

Case May Be Dropped

Berets Quit Jail, Mystery Remains

SAIGON — (AP) — Eight members of the elite Green Berets accused of murdering a suspected Vietnamese double agent moved within sight of freedom today, but a curtain of mystery hung over the tangled and potentially explosive case.

The U.S. Army ended the close confinement of the eight men at the Long Binh stockade and assigned them to regular billets at the big headquarters post 15 miles north of Saigon. It said their isolation was "no longer necessary."

Full freedom for the eight could come by Wednesday and the Army's charges may be dropped by then, said

Henry Rothblatt, a civilian attorney from New York hired by three of the Special Forces troopers to help defend them.

Rothblatt, a criminal law specialist, said the Army's case was "based on the flimsiest of evidence." He said this seemed a situation in which "somebody goofed."

He did not elaborate.

The eight men, including Col. Robert Rheault of Vineyard Haven, Mass., former commander of all Green Berets in Vietnam, had been imprisoned under guard since mid-July.

They were accused of murder and conspiracy to commit murder in the June 20 killing of a Vietnamsee near Nha Trang, 250 miles north of Saigon.

A formal Army probe, similar to a grand jury proceeding, has been in progress

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since July 30 to determine whether the men should stand trial at a general court-martial. Neither the Army nor the U.S. Embassy would discuss details of the case with newsmen.

The official silence helped activate the rumor mills. Speculation covers a wide range and raises many questions. Some veteran observers say that with a court-martial, the Army could find itself involved with political dynamite.

Sources here say that for some reason Gen. Creighton Abrams, the U.S. commander in Vietnam, seemed determined to press criminal charges against the eight.

The case has aroused speculation whether there is in the background some kind of struggle between military

factions, the regular Army against the Green Berets, or between the military and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

The case has a superabundance of riddles.

Questions

Just who was the victim? Why did the CIA seem to issue and then revoke an order for the man's execution? Did the revocation come too late? Was it a case of mistaken identity? Was the murky factional politics of the Saigon government involved?

After two weeks of speculation, leaks and news conferences, nobody has cast any real light on just what is that distinguishes this killing from countless other assassinations and disappearances which one U.S. officer says have been "as much a part of the war as B52 raids and convoy ambushes."