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Williams to Argue That Berets' Trial Stems From Bureaucratic Rivalry

CPYRGHT

THE TRIAL of the Green Berets accused of murder in Vietnam recalls a troubled man whose name—let us say—was Duke.

The time was shortly after World War II, and Duke, an OSS agent, was called upon by U.S. headquarters to explain why he had murdered a French girl whose name—let us say—was Marie.

The story he told erased the most immediate of his troubles. For, as Duke explained it, it became quite clear to his superiors that he had taken the only possible course. Marie was a double agent. If she lived, an entire company of French maquis to whom Duke was assigned would die.

There are some things men do in war which—granted war—must be done. But it never seems right afterwards—as Duke found out, and as no doubt Col. Robert Rheault is now reflecting. And it is never easily explained to civilians—or, for that matter, to army officers who have never had to face those moments when the code of military conduct does not fit.

That is why Rheault's attorney hopes Defense Secretary Laird or President Nixon will call a halt to the trial. For by the time the attorney, Edward Bennett Williams, is through with his presentation, a bungled war in Vietnam will seem even more bungled, and acts which in World War II might have been regarded as excusable will seem sordid as can be.

Williams will try to show that the trial is the result of two intelligence agencies tripping over each other's toes.

A LITTLE HISTORY is in order. In late 1963, the Green Berets took over a Viet Cong operation aimed at persuading the Montagnards to deny their hilltop villages to



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the Vietcong, who were using them as bases.

CIA had been providing arms to these tribesmen, who bear allegiance neither to the Vietcong nor to Saigon. For fun and profit, they were willing to defend their mountaintops against the VC.

As a military operation, the plan did not work out well. With typical army thoroughness, the Green Berets tried to persuade the Montagnards to go on the offensive—to join the war. In this the tribesmen had no interest. But they did provide the base for an intelligence operation into Cambodia, in which Col. Rheault and his men were engaged when they were suddenly arrested.

When they took over the operation, the Green Berets also took over a Vietnamese agent for the CIA. They later believed that he had "turned." In the course of their tender handling, he died.

CIA disagreed with the Green Berets' action. Whether the agency agreed or disagreed with the Green Beret assessment is not clear. But the ground rules called for the CIA station chief to be consulted. He was not.

HE WAS FURIOUS. The result of his fury will be an embarrassing public trial unless someone moves to halt it. In fact, Gen. Creighton Abrams, the U.S. commander in Vietnam, originally hoped that CIA Direc-

tor Richard Helms would do so.

Helms might have informed Abrams that a public trial would endanger secret networks and thus the national security. But Helms chose to back up his Vietnam station chief, and short of intervention from on high, the whole affair is not too big to stop.

Bureaucratic struggles between intelligence agencies are not new. During World War II, Army G-2 frequently complained about William J. Donovan's OSS. And during the Cold War, the number of agents tripping over each other's heels in Eastern Europe led to Soviet Premier Khrushchev's famous remark to the late CIA chief Allen W. Dulles, "Of course we have much in common. We read each other's reports."

But both World War II and the Cold War were popular wars. Ideology confronted ideology, and whatever the mistakes, most Americans thought it important that our side win.

Vietnam is not the same thing. A bungled war, further bungled by bureaucratic rivalry leading to a bungled murder, is not likely to be admired hot-stove reading this winter.

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