

Berets' Chuyen-- Was He Traitor?

By Keyes Beech

SAIGON — (CDN) — One day early last June some interesting slides were flashed on the screen in the highly secret precincts of the B-57 Detachment, Fifth Special Forces, at Nhatrang, a coastal city 200 miles northeast of here.

One picture showed the inside of a North Vietnamese base camp in Cambodia. To at least one of the American viewers, one of the faces in that picture looked familiar.

"That looks like Chuyen," he said. The speaker was Sgt. I.C. Alvin Smith, 41, of Naples, Fla., and as it turned out he had just signed a death warrant.

A Shocker

Members of the B-57 Detachment were appalled. The idea that Thai Khac Chuyen, a 31 year old North Vietnamese refugee who had worked as an interpreter-translator for Special Forces since 1965, was a double agent was a shocker.

If true, it meant that the Communists had penetrated the innermost secrets of their operations.

The B-57 Detachment was part of SOG (Special Operations Group), which has its headquarters in Saigon on Cong Ly Street next door to the Italian Embassy.

Its speciality is trans-border intelligence operations into Cambodia, Laos and North Vietnam. (it's excursions into North Vietnam have been discontinued so as not to irritate Hanoi, since the bombing halt.

SOG's teams usually com-

posed of five men — three Vietnamese and two Americans — are infiltrated into enemy territory by helicopter, by foot or both. Their job is to monitor enemy troop movements — taking pictures, collecting prisoners if possible.

Chuyen was the leader of a team that had enemy troop-watching duty in Laos. But was Chuyen really the man in the picture?

CIA sources say he was not, that his murder was a case of mistaken identity.

Special Forces officers, including just-released Berets, swear that he was.

Special Forces used to work for CIA in South Vietnam, but that is no longer true and hasn't been for more than a year at least. Still, the two groups enjoyed — or did enjoy — friendly relations.

So it was natural when on June 12 Special Forces officers went to a CIA representative at Nhatrang and asked for help and guidance. They said they had a suspected double-agent but did not disclose his name to the CIA until four days later, on June 16.

Made Up Mind

By this time, according to CIA sources, Special Forces had already made up its mind to kill Chuyen. CIA advised against it.

Meanwhile, Special Forces had submitted Chuyen to five days of intensive interrogation. Two standard Special Forces truth-seeking methods were employed—the lie detector (polygraph) and injections of sodium pentothal, a so-called truth serum.

According to Special Forces sources, Chuyen never confessed he was working for the Communists. But the Green Berets were convinced, on the basis of the tests, that Chuyen was lying. The decision was then made to "terminate" his employment.

"I Believe So"

Col. Robert Rheault, leader of the accused Berets, was asked yesterday if Chuyen had "penetrated" his operations.

"I believe so," Rheault replied.

Officials in Saigon had alerted senior officers of the U.S. military command, including Gen. Creighton Abrams, to what was happening in the Chuyen case.

Dumped in Sea

On the night of June 20 Chuyen was killed and his body dumped from a boat into the South China Sea in a heavily weighted bag. It has never been recovered.

On June 21 Rheault was summoned to Abrams' office for questioning.

Where, Abrams asked, was Chuyen?

Rheault replied that Chuyen had been sent on a top-secret mission to North Vietnam.

Asked Protection

Not until 10 days later did Abrams learn the truth. On June 30 Smith walked into the office of the senior CIA man in Nhatrang, told him about Chuyen's murder and asked for protection from his former comrades in Special Forces.

"Smith was full of remorse," one intelligence source said. "Chuyen was his

man. They had worked together for more than a year. He was no longer at all sure that it was Chuyen in the picture."

The next morning Smith was flown to Saigon in the company of two Army criminal investigation agents to repeat his story.

"Blew Stack"

"That was when Abrams blew his stack," said one source familiar with the case. "The idea that Rheault, a fellow West Pointer and a full colonel, could lie to him was more than he could stand. He ordered Special Forces cleaned out — not because he had anything against them personally but because he didn't approve of their methods.

"In any event, quite apart from his emotional reaction to being lied to, Abrams had no choice, after hearing Smith's story, but to go ahead and order a full-scale investigation. If Smith's story was true, it was a plain case of murder," this source said.

Not until July 21, a month after the killing, did Abrams relieve Rheault of his command. When Rheault and the others were subsequently arrested, intelligence sources said, all seven lied about what happened. Later, however, according to this version, all seven changed their stories.

Meanwhile, intelligence operations are in for a severe overhauling. The man in charge is Col. Michael Healy of Chicago, Abrams' personal choice as the new Special Forces commander.