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Phoenix: the CIA's assassination pro

By Michael Drosnin

A Vietnamese peasant woman padded quietly across the tile floor, bringing dinner to the Americans. Captain Sidney Towle Jr. and four other U.S. Army officers were seated around a large wooden table in the old French villa that served as district headquarters in Vung Liem, a village in the Mekong Delta. Overhead, a ceiling fan rotated silently.

Midway through the meal, the village chief, Major Vinn, barged in. He was just back from a mission, sweaty, dirty, streaked with mud. Several of his men marched in behind him, still carrying their weapons.

Vinn strode forward and dumped a bag on the dinner table. Eleven bloody ears spilled out onto the red and white checkered tablecloth. "Show these to Colonel Joy," he said. "Now he has his proof. Six VC. You don't need a second ear from the last man."

"It made me sick," says Towle, recalling that evening in June 1971. "I couldn't go on with the meal, and I couldn't go on with what I was doing in Vietnam." Now a Boston stockbroker, Towle was then a "triple-six," an Army counter-intelligence officer (MOS 9666) who directed a small part of a secret war aimed not at the enemy's soldiers but at its civilian leaders.

"It was an assassination campaign," says Towle. "My job was to identify and eliminate VCI, the Viet Cong 'infrastructure'—the communists' shadow

government. I worked directly with two Vietnamese units, very tough guys who didn't wear uniforms, an informal group that became very formal at night. In the beginning they brought back about 10 percent alive. By the end they had stopped taking prisoners.

"How many VC they got, I don't

Forget Castro. The CIA actually succeeded in assassinating 10,000 civilians in South Vietnam. Herewith the full story, told by the Americans and Vietnamese who carried out the orders

know," continues Towle. "I saw a hell of a lot of dead bodies. We'd put a tag on saying VCI, but no one really knew—it was just some native in black pajamas with 16 bullet holes."

Whichever Vietnamese unit scored the most kills in a given month was rewarded with a cash prize by the Ameri-

Three feeble congressional inquiries—in 1970, 1971 and 1973—failed to elicit more than bland admissions of "unfortunate abuses" in an otherwise legitimate program.

But now an investigation by *New Times*—based on the first-hand accounts of dozens of Americans and Vietnamese directly involved—reveals Operation Phoenix as the only systematized kidnapping, torture and assassination program ever sponsored by the United States government.

Its victims were noncombatants. At least 40,000 were murdered, about 8,000 of them supposed Viet Cong political cadre targeted for execution, the rest civilians (including women and children) killed in more traditional military operations and later conveniently labeled VCI. Hundreds of thousands were jailed without trial, often after sadistic abuse.

Phoenix was conceived, financed and directed by the Central Intelligence

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