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Behind the Intelligence Curtain

By JOSEPH B. TREASTER

The Green Beret case has slightly lifted the curtain of secrecy that has hidden most of the vast allied intelligence operation in Vietnam.

Major revelations about the intelligence network had been expected from the court-martial of six of the eight men involved in the case, all members of the Army Special Forces, or Green Berets. But the Secretary of the Army, Stanley R. Resor, announced Monday that he had decided to drop all the charges in view of the fact that the Central Intelligence Agency would not permit members of its staff to testify.

On the other hand, answers to some of the questions raised by the case have emerged from a series of interviews with civilian and military veterans of Vietnam. The interviews, conducted by a correspondent of The New York Times who recently returned from the war zone, have also yielded a general picture of an elaborate, often inefficient intelligence community.

The themes of inefficiency, of work done at cross-purposes and of noncooperation found an echo in the Green Beret case, in which the South Vietnamese victim was said to have been not only a double agent—working for both the enemy and the allies—but also, according to some reports, an operative employed by different allied agencies.

"If I've ever known a division of bureaucracy to be compartmentalized and filled with internal suspicions, it is the intelligence community," said one middle-level State Department official who has served in Vietnam. "They do not always do kind things to one another. For instance, if I had some good agents in one area of the country and you had one that was getting a lot of good stuff, I might try to blow his cover and put him out of action. Same government, same objectives, different teams."

'No Way of Checking'

"Sometimes three or four agencies in Vietnam employ the same Vietnamese agent," the official went on. "The agencies won't open their personnel registries to one another so there is just no way of checking."

In the sketchy reports on the recent Green Beret case, there have been repeated references to two secret intelligence-gathering units, Detachment B-57 and the Studies and Observation Group, or S.O.G.

Five of the Special Forces soldiers in the now-closed case are reported to have been assigned to Detachment B-57. One, Maj. David E. Crew, was the detachment commander.

Available information indicates that B-57 is an Army unit manned by 25 to 50 Americans and responsible for operating networks of Vietnamese agents—perhaps several hundred—throughout Vietnam and the border regions of Laos, Cambodia and North Vietnam.

The bulk of its work is believed to be in South Vietnam and the objective to obtain tactical intelligence known as O.B., or order of battle, information. It tries to chart troop movements, identify units and commanders, determine supply levels and uncover other data that can be used to calculate when and where the enemy is likely to strike (which is known as I.O.H., for imminence of hostility).

On the organization charts, Detachment B-57 is listed as a part of the Fifth Special Forces Group, which has its headquarters at the former resort city of Nha Trang, on the South China Sea. But informed sources say that, in effect, the Fifth Special Forces is a cover for B-57.

Where Orders Come From

The commander of the Fifth does not give orders to B-57, which does not contribute to the primary mission of the Green Beret outfit—advising Vietnamese irregulars in remote camps. Orders for B-57 are believed to originate in the intelligence section of the headquarters of Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, commander of American troops in Vietnam.

Some dispatches from Saigon identified B-57 as a part of the Studies and Observation Group, an element of the American command. Subsequent investigation indicates that they are separate units. Both seek tactical intelligence, but S.O.G. also engages in sabotage and places emphasis on operations outside South Vietnam.

The Studies and Observation Group, which seems to have no less sensitive mission than B-57, operates without cover from offices in central Saigon in the compound from which Gen. William C. Westmoreland once ran the war. It is listed as a staff section of the American command and draws personnel and necessities from all branches of the armed forces.

There are thought to be as many as 2,000 Americans and many more Vietnamese in S.O.G. Informed sources say that the Americans seldom if ever go into North Vietnam on missions except for brief helicopter trips to emplace or recover teams.

Special Forces Men Vexed

The group's commander, an Army colonel, has an Air Force colonel as his deputy, and there is a "civilian special assistant" who presumably serves as liaison with the C.I.A.

Because of their extensive training in guerrilla warfare, Special Forces soldiers are assigned to both B-57 and S.O.G. But many Special Forces officers are privately rankled

see also

"The ghostly war of the Green Berets," by Horace Sutton, Saturday Review 18 Oct 69, this file.

Some Light Is Shed on Vietnam Setup by Beret Case

over the fact that a high percentage of the men in B-57 are from the Military Intelligence Corps and, technically, are not permitted to wear the green beret.

"This is not a Special Forces organization," a senior Green Beret officer said recently. "They wore the beret and looked like us, but they weren't." He was furious because his elite group had been linked to cloak-and-dagger activities.

Vital as they are, B-57 and S.O.G. are like the exposed peak of an iceberg. Much more work, less spectacular but no less necessary, goes on unnoted.

"A lot of it is just day-to-day plugging," said a former province senior adviser. "The little things they put together don't make headlines and by themselves they're not very important. But eventually you get a picture."

The intelligence community ranges from the barefoot woodcutter who is paid a few piasters for reporting a visit by a Vietcong tax collector to the C.I.A. station chief who works in the United States Embassy behind a door marked "Office of the Special Assistant."

The landscape of Vietnam and the border regions are studded with electronic sensors that beep information into the banks of computers. Radar, cameras, infrared detectors and a growing array of more exotic devices contribute to the mass of information. Not long ago reconnaissance planes began carrying television cameras.

There are a few swashbuckling extroverts and romantics in the intelligence community, but the great majority are more diligent than adventurous—more akin to university researchers than fighter pilots. Many are faced with an element of risk, but if they are conscientious in detail—in other words, good agents—the risk seldom if ever becomes a real threat.

Flimsy Covers Adopted

Perhaps motivated by the old feeling that there is something unsavory about spying, many American intelligence people in South Vietnam adopt flimsy covers. Employees of the C.I.A. often identify themselves as members of the United States aid mission. Many are known as advisers to the Public Safety Department, the Military Security Service, which is the Vietnamese F.B.I., or the division that handles defectors.

Most military intelligence men are believed to operate in uniform and without cover identification; those who wear civilian clothes and use assumed names maintain that they work for nonmilitary organizations.

Whether he uses cover or not, the military man can usually be spotted because of his short haircut, his G.I. eyeglass frames and, quite often, his military-style shoes.

The civilian "spook" is obvious more often than not because of his standard uniform: white short-sleeved shirt draped over dark, shapeless trousers to conceal the snub-nosed .38-caliber pistol clipped to his belt, plus sunglasses and, if he is wearing one, a narrow tie in a dark solid color.

Computers Whirr and Blink

A focal point of the allied intelligence operation is a windowless, white stucco building not far from Tansonnhut Air Base at Saigon. Day and night in its antiseptic interior a family of blinking, whirring computers devours, digests and spews out a Gargantuan diet of information about the enemy.

The fact plant, known as CICV, or the Combined Intelligence Center, Vietnam, was established late in 1966 by Maj. Gen. Joseph A. McChristian, then the senior United States intelligence official, and was intended to serve as the end of the line for all allied intelligence agencies.

It has three principal sources: the American and South Vietnamese military systems and a conglomerate of allied civil and military organizations that work together to destroy the Vietcong's underground government.

To ease the burden on the center, General McChristian also set up CDEC, the Combined Document Exploitation Center; CMEC, the Combined Matériel Exploitation Center, and the CM IC, the Combined Military Interrogation Center. The work of each is explicit in its title.

As field units uncover the enemy's documents, capture weapons and question prisoners, the raw material is supposed to be forwarded to the most appropriate agency. The routing is not always the same; sometimes the material comes directly from combat units, sometimes it passes through the highest American or Vietnamese headquarters.

Rivalry, Distrust, Suspicion

The "hotter" the information the more likely it is to go to an independent American or South Vietnamese office instead of the combined center; in that way the men who make the find can act on it and perhaps record a victory for their "team."

Such rivalry, colored with distrust and suspicion, makes it difficult for the combined facilities to function as planned.

"Sometimes three or four agencies in Vietnam employ the same Vietnamese agent," the official went on. The agencies won't open their personnel

registries to one another so there is just no way of checking."

Some observers believe it likely that groups of Vietnamese who work for different agencies pool their information and present individual reports to their employers.

Some Americans find it difficult to trust any Vietnamese. Even during the time of General McChristian, the American command had a built-in deterrent to the success of the combined center: Routinely, officers stamped on sensitive documents "Secret—No Foreign," and the information could not be forwarded to the joint center.

Concealing the Source

"There is a certain kind of information that neither side will turn over," a high-ranking Army officer explained. "They won't turn in political intelligence and we won't turn in information gathered with special secret equipment. One reason for our position is not to disclose the source. Their reasoning is obvious."

To trace Vietnamese intelligence data that should go into the combined center, American advisers duplicate the reports of their counterparts and introduce them into their own channels. Informed sources maintain that the Vietnamese, for their part, have managed to penetrate American intelligence operations as interpreters, chauffeurs and handymen to learn the contents of "Secret—No Foreign" documents.

Such conditions have contributed to a proliferation of intelligence operatives. The C.I.A. is believed to have more employees in Vietnam than it has ever had in a foreign country, and the military effort is even greater.

In mid-1967 the Americans initiated another attempt at sharing intelligence, first called ICEX, for Intelligence Coordination and Exploitation, and later Phuong Huong, or Phoenix. The program was originally financed by the Central Intelligence Agency and the American military command.

Into a Single Headquarters

Its key feature was that South Vietnamese and American agencies were taken out of separate offices and brought together in a single headquarters, eliminating a number of problems in communications and inertia.

To provide immediate response, so-called provincial reconnaissance units were set up. C.I.A. agents recruited defectors and other Vietnamese wherever they could, gave them the latest equipment and trained them in small-unit tactics and the fine art of silent killing.