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THE CASE OF THE GREEN BERETS

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much through her husband, Polanski, as through her former fiancé, Jay Sebring, with whom Frykowski shared a taste for odd sexual fun and games. All three liked to trip together on pot or acid. Friends believe drugs were used by the victims on the night of the murder (though this has not been confirmed by the medical examiner), but Miss Tate presumably abstained in view of her pregnancy.

Some suspect the group was amusing itself with some sort of black-magic rites—as well as with drugs—that night, and they mention a native Jamaican hip to voodoo who had recently been brought into Frykowski's drug operation. Some such parlor rites might account for the hood found over Sebring's head and the rope binding him to Miss Tate. Indeed, one group of friends speculates that the murders resulted from a ritual mock execution that got out of hand in the glare of hallucinogens. Others are convinced that the murderers surprised their victims at play—and believe the killers were Frykowski's Canadian accomplices with whom he had quarreled and perhaps also the Jamaican. The police, who are known to be on the Canadians' trail, feel that the killers at least had their wits about them and cite the fact that the telephone wires leading to the house had been carefully cut.

Polanski himself—one of the hottest directors in Hollywood since the success of "Rosemary's Baby"—was in England at the time of the killing, working on plans for a new film. Whatever he knows has so far remained a secret between him and the police. But no one is talking about Polanski any longer as a master of the macabre. At the burial of his young wife—together with the unborn child who would have been his first son—the helpless director broke down and wept on his mother-in-law's shoulder, no more the master of this horrible tale than any other man would have been in his place.

Top of the Week

Case of the Green Berets PAGE 26

The astonishing arrest of Col. Robert B. Rheault, the commander of U.S. Special Forces in Vietnam, on suspicion of murder has raised disturbing questions about both U.S. military justice and the use of American soldiers in espionage operations. And although the case against Rheault and seven of his men is still shrouded in secrecy, it has already cast grave doubt on the future of the elite Green Berets. From files by **Maynard Parker, Kevin P. Buckley** and **François Sully** in Saigon, **Lloyd Norman** in Washington, **Henry P. Leifermann** at Fort Bragg, N.C., and other correspondents, Associate Editor **Russell Watson** wrote this week's cover story. In a companion article, Associate Editor **Robin Mannock** describes Colonel Rheault himself. (Newsweek cover photo by Al Satterwhite—Camera Five.)

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week respite. The Senate, after much angry debate, has refused by a two-vote margin to turn down the President's request for deployment of an anti-ballistic-missile defense system. The House has passed an admirable tax reform and relief bill but one that would reduce government income too substantially. Both branches have extended the temporary 10 per cent surtax, but the Senate has refused to go along with the House on other anti-inflation measures.

Yet the first seven months were less notable for any of these achievements than for "the revolt against the Pentagon." This was the phenomenon that toned the period. The sound and fury of it were deafening. It was the itch politicians and the media spent their energies scratching. It was what the ABM debate in the Senate was about. Its shibboleth, "restore civilian control of the military," was so pervasive that nobody bothered to ask how something that had never been lost could be restored. It was as faddish as miniskirts and mutton-chop sideburns.

POLITICAL PAYDIRT

Denunciation of the "military-industrial complex" looked like political paydirt, and members of Congress, especially those sitting in shaky seats, hastened to dig it. Disillusionment with Vietnam, the high cost of sophisticated military hardware and the inflation resulting in part from paying the bills for it made the digging easy. Opponents of ABM in the Senate came so close to winning and were so universally applauded for the effort that they almost all became overnight military experts. They were soon proposing to cut authorizations for an aircraft carrier, for a new tank, for exper-

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NEAR-HYSTERIA

Sense of proportion has been lost in the current near-hysteria. It has happened before. On the eve of the second world war, the House came within a vote of suspending the draft. After that war, public demand to "bring the boys home" was so insistent that the armed forces were all but disbanded. Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson was a hero one day for presiding over their dissolution and a scapegoat the next for the nation's lack of preparedness to fight the war in Korea. Conditions can change attitudes with the speed of light.

The Senate-based campaign against the Pentagon would be excessive in easier times and is especially so with the world as tense as it is now. The recent resumption of enemy attacks in Vietnam and immovability of Communist negotiators in Paris seem to be the answer to Averell Harriman's theory that what we need do is set a pacific example in order to stop the fighting. The Soviets are outbuilding us in strategic weapons and catching up in naval power, displayed in the Mediterranean and even in the Caribbean. Potentially contagious crises persist in the Middle East and along the Sino-Soviet frontiers and Moscow is delaying arms-control talks.

But we are advised not to be timid about reducing armaments. After all, China is a distant threat and the new Soviet leaders are reasonable fellows. Those who give this advice would do well to read testimony by Anatoly Kuznetsov, the recently defected Soviet author, on the stability of the present Soviet leadership.

The Case of the Green Berets

Perhaps no organization in United States military history has so quickly captured the imagination of the American public as the Special Forces. Dashing guerrilla fighters skilled in all the grim arts of war, the Green Berets have become an instant legend. They inspired the only movie Hollywood has so far made about the war in Vietnam—John Wayne's potboiling jungle Western. They were featured in a hit record, and they have received reams of adulatory publicity. In Vietnam, they have produced heroes out of all proportion to their numbers. And at home, they have basked in the reflected glory of the Kennedy mystique—for it was John Kennedy who sponsored the Special Forces and to this day, a green felt beret lies on his grave in Arlington National Cemetery.

It was a profound shock to both the Army and the public, therefore, when the U.S. military command in Saigon announced two weeks ago that the former commander of all Green Berets in South Vietnam, Col. Robert B. Rheault, 43, had, almost incredibly, been arrested on suspicion of premeditated murder. Because of the gravity of the allegation, Rheault (pronounced "roe") had been confined in the cramped, squalid Long Binh military prison with seven of his subordinates* pending an investigation. And for the same reason—ostensibly at least—the Army immediately placed the case under the strictest secrecy.

Secrecy: All the Army would reveal in fact, was that the alleged victim had been a Vietnamese national, who died on June 20, a month before Rheault was arrested. But it soon became apparent that the dead man had been a U.S. intelligence agent who had been killed somehow during—or after—interrogation. That fact hardly reflected credit on the Green Berets. But the Army's secrecy—and the shadowy involvement of the Central Intelligence Agency—persuaded some observers that Rheault and his colleagues were scapegoats, and that the Special Forces were being railroaded by the Army establishment.

Rheault himself denied any guilt. In a letter to his father, he wrote: "I have done nothing to be ashamed of—as a commander, as a soldier or as a man. I would give anything to be able to spare you the pain and worry and embarrassment." And Colonel Rheault's wife insisted that the Green Beret commander—who had served in his post for only two months—did not even know most of his fellow defendants. "At least four of them," she declared, "he had never seen in his life until he met them at the investigation."

In the absence of solid facts, rumors spawned dozens of theories to explain the killing and the Army's surprisingly harsh reaction to it. Some said that the victim had been close to important figures in the South Vietnamese Government. Others hinted that he had been a secret peace emissary to Hanoi and had been killed by mistake. George W. Gregory, a small-town South Carolina lawyer who had flown into Saigon to act as attorney for Major Middleton, declared that the dead man had been a "dangerous Communist double agent." The flamboyant Gregory, who assailed the Army daily in long, excited news conferences, charged that the CIA had ordered the execution and then changed its mind too late.

Associated Press

Under fire: Green Beret in action

None of the many theories in circulation, however, was convincing in all details; only those directly involved knew for sure what had happened, and they were in no position to talk. Nonetheless, by last week, some elements of the case seemed reasonably well established. The murder victim, it appeared, had been one Chuyen Khac—although that may well have been an alias. Whatever his name, he was important to someone—either to the Saigon government or to some other powerful organization. Sometime in June, Chuyen was arrested and interrogated by the Green Berets. Evidence was presented—perhaps an incriminating photograph showing him in the company of North Vietnamese officers or possibly the testimony of a double agent—to show that the man was a traitor.

At this juncture, the Special Forces asked the CIA for guidance. Understandably, the CIA insistently denies any central involvement in the Chuyen case. But there is solid evidence that, at the very least, the Berets requested the advice of a CIA representative in Vietnam on how to handle Chuyen. And, quite conceivably, someone in the agency suggested verbally that Chuyen be killed; according to Gregory, the phrase "terminate with extreme prejudice" was used.

In any case, on June 20, Chuyen was shot, stuffed into a weighted sack and dropped into the South China Sea, somewhere off the city of Nha Trang, where Rheault's Fifth Special Forces Group has its headquarters. But it soon appeared that the CIA did not, in fact, want Chuyen to be killed. Either he was not a traitor at all or he was sufficiently valuable to someone so that he should have been kept alive.

Investigation: In most covert operations, a mistake of this kind is generally hushed up. But this time—some sources said at the insistence of the CIA—the matter was reported to Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, the U.S. commander in Vietnam. And Abrams's reaction was to order a complete investigation of what the Berets had been up to. "Clean them out," he reportedly told a subordinate.

Just why Abrams reacted so angrily is not entirely clear. One reason appears to be that he simply disapproves of illegal killing. "The Special Forces," he told members of his staff last week, "are going to have to show a higher regard for human life." In addition, however, some people in Saigon believe that the killing of Chuyen may have been in direct violation of an order from Abrams's headquarters—an order that conflicted with the "advice" from the CIA representative. The Green Berets, according to this theory, chose to follow the CIA, and when the agency disavowed any interest in having Chuyen killed, Special Forces was left holding the bag.

Indeed, to some of their supporters it seemed that, even if Rheault and his subordinates were responsible for Chuyen's death, they were nonetheless being victimized. Special Forces has long been involved in "dark side of the moon" espionage work, and such activities traditionally include murder—and sometimes torture. This certainly has long been known to the U.S. Command in Saigon. And to suddenly declare such acts illegal, some Green Berets argued, amounted to ex post facto lawmaking.

The fact, however, is that while almost all Green Berets are potential intelli-

*Maj. David E. Crew of Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Maj. Thomas C. Middleton Jr., Jefferson, S.C.; Capt. Leland J. Brumley, Duncan, Okla.; Capt. Budge E. Williams, Athens, Ga.; Capt. Robert F. Marasco, Bloomfield, N.J.; Chief Warrant Officer Edward M. Boyle, New York City; and Sgt. 1/c Alvin L. Smith Jr., Naples, Fla.

gence agents, only a relatively few are involved in purely covert operations. Those who are so employed belong to SOG—the so-called Studies and Observation Group, whose assignments reportedly include missions into Laos, Cambodia and North Vietnam, as well as the assassination of enemy commanders. One SOG unit, known as the B-57 detachment, was based at Nha Trang, and of the eight Green Berets allegedly involved in the Chuyen murder, six worked in B-57. Their commander was Major Middleton, who, in his other capacity as intelligence officer for Fifth Special Forces, reported directly to Colonel Rheault.

Ruthlessness: Obviously, then, Colonel Rheault and the other Green Berets currently in custody had very special knowledge of covert operations. But in some degree the great majority of Green Berets are involved in the seamier side of war. Officially, Special Forces does not instruct its men in terror tactics. "We don't have any classes for assassins," says one Green Beret officer. "But there isn't a Special Forces trooper anywhere who isn't familiar with all kinds of ways to kill. Let's leave it at that." And in some instances at least the Green Berets have used their deadly knowledgeability with frightening ruthlessness. At one Special Forces camp in Vietnam, recalls a Green Beret who was there at the time, "two prisoners were brought in without blindfolds. As it happened, they turned out to be harmless. But we couldn't release them because they had seen the entire camp. So they were taken into the jungle and six guys fired at them simultaneously. That way no one man could be held responsible or feel guilty about it."

Many Green Berets, moreover, argue that this kind of ruthlessness is both necessary and justified. And few of them feel any sympathy for the late Chuyen Khac. "When a double agent is uncovered," said one Special Forces man last week, "you get rid of him. And get rid of him means just that. Kill him." But the actual killing, this veteran added, is usually left to "the locals." Then, ruminatively, he concluded: "What I don't figure is why—if this thing happened—they didn't let the South Vietnamese kill the guy." (The answer to that appeared to be that the espionage network to which Chuyen belonged was exclusively American-operated and that the Green Berets did not want to compromise its security by calling in the South Vietnamese.)

Principles: To most civilians, such cold calculation is highly repugnant. And to any man of goodwill it must seem reasonable to ask whether any nation whose avowed principles forbid torture, assassination and betrayal can afford to defend itself by those very means.

Regrettably, the realistic answer to that question is that nation-states, regardless of their professed ideals, have always found it expedient to do so. And the U.S. is no exception. Americans have enshrined in their folklore such guerrilla organizations as Rogers' Rangers, a militia unit whose most notable feat was to massacre the men, women and children of the Mohawk village of St. Francis during the French and Indian War. And from then on, in a tradition formalized by the Office of Strategic Services during World War II, Americans have committed many ugly acts on behalf of their country—often with the express approval of this nation's leaders.

Special Forces was modeled, in part, on the OSS. Formed in 1952, its primary mission was to organize and train native guerrilla movements behind enemy lines. And since the most likely foe in those days seemed to be the Soviet Union, the Green Berets included many refugees from Eastern Europe, all thirsting to liberate their homelands. Distrusted by the military establishment, Special Forces languished in near-neglect during its early years, and even the beret itself was discontinued. Then John F. Kennedy took office. "President Kennedy was very keen on the Green Berets, and Bobby Kennedy was sold on them, too," former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Maxwell Taylor told NEWSWEEK's Lloyd Norman last week. "Bobby wanted 50,000 of them." That ambitious target was never met. But Jack Kennedy—who conceived of Special Forces as the American answer to Mao Tse-tung's "wars of liberation"—restored to the Green Berets their unique headgear and Special Forces swelled in number from 1,800 men to more than 9,000.

Originally, all Green Beret troops were triple volunteers: volunteers for the Army, for parachute training and for Special Forces itself. Often fluent in one or more relatively exotic languages, each Green Beret was "cross-trained" in at least two skills—medicine, demolitions, communications, operations and intelligence, and weapons. And as they were trained, the men were promptly put to use.

Under CIA sponsorship, Green Berets specializing in Latin America trained the Bolivian Army Rangers credited with killing Che Guevara. And in 1965, Green Berets played a secret—and previously undisclosed—role in America's intervention in the Dominican Republic. "We flew in by helicopter and landed in every town that had a baseball field," recalled one Special Forces veteran last week. "Then we'd fly back to Santo Domingo and report whatever we had learned to the intelligence coordinator, who was a CIA man. He'd show it to [Ambassador Ellsworth] Bunker. They'd erase the Special Forces heading on the report, type in 'CIA' and send it to the White House." Then, smiling nostalgically, he added: "Once there was an open contact in the field between us and the agency. This agency guy walked right up to one of our officers outside a town on the coast, gave him a sack full of money and told him to develop a network of agents. But that was unusual; field contact of this kind is supposed to be avoided."

UPI

Pointed threat: A Special Forces mercenary interrogates a prisoner

Aim: When the Green Berets were deployed in Vietnam in 1961, their mission was relatively simple: to train, equip and advise South Vietnamese guerrillas, whose job would be to harass the Viet Cong. But, partly at the insistence of Gen. William Westmoreland who, initially, had no other American combat troops at his disposal, the Green Berets soon altered that approach. Instead of keeping the enemy off balance by staying continually on the move, they settled down in a network of some 60 forts, each costing something on the order of $3 million. Instead of teaching South Vietnamese guerrillas to fend for themselves, they formed a private army of more than 40,000 mercenaries—mostly enrolled in units known as Civilian Irregular Defense Groups—under their own de facto command. (The great ma-

WILL HE EVER GET HIS STAR?

Tuning in to the grapevine at the Fort Bragg, N.C., headquarters of the Green Berets on the subject of Col. Robert Bradley Rheault is like eavesdropping on a sodality meeting of the West Pointers' Mutual Protection Association—except that many of the soldiers who know and admire the colonel never made it to the Point. When a veteran noncom home from South Vietnam dropped the word that Rheault had been relieved of command of the Fifth Special Forces Group, Fort Bragg at first speculated that he had been pulled out so that he could be promoted to general. "Everybody knew he was in line for a star," said a grizzled Green Berets sergeant last week. "He's a helluva officer and a helluva man." And when it turned out that the colonel was under arrest, one Special Forces trooper called Rheault's blond wife, Caroline, to tell her that there was talk about putting together a raiding force of Green Berets to spring the colonel from his cell in the Long Binh stockade. "I don't think he was kidding that much," Mrs. Rheault told NEWSWEEK.

Colonel Rheault: Forever gung-ho

Perhaps not. Even now that he is behind bars, Rheault can count on a host of highly conventional military types—including Army Chief of Staff Gen. William C. Westmoreland—to defend his name. "You would even be willing to be killed when he is in command," recalled one former Special Forces fighter—simultaneously conceding that he found Rheault a tough and unforgiving superior. "He is a man of tremendous honor and pride. He is a professional officer and you would be willing to follow his orders without question."

Quiet: Rheault dedicated himself to a military career as a child—perhaps as a result of listening to his French-Canadian father yarning about his service with the Royal Mounted Police. After adventures as a Mountie, which won him membership in the Explorers Club, Rheault's father married one of the social Bradleys of Massachusetts and settled down to become a financial consultant in Boston, where Robert Rheault was born on Oct. 31, 1925. Somewhat to his embarrassment, Rheault is listed in Boston's Social Register. "The papers have run this socially prominent thing into the ground," Mrs. Rheault complains.

At Phillips Exeter Academy (Class of '43), the colonel is remembered as "quiet and well-mannered" by vice principal Robert W. Kesler. Rheault averaged B grades or better, rowed on the varsity

jority of the mercenaries were drawn from Vietnam's ethnic minority groups—montagnard tribesmen, Cambodians and tough fighters of Chinese ancestry known as Nungs—all of whom were thoroughly disliked by the South Vietnamese themselves.) Perhaps worst of all, the Green Berets fought on the remote borders, instead of operating in the more heavily populated interior as JFK had intended. "Lord knows," said a former Kennedy adviser, "every Presidential policy directive was either reversed or ignored by the men in the field."

Such independence comes naturally to the men who wear the Green Beret. In the early years, they were responsible primarily to the CIA, which furnished them with lavish funds and encouraged them to act unconventionally. "Sometimes we just made our own foreign policy," said one officer. "It was just the CIA and us—and mostly us."

Heroes: Because of this freedom, the Special Forces attracted some unusual recruits. "My general feeling about the Green Berets," says a World War II commando officer, "is that in guerrilla work, you get some true heroes and some screwballs." The majority of Green Berets are neither of these things; they are just gung-ho soldiers who want to be where the action is. But the corps does include both heroes and screwballs, and there have been just enough of the latter to give rise to endless and sometimes damaging legends about the Green Berets. Old Vietnam hands recall one Special Forces officer who liked to hand out business cards proclaiming: "Have Nungs, will travel." And even yet, Special Forces troopers tend to irritate other soldiers by their ostentatious display of various virility symbols. "Some of the guys," admits one Green Beret, "carry all the caste marks—the montagnard bracelet, the sapphire ring from Bangkok, the Rolex watch, the sports car, the divorce."

Men of that disposition sometimes have trouble getting along with their colleagues, and perhaps no more unsuitable match has ever been arranged than that between the Green Berets and the LLDB or South Vietnamese Special Forces. In general, the Green Berets have little respect for their Vietnamese allies. There have been many fist fights—and even gun battles—between Green Berets and their South Vietnamese counterparts. "When a Beret or a Vietnamese leader fails to return from a patrol," said an ex-Green Beret, "you never know whether the VC got him, or whether one of his 'allies' did."

In their own way, moreover, relations between the Special Forces and the rest of the U.S. Army are almost equally strained. Even though the Fifth Special Forces Group was officially wedged back into the normal army chain of command in 1964, the Army establishment has never relaxed its opposition to the creation of an elite unit. Thus most career officers are reluctant to remain in the Special Forces—or even to join at all. "I think the Special Forces idea is good," says Maxwell Taylor, "so long as men don't stay in too long. If the officers go in for two years and then get on with their careers, their experience works its way through the Army. But I don't believe in a supercilious super-corps apart from the Army."

Even before the Rheault case broke, in fact, the "legs" were chipping away at Special Forces—with malice aforethought, according to the Green Berets. In Vietnam, seventeen former Special Forces camps had been handed over to the Vietnamese, and Fifth Special Forces itself was slated to be disbanded entirely in due course. Training requirements had been relaxed considerably, reducing the quality of Green Beret personnel.

Future: "There was nothing the legs could do when Kennedy was in office, because we were his pet," said a former Beret. Now, however, the future of the Green Berets is seriously in doubt. For one thing, they are likely to have even greater difficulty in attracting professional officers. "Why," asks one officer now in the Pentagon, "should a bright young captain join the Special Forces when he sees Bob Rheault—as fine an officer and a gentleman as you'll ever meet—slapped into a cell like a common criminal?" Beyond that, the usefulness of Special Forces units may well prove to have been gravely impaired. "You can imagine the trouble we would have with some foreign governments if we offered them a Green Beret team now," said one Washington official last week.

In one sense, none of this is likely to disturb the Army establishment which seems inalterably bent on bringing the Berets to heel. (Significantly, Col. Alexander Lemberes, the officer named to replace Colonel Rheault, is neither a fully qualified Green Beret nor a paratrooper—but does have a considerable reputation as a troubleshooter.) But if it is likely to prove a disaster for the Special Forces, the Rheault case and the intraservice bickering and intrigue which it has revealed also seems certain to give the Army as a whole a black eye. Last week, when the Saigon command "temporarily" suspended its investigation of

crew, sang in the glee club and, true to his "straight arrow" approach to life, left behind no memories of beer drinking or other hell raising.

From Exeter, Rheault moved straight to the Military Academy—on an appointment from Henry Cabot Lodge, then senator from Massachusetts. A mediocre student, he graduated 224th in a class of 875 in 1946 but was first in his class in French—which he spoke at home. Perhaps on the strength of that record, he was later sent to the Sorbonne to perfect his command of French, and taught the language at West Point for three years. (He also holds a master's degree in international affairs from George Washington University.)

Volunteer: Rheault's early Army career was totally conventional; he served in Germany, Korea and at Fort Riley, Kans. (which he once described as "the center of the U.S.—equidistant from any place you would rather be"). But in 1960 he volunteered to be a member of the Special Forces. And unlike many other career officers, he courted establishment disfavor by staying for several tours of duty. Nevertheless, he won promotion to lieutenant colonel on a special list reserved for outstanding officers.

Rheault's gung-ho approach to soldiering is epitomized by his insistence on physical fitness. At 43, although his close-cropped hair is graying, he has preserved the physique of a man in his 20s and, if he feels that his subordinates ought to be in better shape, is capable of going out and leading them in a mile run. Skiing is a favorite sport, and he played football at prep school until he fractured his leg. (That youthful injury almost cost him his chance of becoming a paratrooper, a *sine qua non* for the Green Berets. But today he wears a master-parachutist's badge signifying a minimum of 30 jumps.)

"My husband will come out of this with his name completely cleared," insists Mrs. Rheault. "They can do nothing else but to exonerate him completely and apologize publicly." And what then? Among many soldiers, the feeling is that even if Rheault is exonerated, the cautious men who run the U.S. Army will never again entrust him with a major command. But at least one senior officer who has served in Vietnam disagrees. Says he: "I think Bob Rheault still has a career ahead of him and could make general."

the case, some observers thought the Army hoped to sweep the matter under the rug, and that Rheault and his colleagues might never come to trial. But it seemed to be too late for that. Congressmen, editorialists and many ordinary citizens were already demanding a full explanation. And many agreed with Rep. Peter W. Rodino of New Jersey, who called the incident "a miscarriage of even military justice."

The Rheault case also seemed likely to revive public debate over the moral justification for murder and torture in covert operations. With considerable piety, the CIA publicly insists that it does not condone such activities. But many members of the intelligence community would privately argue that "dirty tricks" are unavoidable facts of life in a nation's struggle for survival, and that killing in espionage is no different from killing on the battlefield.

That is, at best, a debatable point. And in any case most ordinary Americans find it intolerable that such actions should be committed by men wearing their country's uniform. One conceivable result of the Rheault case and the attendant uproar might be to get the Army out of covert operations and to put the responsibility for "black" intelligence—if "black" intelligence there must be—back into the hands of the civilian agency created by Congress for that purpose. Certainly, such a development would be welcomed by many military men. For only then can there be complete truth to the heartfelt assertion made by one senior officer in Vietnam last week: "There are no circumstances—none whatsoever—in which murder is legal in the United States Army."

Lull's End

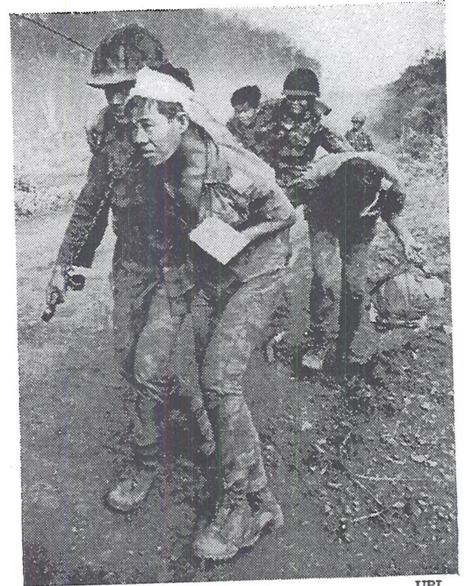
For U.S. military commanders, one of the countless frustrations of the war in Vietnam is the fact that no one ever seems to know for sure just what Hanoi has up its sleeve. And this element of uncertainty seemed as prevalent as ever last week when an eerie battlefield "lull," which had persisted throughout Vietnam for the better part of the past two months, was abruptly shattered by enemy shellings and ground attacks against U.S. and South Vietnamese positions all the way from the Demilitarized Zone to the Mekong Delta.

The enemy offensive got under way with a rash of attacks against strong points held by U.S. marines just south of the DMZ. In one such assault, nineteen Americans were killed and 80 wounded. The following night, the shooting began in earnest as the Communists lobbed rockets and mortar shells into some 150 targets that included Da Nang, the Bien Hoa air base, the U.S. Ninth Division's headquarters at Dong Tham, and parts of Saigon and Hué. At least twenty Communist commando attacks against U.S. and ARVN camps were beaten off. And in the delta, a South Vietnamese artillery unit was overrun and its guns turned against the U.S. military airfield at Vinh Long.

Though it ranked far below the 1968 Tet offensive in ferocity, the wave of enemy attacks caused a sudden spurt in U.S. battlefield casualties—and produced some nasty, if relatively brief, fire fights. In one series of battles in the paddies southwest of Da Nang, U.S. marines killed 213 of the enemy. The cost to the marines themselves, however, was not light: 177 leathernecks wounded and twenty dead—including a 37-year-old lieutenant colonel cut down by machine-gun fire while leading his battalion against an enemy position.

Cav Losses: Stiff fighting took place, too, in Binh Long Province, where the provincial capital, several artillery bases and a base camp of the First Air Cavalry Division were hit by elements of three North Vietnamese regiments. In one of those engagements—in which First Cav troopers were sent out to relieve South Vietnamese troops who had been overrun by the Communists—the U.S. lost seven armored personnel carriers as well as seven men killed and 32 wounded in a matter of minutes. "We didn't think anyone could do that to the Cav," muttered one battle-weary GI who survived the fighting, "Boy, they really made us look like a bunch of suckers."

Inevitably, the resumption of fighting touched off speculation as to just what purpose the Communist attacks were intended to serve. In Saigon and in Washington, there was some thought that the scattered clashes heralded a major enemy offensive that might hit a peak in September. Another theory was that Hanoi, by increasing the level of casualties among U.S. troops, sought to lend new fuel to the antiwar movement in the U.S.—and thus to force Mr. Nixon to accelerate the tempo of U.S. troop withdrawals. Many seasoned military men, however, were inclined to shrug off all such explanations as being unnecessarily elaborate. "I never interpreted the lull as anything more than a period of low-level activity while the Communists built up their forces and replenished to resume more intensive operations later," said one U.S. officer. Then he added: "It's difficult to say from the events of the last few days whether the lull is over. All you can say is that the activity on the battlefield has increased."


UPI

Vietnamese wounded in new fighting