

... YOU SAY CONVICTED

murderers are being trained as assassins?

Answer: It's happened more than once

INSIGHT

THE CONTROVERSY over whether the US Government has ever made use of "political assassinations" seems certain to take a new turn after a remarkable disclosure last week by an officer in the US Navy. In the course of a conversation during a Nato-sponsored conference in Oslo, it was said that the US Navy has been seeking out convicted murderers for retraining in a "political" role. The suggestion was supported by details of this training which, if they are true, might have been taken from the screenplay of Kubrick's film *A Clockwork Orange*.

The details come from Lieutenant Commander Thomas Narut, a psychologist working at the US Naval hospital in Naples. He was attending a Nato conference held last week in a hotel near Oslo at which about 120 scientists, including five from Britain, exchanged information on psychological research designed to help people in tough jobs—especially soldiers—to cope with stress.

Dr Narut's story was later categorically denied—but no explanation was offered why a Navy officer should or could volunteer the detailed descriptions he did.

The conference heard papers on the effect of battle stress on soldiers in the Yom Kippur war, as well as on the blacking out of supersonic fighter pilots and on the long-term effect of interrogation in enemy hands.

Dr Narut's paper appeared to be much the same: the abstract circulated before the meeting was entitled: "The use of a symbolic model and verbal intervention in inducing and reducing stress." And in the course of a 10-minute discourse on it, he did no more than hint at his work in teaching "combat readiness units" to cope with the stress of killing. It was only under private questioning afterwards with a small group of his listeners, and then later alone with Insight reporter, Peter Watson, that Dr Narut began to unfold his remarkable story.

DR NARUT is in his mid-thirties. He completed a doctoral thesis several years ago on whether certain films could provoke anxiety and whether forcing a man to do tasks irrelevant to the film while watching it might help him cope with such anxiety (a technique described in *Clockwork Orange*). He began his speech to the conference by saying that in the US Navy scientists were well provided with facilities for research. Psychologists, for instance, had access to computerised records, including psychological tests, of large numbers of personnel.

His naval work involved establishing how to induce servicemen who may not be naturally inclined to kill, to do so under certain conditions. When pressed afterwards as to what was meant by "combat readiness units," he explained this included men for commando-type operations and—so he said—for insertion into US embassies under cover, ready to kill in those countries should the need arise. Dr Narut used the word "hitman" and "assassin" of these men.

The method, according to Dr Narut, was to show films specially designed to show people being killed and injured in violent ways. By being acclimatised through these films, the men eventually became able to dissociate any feelings from such a situation. Dr Narut also added that US naval psychologists specially selected men for these commando tasks, from submarine crews, paratroops, and some were convicted murderers from military prisons. Asked whether he was suggesting that murderers were being released from prisons to become assassins, he replied: "It's happened more than once." Another American delegate present in the group, Alfred Zitani, from New Jersey, was sufficiently surprised to remark to Watson: "Do you think Dr Narut realises what he has just said? That kind of information must be classified."

Later in private conversation with Watson, Dr Narut described the training in which he had been involved. It had, he said, been in three phases:

Selection: Research on those given awards for valour in battle has shown, said Narut, that the best killers are men with "passive aggressive" personalities. They are people with a lot of drive—though they are well-disciplined and do not appear nervous—who periodically experience bursts of explosive energy when they can literally kill without remorse. Dr Narut says he and his colleagues have, therefore, been looking for men who have either shown themselves capable of killing in this premeditated way (in Vietnam perhaps, or in a murder in the barracks) or whom the Navy's tests show as potentially capable of it.

Among the tests used is the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. This consists of hundreds of questions, and rates personality on many traits including such things as hostility, depression, psychopathy. Also used is the famous inkblot test in which the subject describes in detail what the various inkblots make him think of. Dr Narut said that on this test he looks for men who respond at the extremes to the coloured cards rather than purely black and white. In clinical terms this is generally accepted as indicating that a patient is violent. The patient who responds excessively to the black and white cards is often regarded as a depressive.

Stress reduction training: The men selected are brought either to the navy's neuropsychiatric laboratory in San Diego, California (which also trains spies in techniques to counter interrogation) or to the laboratory where Narut works in the US naval medical centre in Naples. They are first taught to shoot, and then the "Clockwork Orange" training begins in earnest, to rid them of any qualms they may have about killing.

According to Dr Narut, men

Continued on page 2

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Commander Narut's story

INSIGHT

continued from page 1

are shown a series of special films "to heighten their dissociative powers with regard to killing." The films are gruesome and as the training proceeds they get progressively more horrific. Even so the trainee is forced to watch. His head is bolted into a clamp so that he cannot turn away and a special mechanism also ensures that he cannot close his eyelids.

Dr Narut said that one of the first films a trainee sees is a brutal, blow-by-blow account of an African youth being crudely circumcised by fellow members of his tribe. No anaesthetic is used and the knife is obviously blunt (this film in fact is one regularly used in psychological experiments "to create experimental stress."

When the film is over the trainee is asked such questions as, "what colour was the belt on the doctor's trousers?" or "What was the motif on the handle of the knife with which the circumcision was made?"

From here the trainees proceed to films with people from a little nearer home. In one the camera follows the movements of a man at work in a saw mill, slicing planks of wood along their length. The film shows his thrusting movements, back and forth until suddenly he slips—and cuts his finger off.

In this way, said Dr Narut, many of the trainees learn how to cope with even the most gruesome scenes with complete detachment. If physiological measures—like heart and breathing rate—which respond dramatically during the early films, calm down and resume their normal patterns as more bloodthirsty scenes are shown, the men are judged to have completed this stage. Many

do not adjust, said Dr Narut, presumably they are "failed."

Dehumanisation of the enemy: In this last phase, the idea is to get the men to think of the potential enemies he will have to face as inferior forms of human life. They get lectures and films now which portray personalities and customs in foreign countries whose interests may go against the US. But the films and lectures are specially biased to present the "enemy" as less than human: the stupidity of local customs is ridiculed, local personalities may be presented as evil demigods rather than legitimate political figures.

The process, according to Dr Narut, takes a few weeks and the men are passed on. He refused to say where the men went, arguing that he did not have the necessary security clearance. However, at one point in our conversation he used the Athens Embassy as an example and he also said that his busiest time, when the largest batch of men went through this training, was towards the end of 1973, at the time of the Yom Kippur war.

Since our reporter returned from Oslo on Thursday, Dr Narut has not been either at his home or his laboratory in Naples to comment on the issues raised by the disclosures. When we gave the details to the US embassy in London, they referred us to the US Navy office here.

The Pentagon in Washington last night denied categorically that the US Navy had ever "engaged in psychological training or other types of training of personnel as assassins." They also denied that any such training had ever taken place either in San Diego or in Naples. They had been unable to contact Lt-commander Narut. All they were able to confirm was that he was indeed on the staff of the Navy Regional Medical Centre in Naples as a psychologist.