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Green Beret's Lawyer

George Winfield Gregory

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Aug. 13—George Gregory was alone in his law office in the South Carolina town of Cheraw one recent afternoon when a letter arrived from South Vietnam.

It was from his boyhood friend, Thomas C. Middleton Jr., now an Army major in the Special Forces. "I figured he had something he wanted done with his will, considering the business he was in," Mr. Gregory recalled here the other day.

Major Middleton's will was in order, but he had other problems. He was in the Longbinh stockade, he explained in the letter, along with seven other soldiers of the Special Forces, or Green Berets, facing possible charges in the premeditated murder of a Vietnamese national, a man subsequently identified as a double agent. The major outlined the basic facts of the case and said he needed a lawyer.

"I read that letter through," Mr. Gregory said, "and I thought to myself: 'I'll be damned, the Army is fixing to make a human sacrifice out of Tommy Middleton.'"

A week later, George Winfield Gregory was on his way to Saigon to try his first murder case and his first court-martial since 1966, when, as a captain in the Judge Advocate General's Corps, he defended AWOL cases by the score at Fort Knox, Ky.

'A Lot of Fun With This One'

"We're going to have a lot of fun with this one, no matter who gets hurt," he said with a grin when he arrived at Tansonnhut airport in Saigon. "I'm not going to let the Army sacrifice any of these good South Carolina boys. You're going to see that."

A few hours after his arrival Mr. Gregory was on the phone to his client in the Longbinh stockade, 18 miles north of Saigon. "Don't you worry about a thing, Tommy," he said. "I just got here and I'm loaded for bear."

Twenty-four hours later, after a session with his client and a look at the secret court papers, Mr. Gregory was blinking into television lights at a crowded news conference in the Caravelle Hotel in



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A less than reverent attitude toward the military.

Saigon. Beads of perspiration glistened on his broad, high forehead as he held forth for 90 minutes, excoriating the army, waving an accusing finger at the Central Intelligence Agency and challenging the military to come up with "one single shred of evidence to prove these most unwarranted charges against my client."

It was a virtuoso performance—part Melvin Belli, part Senator Claghorn—and when it was finished, the audience had the strong impression that Mr. Gregory had not told them a thing he had not planned to.

Cue Balls Audible

Mr. Gregory is a big man, thick around the middle, with receding curly blond hair and a rich Carolina drawl. He is at his least convincing when he tells people, as he has here all week, that he is just a "simple, home-town country lawyer."

He was born in Charlotte, N. C., in the nearest good hospital to his family's home in Jefferson, S. C., on June 5, 1938. After graduating from the Fishburne military school in Waynesborough, Va., he went on to the University of South Carolina and the university's law school.

Instead of clerking or joining an established firm, Mr.

Gregory opened his own office in a second-floor room behind the Cheraw Town Hall. There was a pool hall immediately next door, and the clacking of the cue ball could be heard through the wall.

"It was not what you'd call a busy practice," Mr. Gregory said. "I think I averaged one adoption a month. The only people who came in were shoe salesmen. I'd usually buy a pair and then ask them about the state of their will."

With the draft breathing down his neck, Mr. Gregory applied for and received a direct commission into the Judge Advocate General's Corps in 1963. He spent three years defending, he says, about twenty interesting cases and about 2,000 garden variety AWOL's.

"Melvin Belli and Lee Bailey and all these other big lawyers write books about their cases," Mr. Gregory said. "I'm going to entitle my first volume 'Gregory's Guide to the Preparation of AWOL's, or How to Handle 40 Cases A Day and Still Have Time for a Part-time Job.'"

Despite a less-than-reverent attitude toward the military, Lieutenant Gregory was promoted to captain. The promotion is automatic, he explained, unless you flunk the physical-training test, which he did, twice. He passed on the third try with the aid of a red marking pencil with which he surreptitiously altered his scores after each event.

"I changed all the 30's to 80's and sailed through," he recalled cheerfully. "The instructors were very proud of my progress."

A few months after his discharge, Mr. Gregory won a Democratic primary and was elected to the South Carolina Senate. He lost a primary fight two years later after espousing a number of progressive but not especially popular causes such as Medicaid, increased aid to education and prison reform.

In June of 1962 Mr. Gregory married Sharon Bennet, a brunette who was the Miss Hartsville, S. C., of 1957. They have two daughters—Kristen, 5 years old, and Avril, 18 months.

The Gregorlys live in an eight-room Colonial saltbox that was built in 1790. Mr. Gregory says the house is his biggest weakness.

"It costs a fortune to heat," he said, "but I love it. General Sherman slept there in '65, on his way south."