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Operation Phoenix and how it grew

Operation Phoenix was the name given to a whole range of assassination, kidnaping, torture and prison programs initiated by American officials in Vietnam from 1967 through 1972.

The target of Phoenix was the VCI or Viet Cong infrastructure in Pentagone the middle and upper level Viet Cong cadre in South Vietnam.

Wayne Cooper, a former State Department foreign service officer and Phoenix adviser for 18 months, described the program's beginnings this way:

"In the mid-1960s, the Central Intelligence Agency began a program which came to be known as "Counter Terror," or CT.

"It was a unilateral American program, never recognized by the South Vietnamese government. CIA representatives recruited, organized, supplied and directly paid CT teams, whose function was to use terror — assassination, ambushes, kidnapings and intimi-

dation — against the Viet Cong leadership.

Cooper wrote of his Phoenix experiences in a June, 1972, commentary for the Washington Post.

The name Phoenix emerged from the Vietnamese. Local programs became known as Phung Haong, after an all-seeing, mythical bird which selectively snatches its prey.

Most of those involved with Phoenix said the program was never successful at neutralizing the Viet Cong leadership. But, nevertheless, it was immensely successful at killing people.

William Colby, current CIA director, told a Washington, D.C., symposium last December that 20,500 Vietnamese were killed during the program.

"The vast majority of those killed were killed in military combat, fights or ambushes, and most of the remaining were killed in police actions attempting to capture them," he said.