

Editorials

Green Beret Case Ironies

IT NOW APPEARS that Thai Khac Chuyen, the suspected double agent, was doped, pistol-whipped, shot, encased in chains and dumped into the South China Sea against the orders of higher-ups in the Central Intelligence Agency.

His intended reprieve was granted, the new reports say, not from mercy or any related compunctions, but because the American spy apparatus felt that his execution in cold blood possessed "highest moral and flap potential."

The validity of that feeling has been amply proved by the tide of revulsion produced by the bits and pieces of information filtering out of Vietnam — a tide not likely to be reduced by disclosures that Chuyen was accorded "wet disposal" even while orders for his return to duty were on the way.

THE OUTPOURING of public horror and dismay over this episode has its own ironies, coming as it does from a people who have long accepted as heroes the clever and resourceful if callous killers in numerous spy thrillers — such as, for instance, Kelly and Scotty, the men from UNCLE, who did in an adversary or two every week in an aura of sympathy and adulation. But now, under the staggering discovery that such "good guys," wearing U.S. uniforms, may have gone into the business, a decided chill has set in; now the public sympathy seems to lie with the victim and his widow, not with the executioners.

Here is a distinct shift of public sentiment away from that of prior wars, in which such episodes drew approbation from most observers on the home front, and were casually shrugged off by the rest. But those were, in general belief at least, wars for national survival, and the current blood letting has lost, if it ever possessed, that attribute in a large and growing segment of public opinion.

Disenchantment with Vietnam has many causes, including non-selective napalm bombing and the senseless strafing of a sampan dweller, as poignantly reported last week. The Green Beret affair now stands high on that sorry list. It also demonstrates why all the denials and all the cover-up attempts by the military and all the pious protestations from Congressman Rivers have been unable to put a clean face on the dirty business of such a war.