

C.I.A. Tells of Beret Case, Saying It Opposed Slaying

Officials Give Details to Show Repeated Warnings — Special Forces Again Get New Chief in Vietnam

By BENJAMIN WELLES

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Aug. 28—After weeks of strict silence, the Central Intelligence Agency is making known its own version of the Special Forces murder-and-espionage case.

In private talks here with newsmen, high C.I.A. officials are seeking to rebut charges of complicity in the reported murder of Thai Khac Chuyen, a South Vietnamese suspected of double-crossing the Army's Special Forces, or Green Berets.

Mr. Chuyen's disappearance in June has touched off an Army investigation that could lead to a court-martial of eight Special Forces soldiers, including Col. Robert B. Rheault, former commander of all Special Forces troops in South Vietnam, on charges of murder and conspiracy. The findings of a pretrial investigation—similar to a grand jury

hearing—are expected soon.

The C.I.A. officials are now furnishing dates, names, facts and figures in an effort to show that the agency repeatedly warned the Special Forces in South Vietnam against taking the life of the suspected double agent.

Army Maintains Silence

The information is also intended to suggest that even after the reported slaying, Secretary of the Army Stanley R. Resor and Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, commanding United States forces in South Vietnam, declined to issue statements clearing the Central Intelligence Agency.

[American military spokesmen in South Vietnam announced a new change in command in the Special Forces unit in the country. Col. Michael D. Healy will succeed Col. Alexander Lemberes, who replaced Colonel Rheault July 21.]

Richard C. Helms, Director of Central Intelligence and President Nixon's chief intelligence advisor, is normally one of the most tight-lipped officials in the top echelon of the Government. However, the device of the background meeting with newsmen, at which officials can unburden themselves without fear of being identified, is widely used when one Government agency or department feels it is being unjustly maligned in the press by the action or inaction of another.

Body Not Recovered

Officially, the C.I.A., the Defense Department and the Army are still refusing all comment on the case. But recent reports from Saigon, quoting "sources close to the case"—widely believed to be Special Forces personnel—have repeatedly said that the C.I.A. ordered the killing of Mr. Chuyen.

The body, it is said, was dropped in a weighted bag off the South Vietnamese coast soon after he was killed June 20 or 21. The Navy has used dredging, frogmen, sonar and other devices in an unsuccessful effort to recover it.

The C.I.A. version of the case, as related in the last 48 hours is, as follows:

At least a year ago members of a Senate-house committee that supervises Central Intelligence Agency activities and annual budget needs suggested to Mr. Helms that the agency end its long-standing association in South Vietnam with

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Associated Press

TO TAKE COMMAND: Col. Michael D. Healy, who has been a Green Beret since 1954, will be commanding officer of the Special Forces group in South Vietnam.

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the Special Forces and, generally, remove itself from operational as distinct from intelligence" gathering functions. Orders to that effect followed.

However, the C.I.A. account runs, on June 12 officers of the Fifth Special Forces group in Nhatrang approached former colleagues in the agency with a request for advice and assistance.

A Vietnamese agent whom they did not immediately identify was, they said, under suspicion as a possible double agent for the North Vietnamese. He had been employed by the Special Forces as an interpreter and leader of an indigenous team assigned to watching enemy infiltration and troop movements on the Laotian border.

The Special Forces officers intimated that they were weighing the possibility of killing the agent as a traitor and as a grave security risk to their other operations. They asked the C.I.A. for its advice, and whether it might take the agent off their hands, confining him in some "safe haven," possibly outside Vietnam.

The agency's representative in Nhatrang is said then to have queried his superiors in Saigon and to have been told emphatically not to offer facilities for harboring the agent but to urge the Special Forces not to kill him.

Photograph an Issue

Agency sources insist that they have no knowledge of a photograph—widely reported in the press—that allegedly showed the agent in conversation with North Vietnamese intelligence personnel and that is said to have set off the Special Forces' suspicions.

On June 16 the agency maintains, the Special Forces identified the agent for the first time as Thai Khac Chuyen. By then Special Forces officers had made it clear that they had virtually decided to "terminate" his employment—a euphemism for assassination.

On June 18, the C.I.A. sources continue, the agency offered to trace Mr. Chuyen through its own files and once more urged the Special Forces in Nhatrang not to kill him but to wait until the agency had had time to decide whether he might be fitted into one of its operations.

By this time the agency's office in Saigon had alerted Army headquarters to the implications of the case and interest was mounting.

However, on June 21, the agency contends, both the C.I.A. and Army authorities were assured by the Special Forces officers in Nhatrang that Mr. Chuyen had been sent on a "high-risk, sensitive mission to North Vietnam."

It was not until nine days later, according to the agency, that the truth emerged. A Special Forces sergeant, Alvin L. Smith Jr. of Naples, Fla., a member of the Nhatrang Special Forces detachment, voluntarily approached the C.I.A. office in Nhatrang, reported that Mr. Chuyen had been killed by the Special Forces and asked for protection.

He said he had opposed the killing, the C.I.A. agency says, and was fearful for his own life because, as he put it, he

was dealing with a "bunch of wild men."

At this point, the C.I.A. continues, its representative in Nhatrang allowed Sergeant Smith to stay on its premises over night and alerted its Saigon office. The next morning two agents of the Army's Criminal Investigation Division arrived and took Sergeant Smith to Saigon.

Soon afterward General Abrams ordered a full-scale investigation and the seven other Special Forces men involved—all officers—were arrested and interrogated. All seven, according to the C.I.A., lied about what had happened.

However, this version continues, after prolonged isolation and intensive interrogation all seven changed their account of the events.

What part Colonel Rheault played is not clear. One version here is that he assumed full responsibility for the actions of his subordinates and insisted on being arrested with them.

A C.I.A. representative was permitted by the Army authorities in Saigon to testify on the agency's noninvolvement during the preliminary hearings. However, the agency's approaches to General Abrams to issue a public statement absolving the C.I.A. of complicity in the case—and particularly in the alleged murder—were reportedly rebuffed. Furthermore, agency officials here conferred at length at the Pentagon with secretary of the Army Stanley R. Resor and with his deputy, Thaddeus R. Beal urging a public exoneration of the C.I.A. and again were turned down.

Mr. Resor flew to Saigon Aug. 18 on what was described as a routine visit to Army installations in Asia. The Pentagon confirmed that he would review the details of the Special Forces case with General Abrams during his stop in Vietnam. Mr. Resor is due back Monday night, his office said.

New Commander for Berets

By B. DRUMMOND AYRES Jr.
Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Aug. 28—The United States Special Forces group in South Vietnam was assigned a new commanding officer today for the second time in six weeks.

An American military spokesman said the current commander, Col. Alexander Lemberes, would be replaced Saturday by Col. Michael D. Healy, an experienced Special Forces soldier now serving as a brigade commander with the Ninth Infantry Division, which is being withdrawn from South Vietnam for deactivation.

According to the spokesman, Colonel Lemberes will return to

the United States for treatment of a leg that was broken in a parachute jump.

Colonel Lemberes, who never trained in Special Forces operations, has instead specialized in military trouble-shooting assignments. He took command of the Special Forces unit on July 21 after his predecessor, Col. Robert B. Rheault, was arrested and accused with several others in the slaying of an alleged Vietnamese double agent. Colonel Lemberes's work at Nhatrang, the central coasta

city where Special Forces have their headquarters, was described by a military spokesman today as interim.

Meanwhile, the military authorities have ordered the eight detained soldiers to remain on the Army's big Longbinh post, about 18 miles northeast of Saigon. They are awaiting a decision, after a preliminary hearing, on whether they will be court-martialed on charges arising from the slaying.

At a news conference today that ended a week-long visit

to South Vietnam, Secretary of the Army Stanley R. Resor limited his answers to questions on the case to the comment "I am satisfied that the case is being properly handled by all concerned."

Colonel Healy, the new Special Forces commander in South Vietnam, is an expert parachutist who has served in several Special Forces groups around the world and put in an earlier tour at Nhatrang in 1964. He joined the Special Forces in 1954.

For details see separate file,

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