

Army's Investigator

William Ray Peers

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WASHINGTON, March 17—When the Army appointed Lieut. Gen. William R. Peers last November to head the panel looking into the Songmy incident, Pentagon associates disclosed that he was not particularly happy, and may even have "growled a little bit" about the assignment.

Man in the News But the exhaustive investigation that followed and the dramatic charges that resurfaced today came as no surprise to those who know General Peers and credit his "tenacity," "aggressiveness" and "toughness" in carrying out a delicate and sensitive task.

"He was a very effective interrogator and quickly came to the heart of the matter," said an associate who served with him on the panel for more than 100 days. The panel took testimony from almost 400 individuals in trying to determine if there had been an official "cover-up" of the incident.

Members of the panel say he took the lead in questioning those who appeared before the group and, on occasion, spent as many as 20 consecutive hours on the job to insure that it would be finished as soon as possible.

No Military Nickname

Unlike other generals who have military nicknames, General Peers is simply called by his middle name—Ray.

"The military people who worked with him in Vietnam sort of idealized him," says a civilian who knew him at the time.

That was about two years ago, when General Peers was commanding general of the First Field Force, a job that entailed substantial duties in the area of "pacification." Although he had occasional confrontations and disagreements over his zealous approach to pacification—he apparently insisted on large-scale resettlement of Vietnamese civilians. The American civilian recalls him as "intelligent," and "forceful," and "a general who didn't lose his temper."



Associated Press

A very effective interrogator.

General Peers was born on June 14, 1914, in Stuart, Iowa, and graduated from Covina High School in California. He attended the University of California, Los Angeles, where he was an end on the varsity football team and a member of the wrestling team. He graduated in 1937.

He saw action in World War II with the Office of Strategic Services and served as commander of Detachment 101 in northern Burma.

Led Unit into Nanking

He later served with the O.S.S. in China, and when the armistice was announced he organized and dispatched United States teams to the several Japanese prisoner of war camps that were located in China and Korea. He subsequently led a Chinese parachute-commando unit into Nanking to occupy that city. After the war, he was the co-author of a book entitled, "Behind the Burma Road."

His decorations include a Distinguished Service Medal with two oak leaf clusters, a Silver Star and the Distinguished Flying Cross.

The silver-haired, cigar-chomping general is an avid fisherman but he has had little time to pursue his hobby since he was assigned to head the Sonmy inquiry. According to his wife, the demands of the task have also left little time for "home life."

Her feelings on the job that her husband has carried out were summed up in one brief phrase: "I'm sure glad it's over."

In an earlier post in Vietnam, General Peers was commander of the Fourth Infantry Division. In this role, he was commander of the area in the fight over Hill 875, one of the bloodiest battles in the entire war. The more than 100 American infantry casualties that resulted, and the abandonment of the hill, brought some criticism upon the general.