

the CIA's hired killers

BY GEORGIE ANNE GEYER

As the war becomes more political and less military, targets shift from the enemy's army to its civilian leadership. To get the job done, the U.S. has trained an elite corps of assassins to eliminate the Viet Cong's "shadow government"

■ 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...Hah!" 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- [Continued on page 101]

ILLUSTRATED BY FRED OTNES

THE CIA'S HIRED KILLERS

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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 misgiving, 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 eight Green Beret officers 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 and a man of recognized integrity, was so personally enraged by many of the "black intelligence" goings-on conducted by irregular outfits like the Green Berets and 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 Berets 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 de-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 control the peace—to be on top 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-roots 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, goodwill 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 or PRU's (pronounced *Prews*). A regionally-based, American-led, CIA-financed paramilitary force of 5,000 Vietnamese, they were originally conceived of as a counterguerrilla organization borrowing from Chairman Mao Tse-tung's principles of living and operating among the peasantry 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 Snoopies 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 guerrilla: to murder, kidnap, terrorize or otherwise forcibly eliminate 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 out of the way as possible before a ceasefire turns control of the country back to the Vietnamese.

Thus in one village, a VC tax collector will be assassinated in his bed in the night. In another, "wanted" posters will be put up for a VC leader, offering a reward to try to persuade his friends to turn him in. The PRU's may also drop down from helicopters and terrorize whole villages, in the hope that they will be frightened to deal with the VC in the future. Or they may bribe VC officeholders to change sides, or kidnap (technically, the word is arrest) those who prove unbribeable.

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, 2,220 killed and the rest rallied to the Saigon side.

In Go Cong province in 1968, the PRU's captured the very highest VC official—the province chief. Acting on intelligence that he was hiding in a certain village, they crept out on a small 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 suddenly 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's discovered only then that the dead man had been the North Vietnamese lieutenant in charge of all the movement of matériel 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 advisors 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 300 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

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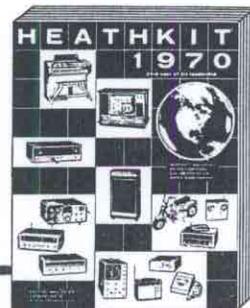


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prison layout. The next morning the PRU's hit the prison, liberating 28 shackled South Vietnamese.

The PRU types are not sentimental when one of their own turns double agent. When one group made such a discovery, it set up a field tribunal, condemned the man to death, and beheaded him. Both the head and the body were politely returned to the man's family for burial.

Indeed, the PRU's are excellent torturers and employ beatings, electric wires in the ears, water suffocation, and anything else that seems effective, constantly and regularly. "Sometimes we have to kill one suspect to get another to talk," one American advisor says coolly. Another American advisor told me—and I have no reason not to believe him—that he ate supper with his PRU's on the hearts and livers of their slain enemies.

The mission and the operation of the PRU's, of course, is still extremely hush-hush. Most correspondents know of their existence, but few have obtained any verifiable details. U.S. high officialdom in Saigon talks about them only on rare, private occasions, and Washington doesn't acknowledge their mission at all. Even the Berets case didn't totally bring out the PRU's role.

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 seemed that the Americans wanted to show off a South Vietnamese unit that was zealous, effective and full of fight, particularly at a time when the regular Vietnamese army, the ARVN, was under severe criticism.

The American CIA chief with whom I dealt had trained guerrillas elsewhere in Asia during World War II. Intelligent, handsome, a professional in irregular warfare, he was proud as punch of his PRU's. Like many similar experts, he believed that had the war been fought more on the counterinsurgency level in the beginning, it would not have turned into such a mess. "Now we're fighting this war the way it always should have been fought," he told me once.

We started our mission by flying down to Rach Gia, a picturesque little fishing village on the South China Sea where the boats are gaily painted with the all-seeing Vietnamese eyes that actually see so little. Its airport was a deserted road cut in half by an operating road, so that when a plane came in, traffic stopped in both directions. This morning, 160 PRU's—tough-looking, wiry, cocky, incredibly eager—arrived early in trucks. While they were waiting, they sat on the runway and—just for kicks—ducked to miss the wings as the planes roared in.

One boy of 22, with a buoyancy I had never seen among the regular South Vietnamese troops, advanced the single most flabbergasting proposal I ever heard in Viet Nam. "In the ARVN, you don't get a chance to do anything," he said, "and I want to fight. Here, there's opportunity. Yesterday there wasn't room for

me in the chopper, and I was sad to be left behind. I like to go on American missions because the VC like to kill Americans and then we get them. I like the Americans because they don't just advise you, they fight with you." Then he got his spectacular idea. "If there is a war in the United States, I would like to come and fight with you," he added.

The two American "advisors" (really the leaders) of the PRU's were friendly and obviously competent. Twenty-nine-year-old Stanley Rodimon, of Huntsville, Alabama, had studied 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 bank." Franklin Flynn, 36, of Imperial Beach, California, had been detached from the Navy Seals to serve with the PRU's. Blond, husky, with a wry sense of humor, Frank also looked upon it as a job and was proud of the work he was doing.

The object of our whirling 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 VCI 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 it, the town's VC sympathies became obvious. A large white sign 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 also 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 paddy 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 VCI they had sought. In all they had killed eight and captured 26—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

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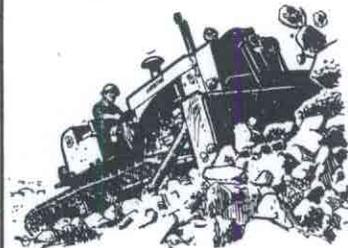
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in their work. "The men are very selective," Rodimon insisted. "They never hurt villagers. I personally checked the pagoda in the town before we went. We're very careful of religious things. We have a fund to give money to people picked up by mistake. But the men never feel bad about killing a VC."

Were they certain that all the men they "got" were really VCI? 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 more—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 officer in Viet Nam put it, "There are no circumstances—none whatsoever—in which murder is legal in the U.S. Army."

On one occasion, an American talked to me about the policy of shipping captured VCI to the remote Con Son island prison for the duration of the war. He shook his head. "I ask myself," he said, "is that any different from the Gestapo?"

Another said, "We use the word 'neutralize' which is a horrible word. It means kill or capture." Then he thought some more. "But on the other hand, if we're going to fight this war, we should be effective. We have to fight it their way."

That was exactly how the PRU's originated and the whole counterterror philosophy got started—through the idea of "fighting it their way." In the absence of an American or South Vietnamese ideology, it was said in the early days, why not borrow the most workable tenets of the enemy's? "After all, they stole the atomic bomb secrets and all from us," a young American named Frank Scotton said one day. "Why should we be squeamish about stealing people's warfare from them? It works better than any-

thing we've come up with to match it, so why not give it a try?"

Thus Scotton and a few other Americans, who were both USIS and CIA-related, started a counter guerrilla movement in northern Quang Ngai province. Their emulation of the Viet Cong went to such lengths that they even had "our Vietnamese" learning the four general rules of Mao Tse-tung (respect the people, help the people, protect the people, follow orders).

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 playful—nailed to doors to make people think they were marked for future efforts.

Even the American mandarin'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 terrorist, who is just as distinct as the infantryman 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 counter guerrilla 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 counter guerrillas 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 both pinpointed village chiefs, killing them brutally and precisely, and they used indiscriminate terror, throwing bombs into marketplaces and killing the innocent.

Terror on "our side," on the other hand, was largely selective. Victims were carefully targeted, generally by the CIA in concert with South Vietnamese intelligence. The major difference was there was no real political organization—no political ideology—behind our terror. Their boys did it for faith; our boys did it for money.

From the beginning, the PRU's were the best killers in Viet Nam. When other Vietnamese troops balked at going up Superstition Mountain near the Cambodian border, which they believed to be 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 30 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 lit 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."

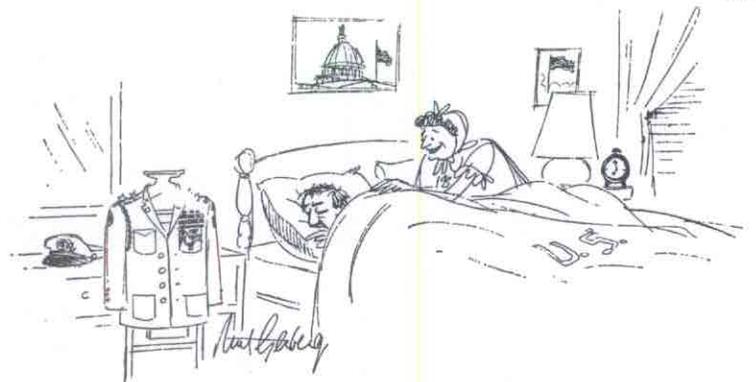
This fighting spirit is encouraged at the camp at Vung Tau on the coast where the PRU's are trained by CIA instructors in an intensive four-week course in clandestine warfare. They learn how to slit throats in the dark, how to make the silent capture, but get no political indoctrination. The training 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 one 300-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 system. When I talked to the PRU's themselves, this basic equality was the first thing every one 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-



"Seven o'clock, General, dear. Time to get up and start undermining world peace!"

tually as successful as Saigon makes them out to be?

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, but American officials now admit that the victims were chiefly small fish in Mao's swarming waters: rice carriers, low-level VCI. Nor has that much meaningful intelligence 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 regenerate 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 VCI 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, whether they were communists, Confucianists or whatever, were purged and often killed by the Diemists.

For these men, indoctrination by the VC was a real awakening. "Suddenly I realized what 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 villagers 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 naïve about it, for this is a war,

how does a supposedly democratic government rationalize the same kind of terror its excoriates "their side" for?

For one thing, despite the fact that it is generally effective, terror is not always so selective as PRU leaders claim. The roundup of hordes of people in operations like that at Ba The is bound to bring in the innocent as well as the guilty. PRU's steal from the peasants, just as the ARVN does. They often do the same dull, stupid things as the South Vietnamese soldiers, only they compound it with terror and brutality.

Not only do many Americans object to these methods, so do many South Vietnamese. Torture has now come to be used so indiscriminately that the VC warn their men to beware of any released prisoner if he has not been tortured.

The Vietnamese Congress, no paragon of virtue itself, recently began a series of investigations charging Phoenix and the PRU's with corruption, clumsy police work and too many illegal arrests.

"Officials have orders to arrest a certain number of Viet Cong," charges Ho Van Minh, deputy chairman of the House of Representatives and considered one of the best and most honest young deputies. "But our investigations show there have been a multitude of cases in which they've arrested the wrong people."

He and other officials who called for an investigation of the whole program admitted that it had resulted in the capture of many agents. But they also wondered whether the malpractices were not alienating people from the government and thus simply creating more VC.

"There have been a number of arrests which really amount to kidnapping," says Ho. "A man going home from work on his bicycle is seized on the way. As far as his family knows, he has simply disappeared. Perhaps a month or two later, they find out where he is."

Another critic, Ho Ngoc Nhuan, chairman of a lower house rural-construction committee, complained that: "In Qang Nam province, I followed one operation. They jammed the entire population of four hamlets into a four-room school and a courtyard while they searched the villages. They ignored the village chiefs who might have been able to help them distinguish which people were VC. They kept the people squatting there for two whole days."

In the 1970's the PRU's will be transferred entirely to the Vietnamese Ministry of the Interior as part of the total changeover of all units to Vietnamese direction. However, the CIA is by no means immediately relinquishing control—not as long as it pays the bills. But certainly with the Green Beret scandal and with the cold eye of criticism looking more at such covert operations, everyone will be taking a colder, harder look at PRU and other such activities.

As noted, one American officer said that there are no circumstances whatsoever in which murder is legal in the U.S. Army. Another disgruntled American civilian official put it this way: "They use terror, yes, but they also have ideology. We have terror without ideology, without revolution. And what is that? It's plain murder."

—Georgie Anne Geyer