



AP Wirephoto

In Long Binh after the decision (from left): Colonel Robert C. Rheault, Captain Robert F. Marasco and Major David E. Crew

Behind the Move To Free Berets

By Robert J. Donovan
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Quite obviously, the Nixon administration has chosen the less explosive way out of the Green Berets scandal, even though this leaves a sordid affair perhaps forever unexplained.

In the rising political heat generated by one of the very nasty episodes of the war there was widespread feeling in the White House that the charges against the accused Green Berets should have been dropped by the Army weeks ago.

The fact that in dropping them

yesterday Secretary of the Army Stanley R. Resor was reversing a firm position he had taken only 11 days earlier suggests that he was under pressure to do so.

For one thing, administration officials feared that a trial of the Green Berets allegedly involved in the murder of a Vietnamese double agent almost certainly would have turned into a sensational drama with world wide repercussions.

By dropping the charges, the gov-

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ment may provoke a fresh outcry from the anti-war left yet, hopefully, cool the whole controversy sooner than would have been a case if there had been a spectacular trial.

For another thing, a lot of patriotic sentiment in Congress and the country was on the side of the defendants as against some obscure Vietnamese double agent.

Thus when Representative L. Mendel Rivers (Dem-S.C.), chairman of the House Armed Services Committee and a leading hawk on the Vietnam war, announced the news of Resor's action in the House, members applauded.

'MORALE'

Across Capitol Hill, Senator Ernest F. Hollings (Dem-S.C.) said: "A trial would have served no good purpose for the Nixon Administration, the Army, the Green Berets or General Abrams (Creighton W. Abrams Jr., U.S. commander in Vietnam)."

"I think this action by the Secretary," said Representative George Bush (Rep-Tex.), "is a correct one and should prove significant in helping the morale of our combat troops."

Representative Wayne L. Hays (Dem-Ohio) remarked: "People in my district, as near as I could ascertain, were outraged that this thing went as far as it did."

"This was the right thing to do, and it should have been done a long time ago," said Representative Carl Albert (Dem-Okla.), House minority leader.

ATTITUDE

Hence, it appeared the administration saved itself considerable political trouble at home and embarrassment abroad by getting the charges dropped.

It will be a long time, however, before the end is heard of the Green Beret case.

The affair still further poisoned the public attitude toward the war, and dropping the charges will hardly rectify this.

It raised a serious moral question about the right of soldiers to kill a prisoner in cold blood without a trial, if that is indeed what hap-

pened, as has been charged. It caused bad blood between the Army and the Central Intelligence Agency on the matter of who was to blame for the incident.

DOUBTS

It has raised doubts in the White House about the Army's handling of the case.

Moreover it has been a most awkward business for General Abrams.

What appears to have happened was that when Abrams learned through a CIA man about the alleged murder of Thai Khac Chuyen, the supposed double agent, he got in touch on June 21 with Colonel Robert B. Rheault, then commander of the Green Berets in Vietnam. But Rheault reportedly replied that the Vietnamese was on a dangerous mission in Cambodia. Later Abrams became convinced that the man was in fact dead.

ANGER

Enraged, he ordered an investigation and then insisted on a court-martial. So first he felt he was the victim of a lie, and now he finds himself overruled by Resor, probably under White House pressure.

Finally, Rheault and the other defendants are left under a serious cloud by recent publication of the charges, the dropping of which will by no means wipe out doubts in many people's minds.

The whole affair indeed will go down as a tragic, ugly and badly handled episode in a tragic, ugly and badly handled war.