

Green Berets at Nhatrang Shocked by Slaying Case

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Special to The New York Times

NHATRANG, South Vietnam, Aug. 7—While Army officials in South Vietnam maintained their silence, officers of the Fifth Special Forces Group here pleaded ignorance tonight of any details of the sudden detention of their former commander and seven other soldiers facing possible charges of murder and conspiracy to commit murder.

Men on the base said they were shocked not only by the announcement of the detentions but also by the lack of any further word about the allegations.

The eight Americans, two of whom are believed to be Special Forces intelligence officers, are being held in custody by the Army in connection with the death of a Vietnamese national here on June 20. Army spokesmen have refused to identify the Vietnamese or discuss any circumstances of the case.

Various Versions of Case

Spokesmen for the Special Forces, or Green Berets, are following orders to refer all inquiries to Army headquarters at Longbinh, 18 miles northeast of Saigon, where the eight men are being held. A pretrial investigation, similar to a grand-jury proceeding, is in progress.

Among those detained is Col. Robert B. Rheault, who took over as head of the Fifth Special Forces here on May 29.

One officer said that many men thought that when Colonel Rheault was relieved of command quietly on July 21 he was about to be promoted to the rank of brigadier general.

"He was considered the epitome of the Special Forces soldier," the officer said.

Informants have said that the two majors in the case, Thomas C. Middleton Jr. and David E. Crew, were the heads of intelligence-gathering units here. Spokesmen for the Special Forces declined to verify the reports.

There are various versions, all of them speculative, on what happened on June 20. Troops in downtown bars talked of highly secret "snatch operations" in which suspected Vietnamese spies are kidnapped and questioned by the Special Forces, the Army's elite counter-guerrilla experts. Some asserted that the Army could easily have handled the case without publicity. Since that did not occur, they said, the case must have some political significance.

Predecessor Had Departed

Col. Alexander Lemberes, who replaced Colonel Rheault, said he had been told only a day in advance that he was being appointed commander of the Fifth Special Forces Group. When he arrived to take command on the afternoon of July 21, Colonel Rheault had already left.

Asked about Colonel Rheault, Colonel Lemberes said:

"At no time did any discussion come up nor at any time did he volunteer any information."

"I was really surprised to see the announcement yesterday," he said. "I was surprised and shocked."

His first word of the case came yesterday morning just before the arrival of a terse Army statement for the press, the only official word in the case thus far.

Colonel Lemberes said that since he took command the Special Forces here has not participated in any investigation of the case.

3,000 Men in Group

The Fifth Special Forces consists of about 3,000 soldiers who man about 50 camps in isolated areas of South Vietnam. About 300 of the men based at Nhatrang, a seacoast town known mainly for its beautiful beaches, about 200 miles northeast of Saigon.

The men being detained, besides Colonel Rheault, Major Middleton and Major Crew, are Chief Warrant Officer Edward M. Boyle of New York City; Capt. Leland J. Brumley of Duncan, Okla.; Capt. Robert F. Marasco of Bloomfield, N. J.; Capt. Budge E. Williams of Athens, Ga., and Sgt. Alvin L. Smith Jr. of Naples, Fla. Colonel Lemberes said he

thought that any circumstances under which these men would be working as a unit would be very strange.

"It's highly unusual that you'd have full colonels working together with majors and captains," he said.

The colonel also discounted speculation that the men associated with each other during their free time, saying that age and rank differences usually curtail this.

"You don't take that cross-section of ranks and have them do something," he went on. "I've been trying to analyze this thing as I lie here in bed, and I just can't analyze it."

The colonel, who has a broken ankle, greeted reporters from his bed. His right foot and leg were in a plaster cast up to his knee. He said he broke the ankle attempting to qualify quickly for jump wings, which all Special Forces soldiers are supposed to earn. This is his first assignment with the Special Forces.

Other Green Beret officers said simply that their men were shocked at the news. They said that Colonel Rheault, who has a dry sense of humor and slightly resembles Gen. William C. Westmoreland in manner and appearance, was well liked here.

"I don't think you could find anyone here who would say a bad word about him," one officer said.