

The Green Beret Curtain Falls

A MORE OR LESS EXPEDIENT curtain has been dropped abruptly on an inglorious episode of the Vietnamese war, leaving the American public generally confused and with a variety of emotions ranging from glad relief to outraged shame.

The Army has put aside its insistence upon full and complete disclosure and has dismissed all charges against eight Green Beret officers and men accused of doing one of their South Vietnamese agents to death in typical gangland fashion. For weeks, it had promised a general court martial to establish the guilt or innocence of the accused and, by shedding pitiless light upon the dark corners of the dirty and dangerous profession of espionage, display to the world this Nation's respect for and adherence to the rules of civilized warfare.

But now only the vaguest of controverted facts are available and a hundred questions have been raised and left unanswered. Why, for instance, did the CIA refuse to let its agents testify at the forthcoming court-martial after they had testified at the preliminary hearings? Was the CIA merely "indirectly involved" as formally stated by the Secretary of the Army, and if so how did its withheld testimony become of paramount importance to the defense? Is the CIA all-powerful in such cases, or could its co-operation be enforced from above?

THE PUBLIC WOULD LIKE to know, also, why the execution of Thai Khac Chuyen, the suspected double-agent, became urgent and imperative — if it did. Who ordered it? Why was he drugged and shot and dumped into the South China Sea without a trial? Why wasn't he turned over to the Saigon government for at least a show of due process?

One would suppose that the American public would, in its high regard for the Nation's moral principles (even in war, as demonstrated at Nuremberg) rise up in anger at the sudden shrugging off of this alleged war crime. That it was, as charged but not proven, a war crime was attested by Secretary Resor who described it as "a fundamental violation of Army regulations, orders and principles."

Yet members of Congress cheered and applauded the quashing of its trial.

SECRETARY RESOR took pains to inform the world that "The Army will not and cannot condone unlawful acts of the kind alleged," yet the withdrawal of all charges must appear to some observers as plain condonation. (To the wife of the missing Thai Khac Chuyen, it appeared all that and more, causing her to remark that "Americans are worse than the Viet Cong — they are more cruel and savage than the Communists.")

What can reasonably be inferred from the case of the Green Berets is that wars are barbarous, this one is no exception, and in such episodes as this there is no glory to be reaped by any one.