, which seems to get bigger all the time under receding reddish-blond hair.

He was a South Carolina state senator for one term—"I was defeated honorably" last year, he noted. As a Democrat or Republican? "You know that—do I look like a Republican?"

Gregory's law practice is typical country work, he said. "I handle everything but tax cases. I flunked that course."

Gregory said he hoped the army would move quickly in the Green Beret case, but there has been no official statement yet on when the eight men might come before a court-martial.