



LEADERSHIP ON THE EDGE

Colonel Robert Rheault

Leadership, Judgement and Accountability in the Shadows

CASE STUDY NO. 1

CENTRAL LEADERSHIP QUESTION

How should leaders act when they believe a threat is real, certainty is unavailable, and both action and inaction carry potentially serious consequences?

LEADERSHIP THESIS

Leadership is the disciplined art of acting without certainty while remaining accountable for the consequences.

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Executive Summary

Colonel Robert Bradley Rheault is most often remembered for the 1969 Green Beret Affair. To begin there, however, is to read his career backwards. Long before Vietnam, he had developed an unusual combination of combat credibility, intellectual breadth, language ability and Special Forces command experience. A West Point graduate, Korean War veteran and Silver Star recipient, Rheault later studied in Paris, earned a master's degree in international relations, taught French at West Point, served with the 10th Special Forces Group and commanded the 1st Special Forces Group before taking command of the 5th Special Forces Group in Vietnam.

Rheault entered a command environment in which conventional military power was only one part of the struggle. The Vietnam War was also a contest for information, influence, legitimacy and access. North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces exploited Cambodian sanctuary areas while overt American activity remained politically constrained. Project GAMMA, formally Detachment B-57, sought to answer this problem through clandestine human intelligence networks. Its strength was access to denied areas. Its vulnerability was dependence upon people whose loyalty, motivation and reporting could never be known with complete certainty.

The Green Beret Affair arose after GAMMA personnel concluded that Thai Khac Chuyen, a South Vietnamese agent and interpreter, had compromised the network. Chuyen was detained, interrogated and killed. Rheault and seven other Special Forces personnel were later charged in connection with the killing. The case collapsed when the government could not reconcile prosecution with the protection of sensitive intelligence evidence. The charges were dismissed, but Rheault's command and military career were effectively over.

This study does not attempt to deliver a simple retrospective verdict. Instead, it uses Rheault, GAMMA and the affair to examine a more durable leadership problem: how should leaders act when a threat appears real, evidence remains incomplete, authorities overlap and delay may be dangerous? Viewed in that light, the case demonstrates that intelligence confidence and legal proof are different standards, that secrecy increases rather than reduces the need for

internal accountability, and that an operationally understandable action may still prove strategically indefensible.

The central failure pattern in the case was not simply a failure to decide. It was a failure to keep decision-making aligned as the situation changed. What began as a suspected intelligence penetration evolved into a command, legal, institutional and legitimacy crisis. Continuous Reassessment is therefore not presented here as a final review activity. It is the leadership discipline that keeps reality, priorities and action connected under pressure. Through **VECTOR™** (Appendix 1), the case reveals four core decision disciplines supported by one defining concept: **Continuous Reassessment**.

- **REGULATE** applies to the individual leader and the collective psychology of the organisation.
- **VERIFY** separates fact, assessment, assumption and unknowns.
- **PRIORITISE** defines the most important controllable problem rather than attacking the most visible symptom.
- **EXECUTE** matches the action to the quality of evidence and preserves options where uncertainty is high.
- **CONTINUOUS REASSESSMENT** maintains alignment between reality, priorities and action as information, conditions and consequences evolve.

For readers outside the military, these terms can be read as a practical decision cycle: steady yourself, test the facts, define the real problem, act proportionately and continuously reassess what has changed. Rheault remains valuable as a leadership case because his strengths and vulnerabilities cannot be neatly separated. Trust enabled decentralised operations, but it could also reduce scrutiny. Loyalty inspired followers, but it could complicate detachment. Comfort with ambiguity supported unconventional warfare, but it could normalise unclear authority.

Mission focus concentrated effort, but it could narrow strategic perspective. His experience reminds us that leadership qualities are not virtues in isolation. Their value depends on the judgement with which they are applied.

1. Why Robert Rheault Still Matters

Most leadership studies begin with success, examining the commander who won the battle, the chief executive who transformed an organisation or the coach who built a championship team. Such studies can be useful, but they are often distorted by outcome bias: later success gives earlier decisions a coherence and inevitability they rarely possessed at the time. Ambiguity is edited out, alternatives disappear and the leader begins to appear as though he or she always knew exactly what would happen.

Rheault offers a different kind of study. His importance does not rest on a famous victory, but on the collision he came to embody: professional competence and personal loyalty set against covert activity, military command, intelligence relationships, legal accountability and political legitimacy. That combination resists easy celebration, but it also resists easy condemnation.

The case matters as capable leaders are rarely brought undone by a simple absence of intelligence, commitment or courage. More often, they encounter difficulty when their strongest qualities are applied inside a system that changes the meaning of their decisions. Decisiveness in one context becomes rashness in another. Loyalty to subordinates can appear as institutional insularity, confidence generated by experience can become indistinguishable from certainty, and secrecy necessary for operational security can frustrate the accountability on which legitimacy depends.

Rheault's command was brief, but the questions raised by it are enduring:

- What level of confidence justifies intervention?
- How should a commander supervise work that is deliberately compartmented?
- What happens when an organisation gives a leader formal responsibility without complete operational visibility?
- Can an officer remain loyal to subordinates while acting as an independent source of scrutiny?
- How should the leader account for consequences beyond the immediate mission?

These questions reach well beyond the military. Executives make decisions during cyber incidents on fragmentary indicators; sporting organisations respond to allegations before every fact is known; security teams act on threat assessments that may be persuasive without being conclusive; and public officials must balance confidentiality with transparency. In each case, the leader is tempted either to wait for impossible certainty or to convert conviction into action too quickly.

The value of the Rheault case is therefore diagnostic rather than devotional. We study him not as a heroic template to be copied, but as a way of understanding how judgement behaves when urgency, secrecy and fragmented authority weaken the safeguards on which good decisions normally depend. This is the terrain VECTOR is intended to navigate: not by removing uncertainty, but by helping leaders act, learn, adapt and remain accountable as the situation evolves. Its defining discipline is Continuous Reassessment — the habit of repeatedly asking whether the leader's understanding, priorities and actions still match reality.

2. The Making of a Warrior-Scholar

The term warrior-scholar is often used so loosely that it loses practical meaning. Properly understood, it should not describe an officer who merely reads widely or holds an advanced degree. A warrior-scholar combines intellectual curiosity, reflective judgement and operational credibility. The scholar seeks to understand systems, assumptions and context; the warrior accepts responsibility for turning that understanding into action. One asks what is happening and why. The other asks what must now be done.

Rheault's development fits this archetype. His education at Phillips Exeter and West Point placed him in institutions that valued discipline, intellectual achievement and service. His later study in Paris and international relations broadened that foundation beyond tactics and administration. His fluency in French and experience teaching at West Point suggest that language and culture were not incidental interests. For an officer who would later work in unconventional warfare, they were professional tools.

Language study can cultivate an underappreciated leadership quality: the recognition that other people organise reality differently. A commander working through foreign partners cannot assume that his own institution's categories, incentives and expectations are universal. Cultural intelligence does not mean romanticising local actors. It means understanding that effective influence begins with a realistic appreciation of how others see the problem.

Rheault's combat service in Korea provided a different form of education. The award of the Silver Star, together with his progression through operational appointments, established credibility that academic accomplishment alone could not provide. Combat subjects judgement to consequence, testing whether analysis remains useful under fear, fatigue, incomplete information and pressure. The warrior-scholar must therefore be credible in both the seminar room and the field.

His decision to enter Special Forces in the early 1960s is particularly revealing. Special Forces demanded more than physical toughness. Officers and non-commissioned officers had to work through indigenous forces, operate independently, communicate across cultures and solve problems for which no prescribed method was sufficient. Conventional formations often seek precision through control. Special Forces frequently seek effect through leverage, relationships and delegated initiative.

This environment suited Rheault's breadth. Service with the 10th Special Forces Group in Europe and command of the 1st Special Forces Group in Okinawa exposed him to unconventional warfare within the geopolitical contest of the Cold War. By the time he reached Vietnam, he was not a novice placed suddenly in an unusual organisation. He had become part of the professional culture that was still defining what American Special Forces should be.

The archetype nevertheless carries risk. Intellectual confidence can harden into certainty. A leader comfortable with complexity can become impatient with those outside the specialist community. Success beyond conventional structures can foster the belief that ordinary procedures are designed for ordinary people and need not apply to exceptional missions. This

is not an inevitable failure of the warrior-scholar, but it is the shadow side of the type, and it becomes especially important wherever secrecy and elite identity combine.

3. Character, Command and Trust

The public record cannot provide a complete psychological portrait of Rheault. Later accounts are influenced by loyalty, sympathy and disagreement over the affair. Even so, recurring themes provide a reasonable basis for leadership analysis.

The second theme is mission command, a leadership approach in which senior leaders establish shared intent, define boundaries and delegate decision-making authority to capable teams. The 5th Special Forces Group was dispersed across a broad and complex environment. Detailed supervision of every activity was impossible. Rheault had to rely on subordinate commanders, specialists and intelligence personnel who possessed knowledge he could not replicate personally. His task was to create purpose, select capable people, establish boundaries, preserve organisational alignment and maintain enough visibility to remain accountable.

The second theme is mission command, a leadership approach in which senior leaders set intent and boundaries, then trust capable teams to act within them. The 5th Special Forces Group was dispersed across a broad and complex environment. Detailed supervision of every activity was impossible. Rheault had to rely on subordinate commanders, specialists and intelligence personnel who possessed knowledge he could not replicate personally. His task was to create purpose, select capable people, establish boundaries and maintain enough visibility to remain accountable.

Mission command is sometimes romanticised as freedom from control. Properly understood, it pairs decentralised execution with disciplined intent: local teams are trusted to adapt, but the overall purpose, limits and accountability remain clear. Trust is not the absence of governance; it is the condition that allows governance to be less intrusive while still effective. Without clear authorities and reporting, decentralisation does not produce initiative so much as fragmentation.

The third theme is loyalty. Many Special Forces personnel continued to respect Rheault after the affair and viewed him as a commander who did not abandon his people when the organisation came under pressure. Followers remember whether leaders share risk or move responsibility downward. This form of loyalty can generate extraordinary cohesion.

In the context of the Green Beret Affair, that loyalty became especially visible. Rheault did not distance himself from the men associated with GAMMA when the matter came under investigation; nor did he present the affair as a simple failure of rogue subordinates acting outside the moral boundary of the command. To many within the Special Forces community, this mattered deeply. Their work depended on delegated trust, shared danger and a belief that commanders would not abandon teams once an operation became politically or institutionally difficult. Rheault's posture was therefore read by supporters as evidence that he accepted the burdens of command and remained loyal to those who had operated within a system he was responsible for leading.

That loyalty, however, also reveals the central tension in the case. At junior levels, loyalty often means standing with the team under pressure. At command level, loyalty must also include protection of the institution's standards, the rights of those affected by decisions and the legitimacy of the mission itself. Rheault's continued identification with his people demonstrated moral courage to some observers, but it also invites the harder leadership question: when does loyalty to trusted subordinates strengthen command, and when can it make independent scrutiny more difficult? The case is powerful precisely because both interpretations can exist at once.

Yet senior leadership requires loyalty in several directions at once. The commander owes obligations to subordinates, mission, institution, lawful authority, professional standards and the society the institution serves. Most of the time these loyalties reinforce one another. In crisis, they can pull apart. The test is not whether the leader abstractly chooses the team or the institution. It is whether the leader creates conditions in which the team can perform without being placed outside legitimate accountability.

Rheault's later work with Outward Bound enriches this portrait. He spent decades in outdoor education and created programs for Vietnam veterans, carrying forward a conception of leadership grounded in inspiring people to undertake difficult, uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous tasks for a shared purpose. The continuity between small Special Forces teams and Outward Bound groups suggests that he saw leadership as a relationship based on competence, hardship, purpose and mutual reliance rather than position alone.

That makes the GAMMA crisis more, not less, interesting. A leader who trusted people deeply, and who believed in accepting responsibility, encountered a situation in which trust itself needed to be tested. The strengths of his command philosophy were placed under the exact conditions most likely to expose their limits.

4. Vietnam and the Invisible Battlefield

The popular image of Vietnam is dominated by helicopter assaults, jungle patrols, artillery fires and conventional formations searching for enemy units. That picture is accurate, but incomplete. Beneath the visible war was another contest: for information, legitimacy, influence, access and control of the human terrain.

American forces possessed enormous destructive power. The enduring challenge was identifying where and when that power could be applied effectively. Enemy formations could disperse, conceal themselves among population networks or move across politically sensitive borders. Political cadres, intelligence networks and logistics systems often mattered as much as units in the field.

This turned knowledge into operational power. Accurate intelligence could reveal a base area, expose a supply route, identify a planned attack or protect a friendly network. Inaccurate or manipulated intelligence could direct resources towards the wrong target, reveal collection methods and generate a false understanding of the conflict.

Cambodia intensified the problem. Its formal neutrality constrained overt action, while North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces used sanctuary areas and routes across the border. The

political map and the operational map did not correspond. The adversary could exploit geography in ways unavailable to conventional American formations.

Grey-zone environments emerge from precisely these gaps: situations that sit between normal competition and open conflict, where rules, visibility and authority are often unclear. The threat is real, overt options are constrained, delay carries risk and covert action creates its own legal and political exposure. Institutions respond by creating compartmented programs, meaning tightly restricted activities where only a limited number of people are allowed to know the full details, along with unusual authorities and indirect methods. These mechanisms can be operationally effective, but they can also make responsibility harder to locate when consequences emerge.

As commander of the 5th Special Forces Group, Rheault inherited responsibility for a diverse organisation conducting village defence, partner development, reconnaissance, unconventional warfare and intelligence-related activity. He did not command a single homogenous system. He commanded intersecting systems, some visible and some deliberately concealed.

The organisation was therefore operating through multiple concurrent decision cycles. Command teams were concerned with authority, risk and accountability; operational teams were focused on source protection and immediate threat control; intelligence functions were testing access, reliability and compromise; political leadership had to consider legitimacy and escalation. Different teams may address different problems while still contributing to a broader organisational objective, but only if their priorities remain connected.

In such an environment, the leader's first assessment is rarely sufficient. New reporting, shifting authorities, emerging political constraints and unintended effects can quickly change the nature of the problem. Command therefore requires not only initial judgement, but disciplined reassessment of whether the problem being solved is still the problem that matters most.

This produced a structural dilemma. The commander needed enough information to exercise responsibility, yet operational security required compartmentation, or limiting sensitive information to those judged to need it. Subordinates needed initiative, yet their actions could create effects far beyond the immediate mission. Agencies shared broad national objectives, but they did not necessarily share the same legal authorities, reporting relationships or institutional incentives.

Rheault did not design this architecture, but command includes inherited systems. A new commander cannot treat ambiguity created by predecessors as someone else's problem. One of the first duties of command is to identify where responsibility, authority and information fail to align. Vietnam offered little time for that work, and GAMMA represented one of its most acute expressions.

5. Project GAMMA

Project GAMMA was the designation associated with Detachment B-57, a clandestine intelligence capability linked to the 5th Special Forces Group. In plain terms, it was a secretive collection network designed to gather information from human sources in places where conventional forces could not operate openly. Its focus was North Vietnamese and Viet Cong activity in Cambodia and border regions. Its purpose was visibility: to see into areas where conventional American forces had limited reach.

GAMMA's networks could report on enemy base areas, command locations, troop strengths, supply activity and movement patterns. Contemporary and later accounts describe it as highly productive, although exact quantitative claims should be treated carefully because much of the program remained classified and later accounts vary in detail. The broad conclusion is nevertheless consistent: GAMMA provided intelligence that senior commanders considered valuable.

Its primary instrument was the human source, which made the project both uniquely capable and uniquely fragile. Technical systems have measurable limitations. Human reporting adds motivation, fear, loyalty, memory, perception and self-interest. A source may be truthful but

mistaken, reliable on one subject and deceptive on another, loyal but vulnerable to coercion, or deliberately controlled by an adversary.

Human intelligence, often shortened to HUMINT, means information gathered through people rather than sensors, documents or electronic systems. It is therefore not binary. It is a continuing judgement about confidence. Handlers assess access, motivation, past reporting, corroboration and behaviour. Even strong reporting remains vulnerable because people change. A reliable source can become compromised without the organisation immediately recognising it.

This produces a leadership challenge deeper than information collection. The commander must understand how confidence has been produced. How many independent sources support the assessment? Are they truly independent or repeating a common origin? What evidence would disconfirm the prevailing view? Which elements are facts, which are analytic judgements and which are assumptions inserted to make the picture coherent?

By 1969 GAMMA personnel believed their network had been penetrated. Sources had disappeared and suspicion focused on Thai Khac Chuyen, a South Vietnamese agent and interpreter. From inside the operation, the issue did not appear to concern one potentially disloyal individual. A penetration could expose agents, manipulate reporting, compromise methods and destroy access painstakingly built over time.

Insider threats create unusual psychological pressure. The suspected insider not only threatens security; he attacks the organisation's understanding of itself. Every previous success becomes questionable. Every unexplained loss can be reinterpreted as evidence of betrayal. Urgency rises because delay may expose more people, while the reliability of the very information used to assess the threat is in doubt. This is the moment at which professional challenge is most necessary. Once a group adopts the penetration hypothesis, ambiguous indicators can become self-confirming. A disappearance supports the theory. A denial supports it, as a trained agent would deny involvement. A gap in reporting supports it, as the adversary may have closed the channel. Without a deliberate search for disconfirming evidence, the theory can become impossible to falsify.

GAMMA's authority arrangements increased the risk. Accounts describe complicated relationships among Special Forces, military intelligence and the CIA. Formal command, operational direction and informal authority based on expertise did not always align. A military commander could remain responsible for personnel while lacking complete visibility of compartmented activity, meaning work deliberately separated into restricted channels. Intelligence personnel could influence operations without exercising formal military command.

Some ambiguity is unavoidable in covert work. Sources and methods cannot be exposed to every part of the hierarchy. Yet secrecy should narrow distribution, not dissolve accountability. The critical governance question is whether someone with genuine authority can see enough of the picture to challenge assumptions, approve risk and take responsibility.

GAMMA thus provides the essential setting for the affair. It was not merely a secret unit attached to a larger command; it was a high-value, high-trust system operating with uncertain sources, blurred authorities and severe consequences for compromise. It demanded excellent judgement while weakening many of the safeguards that normally support it.

6. The Green Beret Affair

The Green Beret Affair began as a counterintelligence problem and became a national controversy. Its leadership significance lies in the movement between those worlds.

That movement is precisely why Continuous Reassessment matters. Leaders must recognise when a problem has changed category. A threat problem may become an authority problem. An intelligence problem may become a legal problem. A local operational judgement may become a strategic legitimacy issue.

GAMMA personnel reportedly believed that Chuyen was passing information to North Vietnamese intelligence and that his activity was connected to the compromise or disappearance of sources. The available public record remains incomplete and accounts differ over details. A disciplined study should therefore distinguish what later writers assert from what can be established with confidence.

The participants did not possess hindsight. They faced a suspected penetration, potentially exposed networks, incomplete evidence, sensitive cross-border operations and uncertain interagency support. Their assessment may have appeared compelling from inside the system even if much of the evidence would not later meet the standards required in a courtroom.

Rheault had assumed command of the 5th Special Forces Group shortly before the central events. This timing matters. He inherited the organisation, trust relationships and assumptions surrounding GAMMA. He was formally responsible for the group, but the compartmented nature of the activity, where knowledge was deliberately restricted to protect secrecy, complicates any simple claim about what he personally knew at each stage.

Leadership analysis must separate four categories: what Rheault directly observed, what subordinates reported, what he inferred and what he authorised or accepted. Retrospective narratives often blend these categories. Doing so creates an appearance of certainty that the evidence does not always support.

Chuyen was detained, interrogated and killed in June 1969. His body was later disposed of at sea. The personnel directly associated with these events were U.S. Army Special Forces members connected to Project GAMMA. It is more precise, however, to describe the accused as Special Forces officers and personnel rather than simply as “Green Beret officers”, as the men involved occupied different ranks and roles. Rheault was charged alongside seven other Special Forces personnel, but public accounts do not generally place him as physically present at the killing itself. His leadership significance lies instead in his position as the recently appointed commander of the 5th Special Forces Group. The central question is what he knew, what was reported to him, what he authorised or accepted, and how far command responsibility extends when trusted subordinates act within a compartmented intelligence system. This was an irreversible action. Its irreversibility is central, as the verification threshold should rise with the severity and finality of the proposed response.

The key question is therefore not only whether GAMMA personnel were justified in believing the network had been compromised. It is whether the confidence, authority, oversight and range of alternatives were sufficient for the action selected.

Army investigators later arrested Rheault and seven other Special Forces personnel and brought charges connected with premeditated murder and conspiracy. The matter quickly became public. A problem previously assessed through secret reporting and operational confidence was now subject to formal evidence, legal rights and external scrutiny.

That transition changed the standard. Intelligence work often asks what is most likely true and how much confidence should be placed in an assessment. Criminal law asks what can be proved through admissible evidence and tested process. Information persuasive in the first system may be unusable in the second.

The CIA's role became central. The defence and prosecution required access to classified context, personnel and relationships, but disclosure risked sensitive operations and methods. The agency declined to provide some of the required cooperation. The government ultimately dismissed the charges.

Dismissal did not amount to a trial finding that no killing occurred. Nor did it establish the exact responsibility of every accused individual. The process ended because the state could not reconcile two of its own interests: prosecuting alleged criminal conduct and protecting intelligence secrecy.

The distinction between legal outcome and leadership consequence is important. Rheault's charges were dismissed, but his command did not return. His promotion prospects disappeared and he retired from the Army. A leader can prevail in a legal domain but lose organisational confidence, political support and professional trajectory.

The affair may therefore be understood as a tragedy of problem framing. If the problem was defined as the removal of a penetrator, attention naturally narrowed towards the person. If it had been framed more broadly as protecting the network, determining the extent of compromise and preserving institutional legitimacy, a wider and more proportionate set of options may have remained visible.

It was also a failure of alignment. Responsibility, authority, information, legal boundaries and institutional support were not sufficiently coherent. This does not erase individual

responsibility. It identifies the system that shaped the decision and then proved unable to defend or adjudicate it.

The Green Beret Affair endures because each side of the dilemma contains a real concern. Intelligence networks do require protection, insider threats can be catastrophic and delay can cost lives. At the same time, secrecy cannot place state action beyond law, and operational conviction cannot automatically substitute for accountable proof. The case is useful not because it offers an easy moral, but because it refuses one.

7. Operational Logic and Institutional Accountability

The affair brought two systems of judgement into collision. The operational world valued speed, secrecy, intelligence confidence, source protection and mission effect. The institutional world required authority, evidence, due process, transparency to legitimate reviewers and accountability for irreversible action. Both were real, and neither could simply cancel the other.

Neither system is inherently wrong. Intelligence organisations cannot disclose every source and method. Courts cannot impose serious consequences solely on the basis of operational conviction. The problem begins when success in one system is assumed to satisfy the standards of the other.

An action may be operationally understandable without being strategically defensible. Senior leaders must hold both perspectives at once. They must understand the urgency felt by specialists closest to the threat while asking how the action will appear to authorities who do not share their assumptions or access.

This is not a demand for timid command. It is recognition that strategic success includes legitimacy. An operation that protects a network but damages institutional authority may produce a larger defeat. Conversely, a legalistic process that ignores urgent risk may fail the people it is meant to protect.

Secrecy intensifies this challenge. External scrutiny may be impossible during a sensitive operation. That makes internal accountability more important, not less. The less an organisation can permit outsiders to review its conduct, the stronger its internal authorities, records, challenge mechanisms and escalation pathways must become.

A mature covert system should be able to answer: who had authority, what information supported the decision, what alternatives were considered, what threshold applied, who challenged the assessment, and how the decision would be reassessed if assumptions changed. These disciplines protect both mission and legitimacy.

The deeper failure in the affair was alignment. Formal command responsibility, operational influence, access to information and institutional willingness to support consequences were not integrated. When the matter became public, the same secrecy that helped the operation function prevented the system from explaining itself.

This yields a critical leadership proposition: hidden decisions do not remain hidden forever. Leaders should make sensitive choices as though a legitimate reviewer may one day examine the reasoning, even if the operational details remain classified. Accountability delayed is still accountability.

8. Rheault Through VECTOR

VECTOR provides a disciplined way to reconstruct the case without pretending that a framework can supply certainty retrospectively. In its current form, the model links each discipline to an outcome:

Regulate creates **Clarity**

Verify creates **Understanding**

Prioritise creates **Direction**; **Execute** creates **Progress**

Continuous Reassessment creates **Adaptation**.

Continuous Reassessment is the defining concept that maintains alignment between reality, priorities and action.

REGULATE → CLARITY asks what may be distorting judgement:

- In GAMMA, those influences included fear that agents would be lost, anger at suspected betrayal, loyalty to colleagues, pressure to preserve a productive capability and professional confidence within an elite community.
- Rheault was reputed to be composed and analytical, but regulation must apply to the group as well as the individual.

Elite teams often manage visible fear well. Their greater danger may be collective overconfidence. Strong cohesion can make agreement feel like corroboration. Outsider challenge may be dismissed as ignorance of the mission. The leader must create a decision environment in which disciplined dissent is treated as service rather than disloyalty.

Practical regulation would require naming the emotional stakes, separating urgency from haste, appointing a credible challenger and asking what evidence could alter the prevailing view. The central question is whether the organisation is responding to the threat or to the feelings created by perceived betrayal.

VERIFY → UNDERSTANDING is a continuing discipline, not a single gate passed before action:

- Leaders should divide the picture into confirmed facts, corroborated reporting, analytic assessments, planning assumptions and unknowns.
- They should examine source independence, reliability, alternative explanations and disconfirming evidence.

Verification is not waiting for certainty. Certainty may never arrive. It is understanding the quality and limitations of the information before selecting an action. The more severe and irreversible the action, the higher the required threshold.

Verification must also be refreshed as the situation moves. Continuous Reassessment asks whether earlier confidence still holds after new information, new consequences or new doubts emerge.

This creates a graded approach. A reversible administrative adjustment may rely on moderate confidence. Temporary containment may require stronger evidence. A major operational commitment should require high confidence. A severe irreversible action should demand the most rigorous verification and authority available.

PRIORITISE → DIRECTION asks for the most important controllable problem:

- Was it Chuyen, the suspected penetration, exposed sources, manipulated reporting, unclear authority or the integrity of the collection system?
- These are connected but not identical.

If a person is defined as the problem, options narrow around that person. If network protection is the problem, the leader can isolate access, protect agents, rebuild channels, validate reporting and map the extent of compromise. Better problem framing creates more proportionate choices.

Priority of effort should be explicit. In a penetration crisis it might initially be protecting exposed people and preventing further information loss. A secondary effort could establish the truth of the allegation. A third could preserve institutional legitimacy through clear authority and records. Naming priorities prevents the most emotionally salient issue from consuming all attention.

This is where nested priorities matter. A field team might reasonably define its priority problem as immediate network compromise. A command team might define it as protecting sources while preserving lawful authority. Political or institutional leadership might define it as maintaining legitimacy and strategic control. The challenge was not the existence of competing priorities, but maintaining alignment between nested priorities so that urgent operational action did not detach from the broader organisational objective.

EXECUTE → PROGRESS converts judgement into accountable action:

- Crisis narratives frequently offer a false choice between decisive action and passivity.
- In reality, leaders can employ progressive commitment: observe, contain, test and commit.

Observation organises facts and identifies gaps. Containment limits damage without presuming guilt. Testing seeks information capable of confirming or disproving the assessment. Commitment applies the necessary decisive measure once threshold and authority are satisfied.

Execution under uncertainty should create progress without destroying the leader's ability to learn. Progressive commitment allows leaders to act early, contain risk and preserve options until evidence, authority and consequence are aligned. The leader should ask whether the action is proportionate, lawful, reversible, supported by authority and connected to the intended outcome. Stop conditions and escalation criteria should be clear before execution begins.

CONTINUOUS REASSESSMENT → ADAPTATION is not a final review step, a lessons-learned activity or a pause after execution. It is the defining concept that maintains alignment between reality, priorities and action. It runs through every part of VECTOR, continually testing whether pressure is distorting judgement, whether evidence still supports the assessment, whether the priority remains correct and whether action is producing acceptable consequences:

- In the Rheault case, reassessment would have required leaders to continually test new information, changed conditions, action effects, assumptions and priorities.
- The original operational issue expanded into legal, political, institutional and reputational crises, demonstrating that progress in one domain can create new risk in another.

This is perhaps the strongest VECTOR lesson in the case: good decision-makers act, but great decision-makers reassess. Reassessment asks whether the leader's understanding still

matches reality, whether priorities remain valid, whether action is producing the intended effect and whether the centre of risk has shifted.

In practical terms, reassessment asks recurring questions: Has reality changed? Has the priority changed? Has the action changed the environment? Have assumptions been challenged? Has the decision created new consequences that now require leadership attention? Adaptation is the outcome of answering those questions honestly and adjusting understanding, priorities or action accordingly.

VECTOR is therefore not linear.

Regulate creates clarity.

Verify creates understanding.

Prioritise creates direction.

Execute creates progress.

Continuous Reassessment creates adaptation. Clarity enables understanding; understanding establishes direction; direction creates progress; progress drives adaptation; and adaptation improves the next decision.

Applied this way, VECTOR does not condemn decisiveness; it disciplines it. It does not elevate process above mission; it protects the mission from actions whose consequences have not been adequately considered.

9. Balanced Leadership Assessment

Rheault should be neither canonised nor reduced to the affair. A balanced assessment recognises a leader of unusual breadth whose strengths were tested inside a system that could convert those strengths into vulnerabilities.

His intellectual breadth was substantial. Language ability, graduate study and international experience supported a wider conception of war than tactics alone. His operational credibility

was equally important. Combat service and Special Forces command gave him authority among practitioners.

He appears to have understood trust-based command. Dispersed teams require selection, shared purpose and confidence in subordinate judgement. His continued reputation among many Special Forces veterans suggests that he inspired loyalty and was seen as accepting responsibility.

His later commitment to Outward Bound and veterans indicates that service, hardship and renewed competence remained central to his understanding of leadership after the Army. This post-military life complicates any attempt to define him only through 1969.

Potential blind spots mirror these strengths. Trust may have reduced scrutiny. Loyalty may have weakened detachment. Mission focus may have narrowed attention to broader legal and strategic consequences. Comfort with unconventional arrangements may have normalised unclear authority. Confidence in professionals may have outrun the level of evidence supportable outside the group. The central judgement should remain modest. The public record does not allow complete access to every discussion or motive. What can be said is that Rheault's command sat at the intersection of responsibility without perfect visibility, urgent threat without certainty and loyalty without uncomplicated accountability.

That combination makes him a serious leadership case. It shows why character alone is insufficient. Good people require good systems, and good systems require leaders willing to test the assumptions of people they trust.

10. Applications Beyond the Military

For sporting teams, the case offers lessons about culture, trust and discipline. Teams depend on loyalty, but loyalty cannot mean concealing behaviour that threatens standards. Coaches must resist making irreversible judgements on rumour while also protecting people and culture during investigation. Containment, fair process and clear behavioural expectations can coexist.

- For corporate leaders, the parallels appear in cybersecurity, fraud, confidential investigations and insider risk. Executives often receive persuasive but incomplete information. The initial response should protect assets and people without converting suspicion into certainty. Governance should clarify who can decide, what evidence is required and how confidentiality will be maintained without eliminating oversight.
- For security professionals, the case reinforces the difference between threat assessment and proof. Security action is often preventive and must occur before all facts are known. Proportionality is therefore essential. Lower-confidence assessments may justify monitoring or access restriction; severe consequences require stronger corroboration and authority.
- For executive teams, the most transferable question is what problem is actually being solved. Organisations often attack the visible individual while leaving the system vulnerability untouched. Removing a suspected insider does not by itself restore compromised credentials, repair weak controls or rebuild trust.
- For personal leadership, Rheault prompts reflection on individual tendencies. Some leaders wait too long for certainty. Others act rapidly once a preferred explanation forms. Some invite challenge publicly but punish it socially. Others value loyalty so strongly that accountability feels like betrayal.

The practical goal is not to imitate military command. A company is not an army and a sporting team is not a covert intelligence network. The value lies in transferring disciplines: regulating pressure, verifying confidence, framing the problem, choosing proportionate action, delegating authority within shared intent and continuously reassessing consequences as the situation evolves.

11. Enduring Lessons

The first lesson is that confidence is not certainty. Leaders work with assessments, but they must label them honestly. Language matters. Saying that something is confirmed, likely, possible or unknown shapes how the organisation perceives its freedom to act.

- The second is that trust requires verification. High-trust teams should be capable of stronger challenge because disagreement does not threaten belonging. The absence of challenge is not evidence of alignment; it may indicate fear, reverence or groupthink.
- The third is that secrecy increases the duty of governance. Sensitive work cannot always be transparent, but it must be accountable to legitimate authority. Records, thresholds and independent review protect the people conducting the mission as well as the institution.
- The fourth is that problem framing precedes problem solving. A visible individual may represent only one element of a wider system. Leaders should distinguish the symptom, immediate risk, underlying cause and strategic vulnerability.
- The fifth is that the verification threshold should rise with irreversibility. When choices can be corrected, the organisation can move quickly and learn. When consequences cannot be reversed, confidence, authority and challenge must be stronger.
- The sixth is that continuous reassessment is the defining discipline of adaptive leadership. Leaders must keep testing new information, changed conditions, action effects, assumptions and priorities rather than treating reassessment as a final activity.
- The seventh is that action creates new terrain. Execution changes relationships, legitimacy, risk and available options. The value of a decision is determined not only by the action it creates, but by the willingness to reassess and adapt when circumstances change.
- The final lesson is that leadership cannot be reduced to decisiveness. Decisiveness without verification is dangerous. Verification without action is sterile. Leadership integrates judgement, action, reassessment and accountability. The most dangerous moment is often when leaders continue solving yesterday's problem.

Conclusion

Colonel Robert Rheault was an intellectually accomplished, combat-experienced and respected Special Forces commander. His military career ended in a crisis that exposed the hazards of secrecy, incomplete information, blurred authority and irreversible action.

The Green Beret Affair should not be simplified into a contest between heroic operators and an ungrateful institution. Nor should it become a morality tale in which complexity removes responsibility. Several truths can coexist.

GAMMA may have faced a serious penetration. Delay may have threatened people and capability. The information was incomplete. Authorities were not aligned. The selected action was irreversible. The state later proved unable to reconcile prosecution with intelligence secrecy.

Rheault's strengths remain visible: intellect, composure, operational credibility, loyalty and comfort with ambiguity. The case also reveals how those strengths can cast shadows. Trust can reduce scrutiny.

Loyalty can complicate objectivity. Mission focus can narrow perspective. Comfort with ambiguity can normalise unclear boundaries. Rheault's experience reminds us that the hardest decisions rarely arrive as contests between obvious right and obvious wrong. They emerge inside incomplete reality, where delay carries risk, action carries consequence and certainty may not arrive in time. VECTOR does not make those decisions easy. It makes them more disciplined. It asks leaders to Establish Reality, Identify Priorities, Take Deliberate Action and continuously reassess whether reality, priorities and action remain aligned. Leadership success depends not only on action, but on the ability to reassess and adapt as reality changes.

Leadership is not the management of certainty. It is the disciplined management of uncertainty while remaining accountable for what follows.

Final Synthesis: Rheault, VECTOR and the Practice of Judgement

The deepest value of the Rheault case lies in the interaction between person, profession and system. If the focus rests only on the individual, the analysis becomes a search for virtue or fault. If it rests only on the system, personal responsibility disappears into organisational complexity. Serious leadership study must hold both levels together.

Rheault brought significant strengths to command: education, operational credibility, cultural breadth, professional trust and comfort with uncertainty. He also inherited an operating environment in which sensitive activity, informal influence and formal accountability did not align cleanly. The resulting decisions can only be understood by examining both his judgement and the conditions that shaped it.

VECTOR is useful because it prevents any single leadership instinct from dominating the decision:

- A leader who values momentum may move too quickly to EXECUTE.
- A technical expert may remain too long in VERIFY.
- A strategist may prefer PRIORITISE, while a reflective leader may remain in REASSESS.

The value of the model is movement and adaptation. Regulation without verification may produce calm but uninformed judgement. Verification without prioritisation produces information without direction. Prioritisation without execution creates intent without progress. Execution without Continuous Reassessment allows commitment to survive after reality has changed. Adaptation is the disciplined adjustment of understanding, priorities and action as conditions evolve.

In the GAMMA environment, **VERIFY** was especially difficult because the information system itself may have been compromised. Put simply, the people making the decision could not assume that more reports meant better knowledge if those reports came from the same uncertain source.

- The organisation needed to examine independence, origin and motive, rather than treating repeated reporting as confirmation.
- This is a modern problem as much as a historical one.
- Digital alerts, executive briefings and informal updates can create the appearance of multiple sources when every claim derives from one uncertain starting point.
- Leaders should ask not only how much evidence they possess, but how many genuinely independent paths produced it.

PRIORITISE adds a second protection:

- Even if the assessment about an individual is strong, the leader must still decide what problem deserves priority.
- Network protection, source safety, evidentiary preservation and authority alignment may matter more than immediate resolution of the person's status.
- Priority of effort is therefore not a list of tasks. It is a statement about where limited attention and authority must be concentrated to change the situation most effectively.

EXECUTE must then preserve the relationship between confidence and consequence:

- Progressive commitment offers a practical mechanism.
- Leaders can take protective action at one threshold, restrictive action at another and final action only at the highest level of verification and authority.
- This approach is sometimes criticised as cautious, but it can increase tempo by allowing early movement without pretending that uncertainty has vanished.
- The question is not whether to act. It is how to act in a way that protects both the mission and the capacity to learn.

CONTINUOUS REASSESSMENT is where the strategic commander, meaning the senior leader responsible for wider consequences beyond the immediate task, distinguishes himself from the effective operator, meaning the practitioner focused on executing the task itself:

- The operator, or frontline practitioner, asks whether the immediate threat was controlled.
- The strategic commander, or senior decision-maker, asks what the action did to legitimacy, institutional relationships, public confidence and future freedom of action.
- These consequences may arrive later, but they are not secondary. They become part of the mission environment.
- Rheault's career demonstrates that a criminal case can collapse while a command career remains destroyed. Different systems produce different outcomes, and leaders must monitor all of them.

For sporting and corporate audiences, the case should be translated carefully. A company is not an army, and a sporting team is not an intelligence network. The useful transfer is not the vocabulary of war, but the discipline of judgement: slow down pressure without losing tempo, test confidence before acting on it, separate protective action from final judgement, make room for dissent, and reassess consequences after the first objective has been achieved.

The final assessment of Rheault should remain deliberately balanced. His record supports respect for his professional achievement and seriousness. The affair raises equally serious questions about oversight, thresholds, authority and irreversible action. Holding those conclusions together is not indecision; it is mature judgement. The purpose of the study is not to turn history into a slogan. It is to sharpen the reader's ability to decide when facts are incomplete, people are trusted, consequences are severe and certainty will not arrive in time.

Discipline means more than self-control. It means intellectual humility, clear problem framing, explicit priorities, proportionate action, legitimate authority and continual learning. Accountability means accepting that good intentions and pressure do not remove responsibility. The leader must be prepared to explain not only what was decided, but how confidence was assessed, which alternatives were considered and how emerging consequences were addressed.

Rheault is therefore an appropriate first case for the series. He resists a neat formula. He reveals the attraction and danger of elite confidence, the power and fragility of trust, and the cost of misalignment between sensitive decisions and public accountability. Most importantly, he keeps the student of leadership in the uncomfortable space where real decisions are made: between action and certainty, between loyalty and scrutiny, and between immediate results and enduring legitimacy.

The practical leadership takeaway is simple: good decision-makers act; great decision-makers reassess. They do not wait passively for certainty, but neither do they allow early confidence to become permanent commitment. They keep asking what has changed, what has been learned, whether the problem is still the same and whether the next decision should differ from the last.

About VECTOR™

VECTOR™ is Montane Protective Security's decision model for operating at the edge of uncertainty.

Informed by military experience, leadership scholarship and real-world application, VECTOR provides a lens through which individuals and organisations can better understand complexity, navigate risk, adapt to change and achieve purposeful outcomes in dynamic environments.

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Selected Sources and Reading

- Francis J. Kelly, U.S. Army Special Forces 1961-1971, Department of the Army, Vietnam Studies series.
- Jeff Stein, A Murder in Wartime: The Untold Spy Story That Changed the Course of the Vietnam War.
- Contemporary and retrospective accounts of Project GAMMA and the Green Beret Affair, including U.S. Army historical material and published participant accounts.
- Robert B. Rheault, reflections on leadership published through the Outward-Bound community.
- Associated Press and Portland Press Herald obituaries describing Rheault's post-Army work with Hurricane Island Outward Bound and Vietnam veterans.

Research note

Project GAMMA remained a classified and contested subject, and public accounts differ on organisational details, sequences of approval and the precise evidentiary basis used by participants.

This study therefore distinguishes established biographical facts, reported operational history and leadership inference.

Readers seeking a final legal judgement should note that the criminal case ended without full trial adjudication.

APPENDIX 1: VECTOR™ Decision Model

