It was 3 o'clock one hot, dark Sunday morning in a small delta town near the Vietnamese-Cambodian border. The tough, powerfully-built American we'll call "Bill"—a paramilitary or guerrilla fighter for the Central Intelligence Agency who had spent precious little of his career worrying about the "moral implications" of his work—paced back and forth in the dingy front room of his house. His job, like that of many Americans in South Viet Nam, was terror. And for the first time in his life, this mission was bothering him. If he hadn't had eight or 10 or maybe 15 drinks, perhaps he wouldn't have talked to me about it. But he had, and he did. "I've been doing this for 22 years all over the world," Bill said, sitting down and hunching over his beer. He was very intense as he reeled off the places: Egypt when Nasser was coming to power, the Congo when we were trying to get rid of Tshombe—Bill's life story was a history of just about every place the United States had intervened or tried covertly to intervene in the past two decades. "I did it believing in it," he went on. Then he shook his head in perplexity. "But for the first time, I feel I really don't understand a situation," he said. "When people ask me, all I can say is...I don't know...I don't know.... Hoh!" He pointed at me. "If you write a story and say you don't know and..." His voice trailed off. There remained only the sinister silence of the tiny delta town. "The dedication of these people is fantastic," he spoke up again. "The dedication and the motivation. I wish I could understand it. You capture them and put a pistol to their heads, and they say, 'Kill me.' They're so little. ..." Bill had shoulders like a foot-
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ball player—it was easy to picture the absurdity, even the vulgarity, of his enormity next to the tiny-boned, miniature, frail Vietnamese.

"You take their necks in your hands . . . you can destroy them so easily. But you can't just keep killing them. You can't ever kill them all . . ."

Today a lot of Americans like Bill are beginning to have misgivings, as the Viet Cong hangs doggedly on, about the increasing ruthlessness and cold-bloodedness in this already most sanguinary of wars. Many are also beginning to wonder whether such methods really "work"—or whether we don't destroy more than we build in the process.

A few months ago, the mysterious arrest of a Green Beret officer for the slaying of an alleged North Vietnamese double agent spotlighted some of the "dark side of the moon" activities in which Americans are involved. Inside sources reported at the time that Gen. Creighton Abrams, commander of American forces in Vietnam, had turned a man recognized in Saigon by the CIA that he personally ordered the arrests as a once-and-for-all example.

"The Special Forces," he reportedly told subordinates, "are going to have to show a higher regard for human life." The CIA was careful to divorce itself from the Beret case, but many other equally brutal operations in which the Agency and other Americans are involved are likewise coming into question. The recently disclosed massacre at Song My and the subsequent investigations, only served to underscore the point.

With the peace talks in Paris, the emphasis of the military role in Viet Nam, and the impending U.S. pullout, the political side of the war has been stepped up. The struggle today is to win the peace—to keep the peace when the ceasefire finally comes and the half-million Americans go home. The name of the game on both sides is to get your people into places of power, to win the allegiance of the countryside and its rice-root leadership for the future, and, conversely, to get the enemy's people out of corresponding positions.

The U.S. and the South Vietnamese are using various methods of doing this. Among them are persuasion and propaganda, promises of political and economic reform, good will missions and . . . the use of sheer animal terror.

At the heart of the latter phase of the campaign are Bill's troops, the little-known Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRU's). Pro-perception forces. A regionally-based, American-led, CIA-financed paramilitary force of 5,000 Vietnamese, they were originally conceived of as a counter-guerrilla organization borrowing from Chairman Mao Tse-tung's principles of living and operating among the peasants as the fish do in the sea.

They operated out of regional safe-houses or, even, Viet Cong-like, masqueraded as peasants by day and fought as guerrillas at night. In the beginning, they practiced all the arts of guerrilla warfare—the ambush, the night raid, the kidnapping or the knifing in the night—and they also engaged in stand-up battles in which they rapidly established themselves as tigerish fighters in an army where most units resemble Snookies looking banefully over the garden fence at the cat next door.

But of late the PRU emphasis has been on just one role of the guerrillas: to murder, kidnap, terrorize or otherwise forcibly remove the civilian leadership of the other side. Trained and directed by their American advisors, the PRU's have set out to target and destroy what has come to be known popularly as the "VCI"—the Viet Cong "infrastructure." These are the "shadow people" of the VC, the complex of political cadres, tax collectors, party members, couriers and others who do the base work which keeps the guerrillas and the main force units going. They also serve as the de facto government in VC-held territory, and the idea is to get as many of them as possible before a ceasefire is declared.

"This is one of the first operations in which they were actually used as a counter-insurgency weapon," one American official said. "We've had to use them since the Saigon government figures, approximately 15,400 of the estimated 80,000 members of the infrastructure were "eliminated." Of these, 11,000 were captured, 2,270 killed and the rest rallied to the Saigon side.

In 1968, according to Saigon government figures, approximately 15,400 of the estimated 80,000 members of the infrastructure were "eliminated." Of these, 11,000 were captured, 2,270 killed and the rest rallied to the Saigon side.

In Go Cong province in 1968, the PRU's captured the very highest VC of all—V-C's Lieut. Colonel—lieutenant colonel. Acting on intelligence that he was hiding in a certain village, they crept out on a midnight raid and kidnapped him from his bed. But not all "captures" are so deliberate. In Kien Giang province, on a massive raid on a village, one PRU sud denly noticed a Viet Cong trying to run away. The PRU tackled the man and the two wrestled wildly for a few minutes until the PRU stabbed and killed his opponent. The PRU discovered only then that the dead man had been the North Vietnamese lieutenant in charge of all the movement of material into the delta for the 1968 Tet offensive—the battle which changed the course of the war.

In Rach Gia, the South Vietnamese colonel complained to the PRU advisor about mines on the road: so the PRU's laid an ambush that killed 40 VC who had been laying the mines at night. In another village, a South Vietnamese woman was sent with a $100 piastre (about $3) bribe to give to a VC guard to visit her husband in a VC prison in Vinh Binh. Her husband passed her a message for the PRU's, outlining the entire
discovery, skinned the man to death, and beheaded him. When one group made such a burial.

When one of their own turns double-agent. Both the head and the body were... one suspect to get another to talk. “One

American advisor says coolly. Another American advisor told me—and I have heard the same story. It's not new. It's been going on for years. This time, both the head and the body were left behind. I like to go on American missions. They have their own way of doing things. But I believe that the Americans use forbidden methods. This time, it's not just about..."

During a recent tour of duty in Viet Nam, I asked, without much hope of approval, to be allowed to go on a PRU mission. To my surprise, permission was granted. It was not to be an assassination or kidnapping—no correspondent would ever be permitted to witness that—but a sudden-strike mission on a VC-held village. It was to be a mission of destruction, a demonstration of force. The PRU types are not sentimental about their work. Indeed, the PRUs are excellent torturers and employ beatings, electric wires, and any other means necessary to achieve their mission. When one of their own turns double-agent, they get someone else to take the fall. This is how the system works, and it seems to be effective."

The two American “advisors” (really the leaders of the PRUs) were friendly and obvious experts. Twenty-nine-year-old Stanley Rodimon, of Huntsville, Alabama, had taught economics at the University of Alabama. Small, dark-haired, good-looking, he was proud of his job. “We’re just taking their guerrilla tactics and turning them around and using them on them,” he said. “I’ve had no trouble adjusting. This is just a job now. I’ll either stay in the service or go back to work in the States."

The object of our whirlwind onslaught by helicopter was the small village of Ba The, a group of houses strung out on both sides of one of the arrow-straight, French-built canals that gridiron the Mekong Delta. The PRU advisors had special intelligence that several ranking VC officers had been hiding in the village. The intelligence was carefully guarded. Only the advisors and the top Vietnamese PRU leader knew where we were going. As we swirled down to the town, the VC was astonished. A large white flag hung across the canal reading: “Be sure and listen to what Uncle says. Rise up and kill the Americans.”

This was the same Uncle Ho Chi Minh who had said, “I am not concerned with the military successes of the government of South Viet Nam. I would only become concerned when they and the U.S. began to destroy the VC political infrastructure.”

Our choppers landed like a sinister flock of black crows coming to roost in the swaying green rice fields, and the men jumped out swiftly into the waist-deep water. Almost immediately, a small bare-shouldered man rose out of the water and pointed his gun at Rodimon. Rodimon killed him on the spot, and the body slipped back beneath the ubiquitous water of the delta. “I was happy when I got him,” Rodimon exulted later.

Systematically the PRU’s swept into and through the village—house by house, bunker by bunker. From the air, the town had looked as empty of human life as an Arizona ghost town, but one by one the PRU’s nudged out young Vietnamese, their wet, brown shoulders glistening in the sun.

Among those “killed or captured”—it was significant that the two were lumped together—were the VC they had sought. In all they had killed eight and captured twenty-six—in their terms, a successful day.

That evening, as we sat in one of the advisors’ houses drinking beer, the two men kept stressing, perhaps because such bloody methods were being questioned on many levels, how careful they were...
in their work. “The men are very selective,” Rodinom inisized. “They never hurt villagers. I personally checked the pagoda in the town before we went. We’re very careful of religious things. We have a fund to give money to people picked up by mistake. But the men never feel bad about killing a VC.”

Were they certain that all the men they “got” were really VC? Absolutely, they said, the intelligence was that good.

Only at one point did Frank Flynn waver, reminding me a little of Bill’s misgivings. “Sometimes,” he said, very late in the evening, “I wonder. Are we really doing anything for the people? Or is it just for ourselves?”

There are many—both Americans and Vietnamese—who question and question deeply the use of deliberate counterterror and assassination on “our side.” There are Americans who question not only its morality and effectiveness, but also what it does to the Americans involved when they see brutality and torture institutionalized in their military system. As one senior American shook his head. “I ask myself,” he said, “why not give it a try?”

Terror and assassination were included in their bag of tricks. At one point, USIS printed 50,000 leaflets showing sinister black eyes. These were left on bodies after assassinations or even—“our terrorists” are playfully—nailed to doors to make people think they were marked for future efforts.

Even the American mandarinate’s formidable representative to Saigon in the early days, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, once acknowledged our new-found toy with the words: “There is a brand-new type of fighting man—the terror-ist, who is just as distinct as the infan-trymen or the aviator, and he fights in a war with no front, no rear and no flanks in which his ‘base’ is right among the people.”

The counterguerrilla idea quickly found supporters in all quarters. The Green Berets, for instance, built their own private army of 40,000 mercenaries. Scotton’s movement evolved into something called the CT’s or Counter-Terrorists. Finally, the PRU’s emerged in 1966. But whereas Scotton’s original counterguerrillas were both assassins in the night and goodwill organizers of the people, the PRU’s were almost exclusively assassins in the night. The ideological mission was taken over by the Revolutionary Development and later the Phoenix program.

From the beginning, it was no secret that the CIA sponsored, trained, paid and led the PRU’s. Or that they represented the specifically political CIA approach, as opposed to the military approach. From the beginning, the CIA had seen the war more in political terms than did the generals. And the CIA certainly turned out to be more right than wrong.

But “our terror” was different from “their terror.” To the Viet Cong, terror was an indispensable weapon in the political and military war. They used it to make people think they were cursed and where the VC had been dug in for years, it was the PRU’s who climbed down into the sinuous caves.

Everywhere they fought like tigers. An estimated 36 percent were former VC who had learned well how to fight and how to hate. Often they had become ferociously embittered because a father or a brother or a relative was killed by the VC.

“That man used to be a VC,” one American officer said one day, pointing to a PRU. “But they killed his family. He was out for the bush. Spent two years out there alone, conducting a private vendetta against Charlie. God knows how many VC he killed. Finally he came in and joined up with the PRU’s. He wants to kill more VC.”

This fighting spirit is encouraged at the camp at Vung Tau on the coast where the PRU’s are trained by CIA instructors in an intensive five-week course in clandestine warfare. They learn how to slit throats in the dark, how to make the silent capture, but get no political indoctrination. The training lends to a strong sense of comradeship, and the PRU’s are ferocious about protecting their American advisors. (In Kien Giang province, they worried about the 100-pound advisor whom they would not be able to carry out if wounded.)

Their American leaders are CIA paramilitary, Navy Seals, Special Forces—anybody the CIA could dig up who had a counterinsurgency background. And in contrast to ARVN officers, the Americans generally treated the PRU’s as equals. They were even promoted according to merit, in sharp contrast to the ARVN with its aristocratic caste. Even I talked to the PRU’s themselves, this basic equality was the first thing everyone stressed.

“I like the unit because every man’s a fighting man,” the Squad Leader Truong Van Lang said. “We really don’t have officers, like in the ARVN where everybody’s sitting in the office. The men are like brothers. We even call each other ‘brother.’ ”

“We kill many VC,” the deputy commander, Nguyen Ngoc Diep added. “We give fame to our people.”

Yet, how well are the PRU’s actually doing in their assigned task of rooting out the VC infrastructure? Are they ac-

TRUE FOR TODAY’S MAN
From the beginning, the problems of this assignment were enormous. Our South Vietnamese could understand shooting at a guerrilla who was shooting at them. But a quiet little clerk they'd known from childhood who just happened to be directing the entire thing? "It's like trying to convince them to get the Mafia leader instead of the guy in the New York subway with the switchblade," one American advisor put it.

Then there were the "accommodations," by which South Vietnamese officials had, for years, made "deals" with their VC counterparts. A VC village chief near Dalat once wrote an angry letter to his South Vietnamese counterpart and demanded:

"What are you trying to do? Why are you interviewing my relatives? Why are you attacking me now?" It was hard for him to believe that his "friends" on the "other side" could have turned against him.

The early figures of apprehended were impressive. American officials now admit that the victims were chiefly small fish in Mao's swimming waters: rice farmers, low-level VC. Nor has that much meaning of these cases actually been gathered. And about 80 percent of those caught are eventually let go by their South Vietnamese brothers.

Moreover, the VC appear able to re-generate cadres as fast as the Americans knock them off. "I am constantly amazed at the tasks they level on these people, that they don't just throw up their hands," one American says. But then, many of the VC are unquestionably the most energetic, aggressive, upward-mobile and idealistic people in the country.

Many came out of the Viet Minh after it won the war against the French but lost the South. About 10,000 Viet Minh stayed south after 1954 and laid the base for the future Viet Cong leadership. Still others "signed on" after the late President Ngo Dinh Diem's infamous law 1059 by which any anti-Diem men, whatever the village, were purged and often killed by the Diemists.

For these men, indoctrination by the VC was a real awakening. "Suddenly I realized that my life was all about," one related after he was captured by the southerners. "We would sit around in a circle and the political cadres would talk to us. They never actually told us anything, they made it come out of us. How many villages had the Americans killed? They would ask. How many of your women are sleeping with them? What are they doing to your country? Suddenly everything became clear."

And today, in addition to their old roles of supply, political indoctrination and tax collection, the VCI form the ostensibly-elected liberation committees, which will constitute the new VC "government" in the South to fight the government of Saigon.

Moreover, what about the whole idea of terror? Does it not destroy the loyalties of more people than it wins over? Is it really effective on "our side"? Without being naive about it, for this is a war.