General David Petraeus and 'dirty wars' veteran behind commando units implicated in detainee abuse.

The Pentagon sent a US veteran of the "dirty wars" in Central America to oversee sectarian police commando units in Iraq that set up secret detention and torture centres to get information from insurgents. These units conducted some of the worst acts of torture during the US occupation and accelerated the country's descent into full-scale civil war.

Colonel James Steele was a 58-year-old retired special forces veteran when he was nominated by Donald Rumsfeld to help organise the paramilitaries in an attempt to quell a Sunni insurgency, an investigation by the Guardian and BBC Arabic shows.

After the Pentagon lifted a ban on Shia militias joining the security forces, the special police commando (SPC) membership was increasingly drawn from violent Shia groups such as the Badr brigades.

A second special adviser, retired Colonel James H Coffman, worked alongside Steele in detention centres that were set up with millions of dollars of US funding.

TVNL Comment: See the full-length documentary film of the 15 month investigation.

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