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## Killing field was training ground used by Zetas

By **Jason Buch** Updated 2:12 pm, Thursday, January 19, 2012



IMAGE 1 OF 2



Accused Zeta hit man Wenceslao Tovar, seen in an undated photo provided by the U.S. Marshal office in Laredo, was turned over to U.S. Marshals at the pedestrian bridge in downtown Laredo on the afternoon of

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LAREDO — A Zetas hit man on Wednesday offered a peek into the slaughter that took place in the small Mexican town of San Fernando, where the remains of 200 bodies were unearthed last year, testifying how new cartel recruits were trained to kill there.

“They would show new recruits how to kill,” testified **Wenceslao Tovar**, 26, an admitted Zetas sicario, or hit man. “They would give them a machete. If not, they’d give them a sledge hammer and they’d tell them to kill the people they had tied up.”

Those who successfully completed the training were treated to a party that included a raffle with winners getting watches, vehicles and cash, Tovar said. Those

who couldn't kill were made halcones, the Spanish word for "hawks," used to describe cartel lookouts, he said.

Tovar's testimony came in the trial of **Gerardo Castillo Chavez**, a 25-year-old from Mexico, on charges that he took part in killings and assaults in 2006 as part of a drug conspiracy. But testimony in the first day of trial went far beyond Castillo Chavez's alleged involvement with the Zetas.

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Tovar said he met Castillo Chavez, who he knew only as "Cachetes," "cheeks" in Spanish, as they went through training in Mexico.

Tovar said he was with about 300 Zetas recruits, members and leaders who trained in late 2005 near San Fernando. It was the second time he'd been sent to such a camp, where Zetas learned military tactics and recruits were forced to prove their mettle by slaughtering bound men, Tovar said.

Defense attorneys challenged his testimony, pointing out that he's trying to get a reduced

sentence and that Tovar, when initially shown a picture of Castillo Chavez by police, said he didn't recognize the defendant.

Tovar testified Wednesday that he didn't have his glasses on and couldn't see the picture well. Later, he backtracked and said he was trying to protect the man he'd met only briefly at the training camp. Defense attorneys also pointed out that Tovar, as well as admitting to killing in the U.S, took part in kidnappings that resulted in dozens of slayings in Mexico.

"You participated in all those murders, and they were still willing to come to an agreement with you?" defense attorney **Oscar Vela** asked.

In testimony that began midmorning and lasted well into the afternoon, Tovar, a U.S. citizen who was recently deported from Mexico, described how he smuggled drugs for the Zetas in Nuevo Laredo and was recruited as a hit man for the cartel.

Among his revelations was that he and another admitted Zetas sicario committed an until-recently unsolved homicide in 2005 in Laredo.

The two were tasked with killing someone named “Pompoño” who lived in the South Laredo subdivision of Los Presidentes, he said on the witness stand.

Tovar testified that he drove **Gabriel Cardona**, 25, a co-defendant in the drug conspiracy case who's serving 80 years in state prison for five killings here and a life sentence in federal prison for killing two U.S. citizens in Mexico, to Pompoño's house.

Cardona “knocked on the door and he shot the person who came out,” Tovar said. “He killed him. We changed cars and we left to go to Mexico.”

But police said the person killed on May 11, 2005, wasn't the Zetas' target but his son, 13-year-old **Rogelio Rodriguez III**. The case had remained unsolved until Laredo police interviewed Tovar after he was brought to the U.S. in July.

Tovar went on to describe how he and two crews of Zetas sicarios, including a former **U.S. Marine** pretending to be a police officer, killed a former Nuevo Laredo police officer who was living in the U.S. after joining with a local drug trafficker's fight against the Zetas.

Tovar pleaded guilty earlier this month to charges related to that killing. He faces up to life in prison.

After the killings in the U.S., Tovar said, he went to work for Miguel “El 40” Treviño Morales and his brother, Omar “El 42” Treviño Morales in Mexico. He attended training camps and worked in the brothers' bodyguard and enforcement details.

From July until November 2005, Tovar said, he and other Zetas kidnapped 10 to 15 people a week in Nuevo Laredo and turned them over to **Miguel Treviño Morales** for execution. When he first met Treviño Morales, now believed to be the organization's second in command, the Zeta commander was in the process of decapitating three people, Tovar said.

At the end of 2005, those who completed the training camp in San Fernando were treated to a party with Gulf Cartel and Zeta leaders — at the time the two organizations were allied — that included the raffle for watches, vehicles and cash.

Tovar said his career with the cartel ended in April 2006, when he had an auto accident that left him confined to a wheelchair.

Testimony in the trial is expected to continue Thursday morning.

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