ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE Sec. 1 pg. 8

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French agency has a tough reputation

By John Morrison

PARIS [Reuters]—France's secret service, at the center of a controversy over the sabotaging of the Greenpeace ship Rainbow Warrior, is a military outfit that has frequently hit the headlines for its use of strongarm tactics.

The General Directorate for External Security [DGSE], headed by Adm. Pierre Lacoste, is accused by the French media of masterminding the sinking of the ship in the harbor at Auckland, New Zealand, on July 10 in which a crewman was killed.

The ecology movement's vessel was to have led a protest fleet to France's nuclear test area at Mururoa Atoll.

President Francois Mitterrand's inquiry into the affair, headed by Gaullist Bernard Tricot, absolved the French secret service Tuesday of involvement in the bombing.

However, the report did admit that a man and woman currently facing charges in connection with the incident were members of the French secret service. The report also identified four other men believed connected to the case as secret service agents.

The DGSE, until 1982 known as the SDECE, was built in the 1940s by veterans of the wartime resistance against Nazi occupation, a brutal struggle with few rules. "This job is not for choirboys," one of them said.

In a recent book on the service by journalists Roger Faligot and Pascal Krop, former French agents recount tale after tale of violent undercover exploits in the 1940s and 1950s.

"It's a hoodlum's trade carried out by honest men. We kill only for reasons of state," the authors were told by Maurice Robert, a SDECE veteran who later became ambassador to Gabon.

In 1948, SDECE agents kidnaped top Nazi commando Otto Skorzeny from an American prison in Darmstadt in order to pump him for information about the Soviet Union.

"Of course, the operation was only half-covered by headquarters in Paris. But he [Skorzeny] knew a lot about the Russians," Col. Michel Garder told Faligot and Krop.

In the same year a SDECE pilot flew secretly into Czechoslovakia to bring out Hubert Ripka, an opponent of the communists who had just seized power in Prague.

In the early 1950s the strongarm branch of the SDECE—the Service Action [SA]—was expanded to handle counterinsurgency operations against the Viet Minh in Indochina. It had not only its own air squadron but its own special forces, the 11th Shock Airborne Batallion whose symbol was a black panther.

In the Algerian war, the SDECE carried out assassinations, sabotage and psychological warfare in France's ultimately futile eight-year struggle against the National Liberation Front [FLN].

According to the book, these operations, though sometimes disowned by embarrassed politicians if they went wrong, were all authorized at the top by the governments of the Fourth Republic.

In October, 1956, after unsuccessful attempts to assassinate him—including a car-bomb in Cairo which killed 30 people—the SDECE captured FLN leader Ahmed Ben Bella by forcing his plane to land in Algiers on a flight between Morocco and Tunisia.

The operation caused a political dispute in Paris and resignations from the government of Guy Mollet. One minister who stayed on was Mitterrand.

Between 1956 and 1962, the SDECE sank a dozen ships bringing arms to the FLN and killed several arms traffickers, mostly West Germans.

These attacks were claimed by a mysterious organization called the "Red Hand"—in fact a front for officers of the Service Action trained at Cercottes near Orleans in "homo" [homicide] operations.

After the end of the Algerian war in 1962, the SDECE shifted the center of its operations to Africa, under the close supervision of de Gaulle's legendary aide Jacques Foccart.

Foccart's name became a byword for cloak-and-dagger operations in Africa, including the supply of arms to the Biafran secession in Nigeria and attempts to overthrow Guinean leader Ahmed Sekou Toure.

In 1965, the SDECE was severely shaken by the Ben Barka affair—its involvement in the kidnaping and presumed murder in Paris of a Moroccan opposition leader.

De Gaulle, wanting the service kept under a tighter rein, transferred responsibility from the prime minister's office to the Defense Ministry.

Since 1970—when a new chief, Alexandre de Marenches, swept away the old guard in a purge—the SDECE has tried with limited resources to compete with the CIA and the KGB in the sophisticated world of East-West espionage. But its image problem has hampered recruitment of the best and brightest.

"The chronic problem of the French secret services is that, unlike the Anglo-Saxons, they have been unable to recruit scientists, economists and linguists on campuses," Faligot and Krop write.

Mistrust of the SDECE has been widespread on the left. The 1972 opposition program signed by Mitterrand and his communist allies promised to abolish it, a pledge later quietly forgotten.

Defense Minister Charles Hernu persuaded Mitterrand to leave the SDECE under the control of his ministry and appoint his friend Pierre Marion, a former aviation industry executive with little experience in intelligence, as its new chief.

The SDECE was renamed the DGSE and barred from operating within France. But Marion's wholesale reorganization, purges and prickly temperament had a disastrous effect on morale and in 1982 he was replaced by Lacoste.