

THE WAR

Mystery of the Green Berets

Although they are the most glamorous and publicized soldiers of the Viet Nam war, the U.S. Army's elite Special Forces have always been enveloped in the sinister. Highly trained in guerrilla and psychological warfare, they operate covertly on the fringes of battle. They often ignore the nominal rules of war in their day-to-day battle for survival in isolated rural areas.

Last week the aura of intrigue was deepened and tinged with scandal when the Army's Saigon command announced that eight Green Berets, including the Special Forces commander for all of Viet Nam, had been detained while the Army investigated charges of premeditated murder against them in the shooting of a South Vietnamese. The commander is Colonel Robert B. Rheault, 43, a much-decorated West Pointer. Also arrested were two majors, three captains, a chief warrant officer and a sergeant first class.*

Ripples of Disbelief. The Army did nothing to lessen the mystery. The killing was said to have occurred June 20 near the Special Forces headquarters at Nha Trang, 200 miles northeast of Saigon. Rheault was relieved of his command on July 21. Who the victim was, what his connections with the war might have been, who brought the charges—all these facts remained secret. Regular military investigating units professed to have no knowledge of the incident, leading to conjecture that the case involved a secret agency, possibly the CIA. This speculation was supported by the fact that at least three of the Green Berets were intelligence specialists. According to one story, the victim was a Vietnamese spy for the Americans, who had disappeared when he was discovered to be a double agent. No body has been found, and rumor has it that the victim was disposed of at sea. Such a killing would not be unique in Viet Nam, not difficult to disguise. Why the Army chose to publicize the case is another mystery.

Rarely has an officer of Rheault's high rank faced a murder charge. Thus the case sent ripples of disbelief and disillusionment through Army camps and mess halls. Rheault had been respected and well liked by his men. Said one Green Beret captain: "My first reaction was shock. The second was that Colonel Rheault was getting shafted." Several soldiers had first thought that Rheault was relieved of duty in order to be promoted to brigadier general.

Rheault's replacement, Colonel Alexander Lemberes, said he was just as

puzzled as everyone else. He had only 15 minutes to pack after being notified that he was replacing Rheault, and subsequently broke his right ankle in a hasty attempt to qualify as a parachutist—something all Green Berets must do.

Relatives of the eight men were also left without explanations. Mrs. Rheault said she had sensed that something was wrong from her husband's most recent letters, but relatives of the others said that they had not been aware of any difficulties until news reports of the arrests appeared. By week's end, four of the accused had hired civilian lawyers. Two of the attorneys received security clearances, reinforcing the belief that the case involves some supersecret operation. The Army is now investigating the charges to see if there are grounds for a court-martial. Conviction on a charge of premeditated murder carries a maximum penalty of death.

* In addition to Rheault of New Canaan, Conn., the others were Major Thomas C. Middleton Jr. of Jefferson, S.C., Major David E. Crew of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Captain Leland J. Brumley of Duncan, Okla., Captain Robert F. Marasco of Bloomfield, N.J., Captain Budge E. Williams of Athens, Ga., Chief Warrant Officer Edward M. Boyle of New York and Sergeant Alvin L. Smith Jr. of Naples, Fla.