

'My Mission Was to Murder Letelier,' Says Chilean Agent

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WASHINGTON — "My mission," Michael Vernon Townley said casually in answer to a prosecutor's questions, "was the elimination ... the assassination ... the killing of Orlando Letelier."

"My orders were to make the death appear to be an accident, or a suicide, to make it as innocuous as possible."

That courtroom testimony Thursday seemed particularly strange, coming from a man so clean-cut and soft-spoken that he appeared more like a church deacon than an assassin.

But assassin he is. For on Sept. 21, 1976, by his own admission, he planted the bomb that killed Letelier, the former Chilean ambassador to the United States during the regime of Salvadore Allende.

LETELIER, WHO was living here in forced exile after Allende was overthrown, and Mrs. Ronni Moffitt, a young assistant, died when the remote-controlled bomb strapped to the floorboard of Letelier's Chevelle exploded as they drove to work along Embassy Row.



Michael Townley
... star witness

A third passenger, Ronni's husband Michael, survived the blast. But, in a dazed state, he was found by onlookers running from the wreckage screaming, "The fascists have done this to us."

Townley, 36, in a deferential tone and with unflappable calm, spent almost four hours Thursday ex-

plaining to a U.S. District Court jury how he carried out his assignment to "eliminate" Letelier.

Townley already has pleaded guilty. He is the government's key witness in the case against his alleged Cuban exile accomplices.

Most of his testimony had been outlined previously by prosecutors, but he did provide some fresh details Thursday in telling his story publicly for the first time.

HE SAID he directed the plot as an agent for DINA, the Chilean secret police, and was assisted by members of the militant Cuban Nationalist Movement.

Two of the Cuban defendants, Alvin Ross Diaz and Guillermo Novo, both of Union City, N.J., are charged, along with two others who remain fugitives, with helping Townley carry out the murder.

The third defendant, Ignacio Novo of Miami, allegedly lied to a federal grand jury investigating the assassination and assisted the other Cuban militants in eluding capture. He is Guillermo Novo's brother.

Townley's three superiors in

Townley: Diplomat's Death Was Result of a Conspiracy

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DINA who conceived the mission also are charged in the murder. However, they have not been extradited to the United States.

THE THREE Cuban defendants focused an icy stare on Townley throughout his testimony and, at one point, hurled insults at him during a break in the proceedings.

With the jury absent from the courtroom after Judge Barrington Parker Jr. called attorneys to his private chambers, the three Cubans hissed epithets at Townley, who was sitting next to a U.S. marshal only a few feet away.

In venomous Spanish, they called him a "whore," a "bastard" a "son of a whore" and — despite their pleas of not guilty in the assassination — a "traitor."

A young Cuban woman in the courtroom also called to Townley, "Someone should cut out your tongue."

The three defendants claim that Townley actually is a CIA double-agent who used DINA as a cover for his activities. Defense attorneys also contend that the CIA orchestrated the murder and then framed the Cuban exiles.

TOWNLEY ADMITTED Thursday that he had volunteered for CIA duty in 1970, but never was contacted after being interviewed in Miami by a CIA agent. He said he telephoned the CIA's Miami office twice more in late 1973, but again wasn't used.

When Assistant U.S. Attorney Eugene Propper asked him if he ever had worked for the CIA, Townley replied in a strong voice: "No sir, I have not."

He said he was drawn into intelligence work as the result of his hobby — electronics — and his anti-Communist political beliefs during Allende's Marxist regime.

When Allende shut down the Chilean radio stations in 1972, Townley set up a mobile station that moved around Santiago, the capital city, broadcasting anti-government information.

After Allende was overthrown in a bloody military coup in 1973 — a coup that eventually forced Letelier into exile here — Townley said he became "superficial friends" with the intelligence officer assigned by the Allende government to close Townley's broadcasting station.

IN LATE 1974, Townley said that Col. Pedro Espinoza recruited him into DINA, where his American background and knowledge of electronics could be useful to the intelligence service.

Townley said his first mission came a month later. He was sent to Miami under an alias to buy electronic-surveillance equipment for DINA. He purchased the equipment at Audio Intelligence Devices Inc., near Fort Lauderdale, and returned to Santiago.

Then, in early 1975, Townley said he was called by DINA director Manuel Contreras and assigned to "eliminate" two Chilean exiles critical of the military junta.

This was Townley's first connection with the Cuban Nationalist Movement. Townley said his orders were to disrupt a meeting of Chilean exiles in Mexico City and "eliminate" Carlos Altamirano and Volodia Teitelbaum, both leading anti-junta leftists.

DINA, Townley said, told him to get help from Cuban exiles he had met during the four years, 1967-71, he lived in Miami.

HE SAID he traveled to Miami and contacted Felipe Rivero, founder of the Cuban Nationalist Move-



— Associated Press

Bomb Ripped Orlando Letelier's Car in 1976

... he and associate died in Washington blast

ment, and discussed his assignment in "very general terms." In the end, Townley testified, he decided against enlisting any Miami-area Cubans in the plot because "most of them turned out to be very talkative."

Rivero referred him to Guillermo Novo in New Jersey, Townley said. Townley said he knew that Novo had gone to Chile in 1974 with Orlando Bosch, a Cuban terrorist, and Jose Dionisio Suarez, also of New Jersey. The two had wanted Chile to recognize the Cuban Nationalist Movement as the Cuban government in exile.

Townley said he persuaded Novo that he was a legitimate DINA member. Novo, Townley said, then gave him explosives and assigned Virgil Paz Romero to help.

The plot failed because Townley and Paz arrived in Mexico City one day after the Chilean exile meeting ended, Townley said. But the mission succeeded in cementing a relationship between DINA and the Cuban Nationalist Movement, especially its New Jersey leaders, Guillermo Novo and Paz.

TOWNLEY SAID that in early 1976 Paz traveled to Chile and attended the DINA training school. While there, Paz stayed with Townley and his family in suburban Santiago.

The orders to assassinate Letelier, who had become an international spokesman against the military junta, came late in the summer of 1976, Townley said.

Initially, the murder was to be carried out only by Townley and another DINA agent, he said. But after some initial plans went awry and DINA officials began to fear they might be linked to a killing, an alternative plan was developed, Townley said. Cuban exiles would be used to assassinate Letelier.

Townley said that when he flew to New Jersey and outlined the plan to Novo and others in the exile group, "They complained that they were on the small end of the funnel," a Spanish expression meaning roughly that they were being asked to accept the responsibility of a large country.

But he said Novo reluctantly agreed to participate on the condition that Townley be actively involved and that DINA agree to support the Cuban exile movement.

TOWNLEY SAID the decision to kill Letelier with a bomb was made Sept. 18 during a breakfast at a McDonald's in Washington.

With him were Paz and Suarez, who drove here from New Jersey on orders from Novo, Townley said. Together they built the bomb — with parts purchased at local Radio Shack stores and a Sears, Roebuck store — and drove to Letelier's suburban home about midnight, he said.

Townley said he personally crawled beneath the car and attached the bomb to the chassis beneath the driver's seat.

Because his orders called for him to be out of Washington when the

bomb went off, Townley said he flew first to New Jersey the next morning and, after meeting with Novo, flew to Miami that night to visit his parents in Boca Raton. The date was Sept. 19.

He directed Paz and Suarez to carry out the murder by activating the remote-controlled bomb as Letelier drove through "an extremely unpopulated park" near his home so nobody else would be injured.

"They were told not to do it if anyone else was in the car," Townley added.

On Sept. 21, the mission was accomplished. "I heard on the news that something had happened in Washington," he said.

But neither of his instructions was followed. The bomb exploded in a highly populated area, and there were two other passengers in the car.