

The dark career of Michael Townley

By JOHN DINGES
Special to Sunday Express-News

THE NAME in the outdated United States passport is false, but the faded stamps tell a story. In Rome, there is a special telephone number to contact a terrorist whose nickname is "Topogigio." Other pieces of the puzzle come from hotel, telephone and flight records from a dozen cities.

The evidence surfaced in the investigation of the 1976 car-bomb assassination of former Chilean Ambassador Orlando Letelier in Washington.

The clues lead far beyond Letelier's death to other murders, other cities and the existence of an assassination underground on three continents sponsored by Chile's military rulers.

Most of the information is now in the hands of the Justice Department, but it remains under wraps. The reason: Secret agreements with the Chilean government by U.S. officials negotiating for the extradition of Michael Townley, the key witness in the Letelier murder trial. In this agreement, U.S. officials promised Chile that they would not reveal the by-products of the Letelier investigation to other countries when crimes committed by Chilean agents in conjunction with local authorities were involved.

At a five-week trial ending in February, a Washington jury convicted two Cuban exiles accused of acting as "hit men" under contract with DINA, Chile's notorious secret police, to kill Letelier, a leader of Chilean exile resistance to the military government.

Still pending is a U.S. request that Chile extradite Gen. Manuel Contreras, head of DINA at the time of the September 1976 murder, and two DINA officers accused of arranging the assassination.

AT THE CENTER of the DINA network is Michael V. Townley, assassin, contract agent and international liaison for the agency. American-born, he is spied and killed for DINA. He told American investigators how, under DINA orders, he arranged Letelier's assassination with a remote-control bomb built by him and set off by Cuban exiles.

Townley was the chief prosecution witness at the trial of the two Cuban expatriates on charges of murder and conspiracy and of a third accused of covering up the crime. Townley matter-of-factly described the gruesome details of the bombing that killed Letelier and an American woman, Ronni Moffitt, who was riding with him.



MICHAEL TOWNLEY

But there was much more that was not heard at the trial.

As a result of the Letelier case investigation, abundant hard evidence has emerged that confirms involvement of Chile's secret police in attacks on other prominent exile opponents of the military government.

The first such attack was the bombing murder of retired Chilean army Gen. Carlos Prats and his wife in Argentina in September 1974. A year later, former Vice President Bernardo Leighton, a leader of centrist opposition to military rule, and his wife were critically wounded by a gunman's bullets in Rome.

The evidence traces the incomplete but unmistakable outline of a three-continent network of violent anti-communists receiving support and training from Chile in exchange for their participation in DINA's liaison with groups in Argentina, the United States, Spain, France, Germany and Italy. Townley also has admitted carrying out DINA missions in Holland, Belgium, Austria and Luxembourg.

Independent of Townley, other parts of the network are known to involve police and paramilitary operations in several Latin American countries backed up by sophisticated computers based in Santiago.

On Oct. 4, 1973, Michael Townley became Kenneth W. Enyart, construction worker. Using a forged Florida driver's license and birth certificate, he applied for a U.S. passport in a Hialeah, Fla., courthouse, listing South America as his destination.

Less than a month before, in Chile, the elected Socialist government of

On Sept. 21, 1976, Orlando Letelier, the former Chilean ambassador, was assassinated when a bomb blew up his car in Washington. Early this May, the American-born mastermind of the killing, an agent of Chile's secret police, was sentenced for the crime. In this article, rivaling the drama of a fictional cloak-and-dagger tale, John Dinges gives the inside story of the dark career of Michael Townley, the "blond American" undercover operative known on three continents and involved in intrigues in Italy, Argentina, Mexico, Spain, France and Germany.

President Salvador Allende had been overthrown in a right-wing military coup that was one of the bloodiest in Latin American history. Townley, the son of a wealthy Ford Motor Co. executive in Chile, had joined a rightist group engaged in terrorism against Allende. He was implicated in a homicide and forced to flee the country. Soon after his return to Chile, Townley was approached by DINA operations director Lt. Col. Pedro Espinoza, who was later indicted in the Letelier case.

It was not difficult to persuade DINA chief Contreras that Townley would be useful to do dirty work abroad. Townley was hired in mid-1974.

ON SEPT. 6, 1974, Townley was given a Chilean identity card with his official DINA alias, Juan Andres Wilson Silva, technician. He was ordered to Argentina to arrange the assassination of Gen. Prats. As an exiled Allende loyalist and former commander-in-chief of the Chilean armed forces, Prats was considered the most dangerous rival to Gen. Augusto Pinochet, who had expelled him shortly after the military takeover Pinochet headed.

Stamps in the Enyart passport show Townley flying from Santiago on Sept. 10 to Buenos Aires, where Prats and his wife were living in exile. According to investigative sources, Townley made contact with low-level members of Argentina's terrorist community, a group of civilian mercenaries attached to a branch of the Army Intelligence Service (SIDE).

The night of Sept. 10, Gen. Prats and his wife drove home after midnight. Prats stopped in the driveway and got out to open the garage door. A moment after he returned to the driv-

er's seat, a bomb exploded. Prats and his wife both were killed in a blast so powerful it blew parts of the car nine stories high onto an apartment balcony. Argentine investigators theorized in a still-secret report that a clock timing device was used to detonate the bomb.

Townley's Enyart passport shows him arriving in Santiago a few minutes after midnight — just about the time the bomb was going off in Prats's car. As he did in the Letelier assassination, Townley left his local contacts to push the button.

After the Prats mission, Townley was sent to Miami. He plugged himself into Miami's anti-Castro Cuban terrorist underground, which held Pinochet and DINA in great esteem because of their successful war against the left. Townley let it be known that DINA was seeking a suitable group to help on a special mission.

In February 1975, contact was made with the leader of the Cuban Nationalist Movement, a small but militant group on the rightist fringe of the exile movement. A meeting was arranged in New Jersey with Guillermo Novo and others of the CNM "Northern Zone." Then Townley returned to Miami to buy the equipment to build the assassination device that was to become his trade-



ORLANDO LETELIER

mark: a Fanon-Courier "beeper" system, which he modified electrically to serve as a remote-control detonator.

DINA ordered Townley to disrupt a meeting of Chilean exile leaders in Mexico City and "eliminate," with CNM aid, as many as he could. The assassination list was headed by Communist Sen. Volodia Teitelbaum and Socialist Party Gen. Secretary Carlos Altamirano. Orlando Letelier, recently released from a Chilean concentration camp, was also at the meeting.

For reasons not yet explained, Townley arrived late for the exile meeting and did not carry out the assassination plans. But the relationship between DINA and CNM continued.

MEANWHILE, DINA's focus widened to Europe, where most Chilean exiles lived. Townley was sent to establish or renew contacts with anti-communist groups there. The Pinochet government was becoming concerned about a new threat: The Christian Democratic Party, originally acquiescent to the coup against the leftists, was moving into opposition.

Pinochet feared the formation of a united Christian Democratic-leftist opposition front that would represent up to 80 percent of the population. The exiles in Europe included many of the parties' top leaders, who were pursuing the idea of an alliance.

Townley said that he and Virgilio Paz of the CNM went to Rome in September 1975 to cement DINA's relationship with the Youth Front (Fronti della Gioventu), the militant youth arm of the Fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI), and enlist their help in assassinating the exiled elder statesman of the Christian Democratic Party, Bernardo Leighton. The relationship between DINA and MSI's Youth Front appears to have been virtually a carbon copy of the DINA-CNM link: above-board propaganda exchange and ideological support combined with clandestine terrorist operations.

Townley's contact was a man he knew as Alfredo di Stefano, who went by the nicknames "Topogigio" and "George." Townley and Paz are believed to have worked out with di Stefano a three-way mutual aid arrangement involving DINA, CNM and di Stefano's youth group.

Leighton was a co-founder of the Chilean Christian Democratic Party and leader of its most liberal wing. He had lived in voluntary exile in Rome since December 1973. Leighton's assassination was portrayed by DINA as being politically beneficial both to Chile's junta and to the cause of Italian fascism. Leighton was considered by DINA's analysts to be a dangerous "catalyst" who could force a precedent-setting alliance against the right that could spread to other countries.

Di Stefano agreed to carry out the three-way operation. The target was a Chilean, the assassins were Italian and — in a twist — the Cuban exile movement would take credit for the operation in order to take the heat off the Italians.

Townley flew to the United States. On Oct. 6, as Leighton and his wife stepped out of a taxicab a few blocks from the Vatican, they were shot down from behind by a lone gunman. Both were

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critically wounded but survived. Ana Leighton, shot in the spine, remains partially paralyzed. Leighton recovered fully from a head wound, but withdrew from active politics.

Miami's Spanish-language newspaper, *Diario de las Americas*, received a communique postmarked Oct. 10 in which a Cuban exile group identified as Zero, one of the pseudonyms for the CNM, claimed credit for shooting Leighton. No details to verify the claim were given, but on Nov. 4, another Zero communique was received by The Associated Press. The message said Leighton was shot in the back of the head, not in the forehead as reported in the press, and that the weapon used was a 9-mm. Baretta pistol. Italian police confirmed that the details were correct and could only have been obtained by someone with firsthand knowledge of the assassination.

The confusing messages were part of the "test" of the trilateral pact agreed upon in Rome. Townley's Italian contacts who arranged the shooting attack passed details of the wound and the gun to the CNM, which gave them belatedly

to the press to bolster their claim to have committed the crime. The information was relayed through DINA.

WHAT WAS to be the last act of the collaboration between DINA and the CNM took shape in mid-1976, when Cuba's rulers planned the assassination of Orlando Letelier. The job was given to Townley, a natural choice for an operation in Washington because of his American citizenship and strong ties to cooperative CNM members living in New Jersey, a few hours' drive from Washington.

Paraguayan intelligence, which had recently joined the counterinsurgency organization created by Contreras to coordinate the secret police operations of the military governments in South America's southern zone, agreed to provide false official passports for DINA's unspecified mission in Washington.

Townley persuaded CNM members Guillermo Novo, Alvin Ross, Jose Dionisio Suarez and Virgilio Paz to assist him in the assassination. At 9:30 a.m. on Sept. 21, 1976, a bomb exploded in Letelier's car as he rounded Sheridan Circle

near the Chilean Embassy where he had once lived.

Sign-in records show that Townley was in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., at the time, buying electronic equipment.

But Contreras' reliance on his network backfired. The Paraguayan passports, though never used, provided investigators with pictures of Townley and another DINA agent involved in the operation.

Security was poor inside the Cuban exile community, and within weeks the CNM role in the murder had been established. U.S. investigators began to follow the trail of the "blond Chilean-American" said to be DINA's liaison to the CNM. The trail led to Chile in February 1978 when for the first time the picture and description of the suspect were matched with Townley.

The United States, bent on solving Letelier's murder, demanded Townley's extradition. Chile, caught in one murder, negotiated to protect the rest of DINA's terror network and prevent the other assassinations from being linked to the Pinochet government.

Two weeks' tense negotiations in Washington and Santiago were

interspersed with heavy diplomatic arm-twisting by U.S. officials. On April 7, a secret agreement was signed in Washington by Chilean Under Secretary of Interior Enrique Montero and U.S. Attorney Earl Silbert.

To obtain the expulsion of Townley, the United States promised that "information (obtained through the Letelier investigation) . . . will be conveyed only to the government of Chile," and that the information may only be used by the United States "to prosecute violations of law in the United States." The pact thus prohibited the United States from passing on to, say, Argentina, Germany or Italy, information uncovered about Chilean terrorist acts within their borders.

Townley was put on a plane in handcuffs on April 8, seated next to two FBI agents.

On April 17, Townley signed a plea-bargaining agreement with Silbert. Townley would plead guilty to one count of conspiracy to murder a foreign official and be sentenced to three and a third to 10 years in prison. Townley could be required to give information

only about crimes involving American citizens or that were committed on U.S. territory.

Novo and Ross were picked up near Miami as they were preparing to flee the United States with false passports. Paz and Suarez are still at large.

THROUGHOUT the trial in January and February this year, prosecutors fought off defense attorneys' efforts to force Townley to face cross-examination on other assassination missions for DINA. U.S. District Judge Barrington Parker commented at one point to Prosecutor Eugene Propper that "it sounds as though you are representing Mr. Townley." But Parker held to the guidelines of the U.S. pact with Chile and declared off-limits all questions probing into other DINA operations and crimes.

Four of the nine men indicted in connection with the Letelier murders are in prison. Novo and Ross were given life sentences. Ignacio Novo, Guillermo's brother, was given five years for lying to a grand jury.

Judge Parker finally sentenced Michael Townley on May 10 to a maximum of 10 years in prison.

Pinochet continues to insist that his government had nothing to do with Letelier's death or other human rights violations.

The Chilean Supreme Court is expected to follow a preliminary recommendation denying extradition of Contreras and other officers on grounds that Townley's testimony was obtained in exchange for a promise and is thus inadmissible.

The case is far from over for Townley. In a letter to his wife a year ago — a copy of which was obtained — Townley told of his fears:

"With what has started in the press, screaming about Argentina, Italy, etc., and what is going to come out about Mexico, the rest of the world is going to be screaming for you and me for many years to come. It won't make any difference that they also scream for Contreras and the Chilean government, they will be screaming first of all for us . . ."