Chapter 7
The Conversion of the Special Forces

Significant material, ideological, and rhetorical relations bound the American government’s military intervention in Vietnam with evangelical and humanitarian missionary projects. None were more involved in the program to “win the hearts and minds” of the Montagnards than the American Special Forces or “Green Beret” as they were popularly known. They too were a kind of missionary to the Montagnards. One officer explained at the time: “We’re really a military version of the Peace Corps. We are social workers with rifles.”\(^1\) While the Special Forces were actually quite successful in this project to win the hearts and minds of the Montagnards, their mission seems to have had a profound effect on themselves as well. The men of the Special Forces, in a sense, passed through a “conversion” of their own. Their “hearts and minds” were won by the Montagnards. Trying to win the loyalty of the Montagnards, in the end it is the Special Forces whose loyalty is won. This conversion has become evident in the resettlement of the Dega in North Carolina where retired Special Forces soldiers have worked passionately to promote and defend Montagnard interests.

The historical process of this conversion of the Special Forces was marked by specific material objects of highland culture and the ritual performance of oaths of allegiance. The conversion of Special Forces soldiers goes unnoticed because it is conducted on the level of physical objects and gestures, which apparently no one would think would affect the interior subjectivity of the soldiers—reproducing once again the dichotomy between interior selves and exterior bodies that troubles missionary discourses of conversion.

The men of the Special Forces came to the central highlands to change Montagnard material culture, and thereby to change the interior hearts and minds of the Montagnards. But in the end, it is the
Special Forces as much as the Montagnards who are “converted”—by very material artifacts and customs of the highland culture in which they sought to intervene. This narrative of Montagnard actions producing Special Forces loyalty subverts the dominant narrative of Special Forces activities to produce Montagnard loyalty.

1 The Missionary Discourse of the American Special Forces

The U.S. Army’s division of Special Forces emerged from the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) after World War II. Highly trained in the skills of “unconventional warfare,” Special Forces commandos were taught to operate alone or in small teams behind enemy lines to organize “partisans” into a guerilla resistance force that could disrupt enemy supply lines and infrastructure. They were the Army’s elite force, carefully selected, supremely conditioned, and rigorously prepared. The unit cultivated a certain mystique by attracting and encouraging “a special breed of soldier,” one who excelled at creative innovations and carried a brash “can-do” attitude—a soldier who “chafed at rigid discipline and who didn’t care what the career managers at the Pentagon said or believed.” Prominent in this myth is the story of the young President Kennedy, smitten with the unit’s image of excellence and vigor, visiting the Special Forces training camp at Fort Bragg during the first year of his administration, and personally intervening in military protocol to insist that members of the Special Forces be allowed to wear the jaunty green beret that many soldiers had taken to wearing. He called it “a symbol of excellence, a badge of courage, a mark of distinction in the fight for freedom.” The Special Forces eagerly associated itself with the image of youthful optimism, serious intent, and applied expertise cultivated by the Kennedy administration. Upon his death, the Special Forces renamed their Special Warfare Center The John F. Kennedy Special Warfare School. “Quite fittingly, a green beret now rests permanently on President Kennedy’s grave in Arlington National Cemetery,” the Special Forces’ Green Beret magazine remarked in its inaugural issue in 1966. The JFK Special Warfare Museum on the base at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, enshrines the image and rhetoric of Kennedy’s early idealism of the 1960s.

Kennedy conceived the Special Forces as a unit to combat low-level communist insurgencies. He effectively reversed the Special Forces’ mission from guerilla commandos to counterinsurgency experts. Their first assignment in this new role was in Indochina, where they