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The professor, Vietnam and a murder case

By Murray Dubin
Inquirer Staff Writer

FULLERTON, Calif. — When Anthony Russo, a co-defendant in the Pentagon Papers case, was told that his friend Edward Lee Cooperman had been shot to death, he assumed that Cooperman had been assassinated by right-wing, anti-communist Vietnamese.

When Morton Sobell, who was imprisoned for 18 years for conspiracy to commit espionage with Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, learned of his friend Cooperman's death, he was certain that the physics professor had been assassinated.

And when John McAuliff, former director of the Indochina Program for the American Friends Service Committee in Philadelphia, learned of the shooting, he, too, assumed that Cooperman had been murdered, another victim in a recent rash of attacks by Vietnamese refugees against those sympathetic with the communist government in Hanoi.

Cooperman's widow believes he was assassinated. So does the Hanoi government, which has accused the CIA with engineering the death of a man who had worked actively for eight years to help the people and government of Vietnam.

Police here, though, say there is no evidence that Cooperman was assassinated, and the CIA vehemently denies any involvement in his death.

A Vietnamese student, Mihn Van Lam, who told police that Cooperman was like a father to him, has been charged with murder in the Oct. 13 slaying. Lam, 21, contends that the shooting was an accident while they were "playing around" with a pistol.

But when Lam's trial begins this month, the victim, not the defendant, is likely to be the focus of attention. And there promises to be plenty of testimony about espionage, money and sex, as well.

Cooperman, a professor at California State University at Fullerton, was a widely known — some say controversial — figure in the Asian community in Orange County, which has an estimated 60,000 Indochinese refugees.

He devoted much of his time toward improving American relations with Vietnam after the fall of Saigon, visiting the country many times and founding an organization that exported books, medical equipment and even high-tech equipment to that country — the last, apparently illegally.

But his pro-Hanoi politics were not well received by some in the Asian community, and he told family and colleagues of threats against his life.

In the most recent development in the case, an inmate who shared a cell with Lam reportedly told prosecutors that Lam had told him that he *did* kill Cooperman.

According to a source who has heard a tape of the inmate's statement, Lam said he killed Cooperman because a Vietnamese businessman had threatened to kill Lam's sister if he did not. Lam said the businessman worked for someone named "Ky or Ny," the inmate reportedly said.

Local news accounts were quick to point out that Nguyen Cao Ky, a former vice president of South Vietnam, owns a liquor store not far from Fullerton.

Lam denies making any confession.

As the trial draws near — a judge is expected this week to set a date — this college town is bursting with innuendos, rumors and scenarios.

"And I still haven't heard a credible scenario yet," said Cooperman's friend and colleague, physics professor Roger Dittman, who nonetheless believes that his friend was assassinated.

He said the case has drawn worldwide attention because of Cooperman's international reputation as the most active American scientist working to help the people of North Vietnam. He said he knew of scientific groups in Paris, Berlin and the Netherlands that were closely monitoring the case.

Cooperman, 48, a native of Allentown who graduated from Pennsylvania State University with a doctorate in nuclear physics in 1963, was involved in the antiwar movement. But it was not until later, when he went to work at a nuclear-research center in France, that he became so passionately pro-Vietnamese.

His brother, William Cooperman, a middle school principal in Topton, Pa., said that while Edward was in France he met many Vietnamese and became more active in the antiwar movement. He first visited Vietnam



Edward Lee Cooperman
Killed over his pro-Hanoi politics?

in 1977.

"He saw the effects of Agent Orange on newborn children and it destroyed him," William Cooperman said. "My brother thought he had a moral obligation to be in Vietnam."

So he formed the U.S. Committee for Scientific Cooperation with Vietnam, a private group of citizens and scientists, and later started the committee's funding arm, the Foundation for Scientific Cooperation with Vietnam.

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From 1977 to mid-1984, he visited Vietnam 12 times, delivering medical supplies, helping study the effects of Agent Orange, retraining hospital personnel, working on methods of drying rice with solar energy, launching 35 projects in all by the time of his death.

He brought Vietnamese doctors and scientists into the United States. He worked with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

"He was a giant," said Russo, "because he applied his science to the people and didn't stay in an ivory tower. He was building a bridge to Vietnam."

But apparently not everyone wanted that bridge built.

Cooperman began receiving threats against his life from people who were opposed to his work in Vietnam. Although never citing names, he once told his wife, Klaaske, that someone came up to him on campus and said he would kill him.

He took the threats seriously. Bars were put on his windows at home, and lights were installed in the driveway.

"He thought they'd get him on his motorbike," his brother said.

"He was afraid they would try to hurt his reputation, to plant drugs in his office or something," Klaaske Cooperman said.

Still he joked about the threats, once reminding a colleague that they looked alike and that the friend had better be careful. Cooperman never changed his routine, which consisted of going to and from work seven days a week, always at the same time.

In May, while on a trip to Hanoi, he learned that two good friends in San Francisco, a Vietnamese couple active in improving relations with Hanoi, had been attacked. The man was wounded, his wife killed.

"It's going to happen to me, too," Cooperman's wife quoted him as saying.

When he returned from Hanoi in July, Cooperman seemed changed.

He altered his routine, going to work at different times. He bought a gun and learned how to use it.

"And he was different, more serious somehow," said his brother.

Alan M. May, Lam's attorney, agreed that Cooperman was different after that trip.

After examining Cooperman's records, receipts and bills of lading, May contends that Cooperman was afraid that the U.S. government was going to discover that he was shipping computers and technical items to Hanoi illegally and that the Hanoi government would learn he was shortchanging it and exporting inferior merchandise.

May said he believed that Cooperman had more to fear from U.S. sanctions and an angry Hanoi than from anticommunists.

May acknowledged Cooperman's brilliance and benevolence, but asserted, in court documents and in interviews, that the physics professor had bizarre sexual interests, was illegally assisting Hanoi and might have been a crook.

According to documents filed by May, Lam, a former student of Cooperman's, went to Cooperman's office on the morning of Oct. 13 at the professor's request.

"The defendant was, as other young male students before him, selected by Dr. Cooperman for special attention," the document said.

"That attention included purchasing the defendant a black leather jacket, a motorcycle, gifts of money and a weekly social appointment that included wrestling."

During the preliminary hearing, two physics department employees testified that they had seen Cooperman wrestling in his office with other Asian youths.

Cooperman, May alleged in the document, asked Lam to dress in the "rough look" of leather. "Lam had an anti-motive for killing him," May said. "He was a sugar daddy. He had every emotional and material reason to want the professor to live."

Lam, in a statement to police, said the shooting occurred when the two men were seated in chairs facing one another. The professor "placed a loaded .25-caliber pistol in Lam's hand, insisting that the defendant point it at his throat," May said in a court document.

Lam refused. The professor "pulled the weapon up to his throat," and the defendant resisted that effort, according to the document.

Lam accidentally fired the gun, according to May, shooting Cooperman in the throat.

Lam told police that he then left and went to a movie with a girlfriend, returned to Cooperman's office alone, put the pistol in Cooperman's hand and called police, telling authorities that he had just arrived.

When police arrived, they believed the death to be a suicide but Lam told them "it was an accident," according to police testimony at a preliminary hearing.

A number of people have raised questions about aspects of Lam's story.

Dittman, who said he believed that his friend had been assassinated, cannot understand why Lam, if he were an assassin, would return to the office.

William Cooperman said his brother "would never play around with a loaded gun. He didn't like my kids playing around with scissors."

A ballistics expert testified that it would be very difficult to accidentally fire the murder weapon.

The police found many photographs of Asian youths in black leather jackets in Cooperman's office as well as more explicit sexual material, May said.

"Anybody could have gotten in there and planted that stuff," Mrs. Cooperman said.

Moreover, she said her husband's usually bulging briefcase had been

found virtually empty. She maintained that her husband's papers were stolen, including his work on Agent Orange.

"He was getting close on Agent Orange, he told me," she said.

Dittman speculated that some of Cooperman's unofficial work, such as trying to help former South Vietnamese government officials to get back into the country, might have precipitated his death.

Sobell and others are furious with May's efforts to tarnish the reputation of a man whose integrity, they say, was beyond reproach.

"He's trying Ed Cooperman and he's dead.

"Ed can't defend himself."