

Questions in Green Beret Affair

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Aug. 14—Under the hard, cold rules that govern wartime intelligence operations, double agents are considered fair game.

In wars as in spy novels, they have traditionally been eliminated without hesitation or compassion when their dual roles have been discovered. The Vietnam war has been no exception.

News Analysis If anything, because of the fratricidal nature of the conflict, there

have been more double agents in this war than others. Both sides have used spies extensively, and many of these have tried to serve two masters simultaneously.

According to reliable sources, more than 150 double agents have been caught and executed by allied forces in South Vietnam. If that many have been caught, no doubt many more have operated and are operating undetected.

In that case, the recent arrest of eight Special Forces soldiers facing possible charges of murdering such an agent is hard for many here to understand. The case has caused intense controversy and has generated an extraordinary amount of speculation. It has raised questions about the Army's intelligence techniques and the degree of communication and cooperation that exists—or does not exist—between various intelligence branches.

Army Is Silent

The Army has not issued an official account of the incident; indeed, it has refused to discuss it at all. But this account of the bare facts of the case has gradually emerged from informed quarters here:

The agent involved, a Vietnamese identified as Chu Ven Thai Khac, was employed by the Special Forces to head a team of clandestine trail watchers operating on both sides of the Cambodian border. Late in May or early in June, the Special Forces, or Green Berets, determined that Khac was a double agent, working also for North Vietnamese intelligence.

Cause of Arrest of 8 in Murder of Agent Stirs Speculation

According to sources close to the investigation, Khac's status as a double agent was confirmed by the United States Central Intelligence Agency, which reportedly advised that he be "eliminated." This was done on June 20 by shooting the man, placing his body in a weighted canvas bag and dropping it in the South China Sea.

A few days later the reported C.I.A. directive is said to have been rescinded. A new order directed that Khac should be spared, and that if anything had happened to him it should be reported directly to Gen. Creighton W. Abrams, the commander of the United States forces in Vietnam.

Investigation Ordered

General Abrams ordered an investigation into the incident. This resulted a month later in the arrest of the eight Special Forces soldiers pending investigation that could bring charges of murder and conspiracy to commit murder. The eight include the former Command of the Special Forces in Vietnam, Col. Robert B. Rheault; six of the others are officers and one is a sergeant.

The arrest of such ranking officers on such a charge is without precedent in Vietnam. The Army, it is speculated here, must have known when it pressed the charges that word of the proceedings would eventually get out and attract widespread attention. The military could also foresee that a public court-martial would invite investigations into the incident and into intelligence operations in general by the press and perhaps even by a Congressional committee.

Knowing all this, the Army nonetheless elected to proceed. This is what has raised the most questions here. The Army would seem to have much to lose and nothing to gain from formal prosecution.

There are other unanswered

questions. Why was the order to eliminate Khac countermanded? Why was it necessary for General Abrams to be informed of the disposition of Khac?

And why, in the first place, was the matter not turned over to the Vietnamese authorities for disposition, as is the usual procedure in cases involving Vietnamese nationals?

Unanswered Questions

Unanswered questions breed speculation, and Saigon is alive with conjecture, almost all of it unsupported by facts. There are scores of theories and explanations, with three of them most prevalent:

¶That the agent was important to someone for some reason. The C.I.A., it said, may have wanted Khac alive for further interrogation, or United States military intelligence may have wanted to use him for some special mission. He may also have been related to someone of prominence in Vietnam who tried to intercede at the last moment. Or the Vietnamese may have been eager to interrogate him in connection with their own investigation into a reported North Vietnamese spy ring that is said to have had contacts within the Presidential Palace in Saigon.

¶That Khac played some sort of political role in addition to his intelligence function, such as liaison in secret negotiations between Saigon and the North Vietnamese.

¶That some sort of interservice or interdepartmental rivalry among the Americans is involved. Many American officers here are convinced that the Army and perhaps the C.I.A. are eager to embarrass the special forces. Stories are told of intense friction between the Special Forces and more conventional elements of the armed forces in South Vietnam.

All of this remains pure speculation. The disparity between the theories is an indication of how little is known. The full story is not likely to be disclosed until and unless the eight imprisoned soldiers are put before a public court-martial.

*"in the past year"? See SFExaminer, 15 Aug 69.