

VIETNAM

"I WAS THERE"

By S/A Bill Biscomb

The movie marquee read "Full Metal Jacket". I asked the ticket guy if the film was any good. He proceeded to tell me that it is the best Vietnam war movie yet.

I responded, "I'll let you know after I come out...I was there".

Some time ago, a GM-15, talking about NIS service in 'Nam said, "The organization and new agents don't want to hear about Vietnam. They want to know about Red Blanket."¹

I have to disagree on both counts. I can't believe Career Services considers Vietnam service just another unaccompanied tour.

Believe me when I say there is no comparison between a year in Vietnam and a carrier tour, or a Red Blanket detail, or an assignment to Bobsled. A newly hired agent probably never heard of Red Blanket, but he or she is certainly aware of the country's involvement in Vietnam.

Just the other day, a young agent (they all seem young these days), when hearing I was there, asked what cases I worked in NISRA Danang. I told him, "Narcotics, black market money exchange and fraggings".

But I do not intend to give a history lesson about NIS in Vietnam. Rather, first let me give you an insight into those agents who volunteered for twelve months for an unaccompanied tour in a combat zone, whether assigned to NISRA Saigon or NISRA Danang. Since there were no female agents assigned there, I will be using the male gender throughout the rest of this article.

Some agents volunteered in order to leave a NISRA where they were doing

1. Red Blanket was the code name for a protective service detail in Italy.



NIS Special Agents who served in Vietnam for one year received the civilian Vietnam Service Medal shown above. The background is dark blue with yellow and red stripes.

background investigations, asking fifty times a day, "Is he honest, loyal, trustworthy, and would you recommend him for a position of trust"? (The rough notes read, "HLT POT".) Others volunteered for the opportunity to be reassigned to a NISRA of their choice if and when they made it back alive. To be candid, organizational promises to return an agent to the office of his choice were not always kept. Still others,

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perhaps a little gullibly, believed it when told that such a tour would certainly be "career enhancing".

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There were those who volunteered to get away from a new marriage gone sour, or from an old marriage gone stale. Vietnam held the prospect of excitement, danger, interesting work, overseas travel. Additionally, there was additional premium pay at a time when there was none (and later only 10%). At a time when many agents were making less than five figures, this pay increase was the big selling point for some agents who were hard pressed financially.

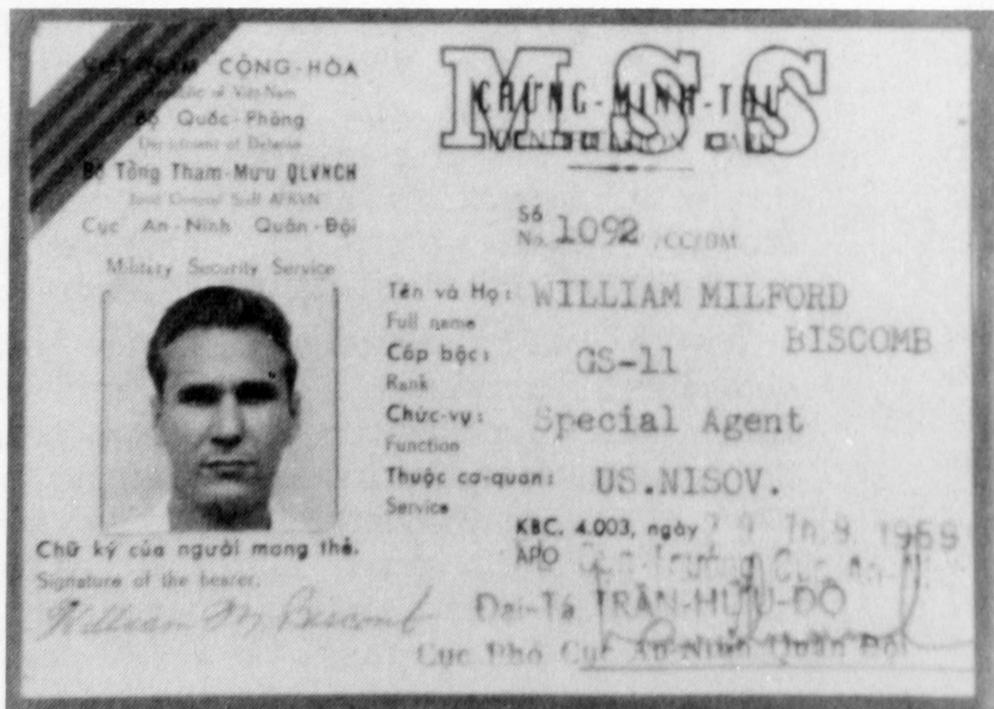
The prospects I mentioned quickly became reality. Overseas travel usually began from Travis AFB in California. After a tiring MAC flight...PAN-AM, no frills...the bleary-eyed S/A found himself in steamy, stinking downtown Saigon. No one was there to meet me at Tan Son Nhut Airport. I figured out how to use the phone system and called NISRA Saigon.

In a short while a big guy strode in armed with his issue .357 magnum on his belt. This was a mild shock since in those days it was a no-no to display a weapon. A GS-11 like myself, he introduced himself as Don Webb. Did I mention excitement? That began with the drive from the airport to the NISRA. I believe this introduction to Vietnam is more or less typical.

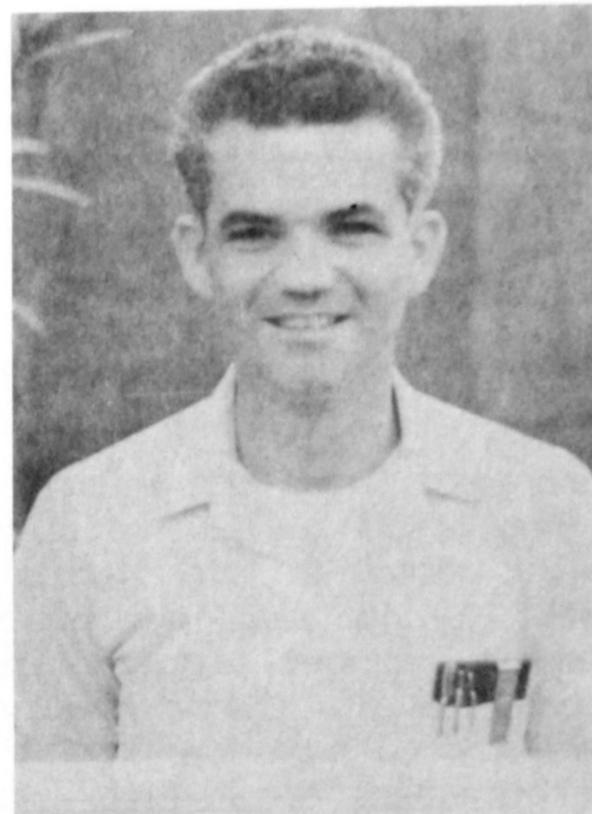
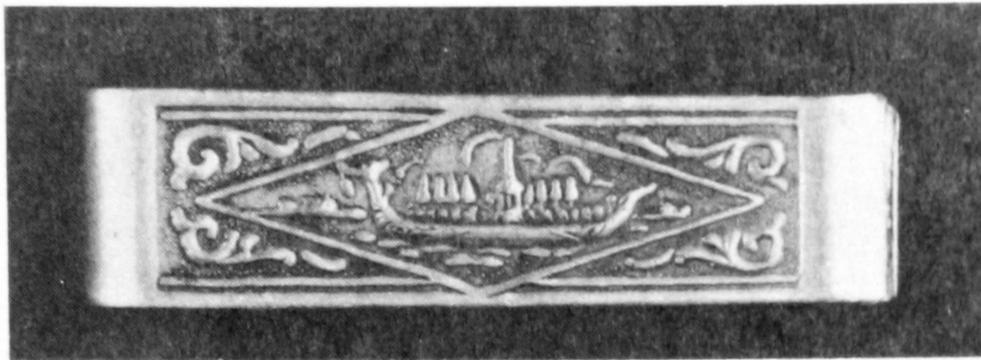
At the NISRO, the upper half of one's credentials were removed...the part that boldly proclaims "Naval Intelligence"...and kept for safekeeping for 12 months. It was explained that this was a precaution to prevent being shot as a spy in the eventuality of capture by the enemy. The agent next was issued a laminated card identifying the bearer (in English and Vietnamese) as a non-combatant. The thought occurred that probably "Charlie" could not read either English nor Vietnamese. For the reader, "Charlie" was the generic name for members of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Viet Cong (Victor Charlie in the phonetic alphabet, hence "Charlie" for short).

The thought also occurred to most of us that we certainly did not look like a non-combatant dressed in fatigues

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BADGE AND CREDENTIALS ISSUED TO S/A BISCOMB IN VIETNAM



THE HISTORY OF THE CREDENTIAL CLIP

One way of spotting NIS Special Agents who served in Vietnam is by their credential clips. These clips, like those pictured above at left, were originally money clips given away by tailors and other merchants in Bangkok, Thailand, to customers who purchased their goods. They became a popular item with NIS Special Agents in Vietnam, like S/A Lance Arnold in the picture above at right, who used them as credential clips.

sans insignia, armed with a pistol and rifle, protected by a helmet and flak jacket. In fact, when the agent went outside the city limits, he looked exactly like an E-1 grunt, albeit older and somewhat better smelling.

I mentioned danger earlier. Realize that our "customers" came to the interview armed to the teeth. At the NISRA, they had to be convinced to leave their weapons at the door. In the field environment it was another matter. We had to watch out for danger from friendly forces as much as from enemy forces. After all, we posed as much a threat as the enemy to the doper or black marketeer. Then there was the ever-present danger from rocket attack, which was indiscriminate. The incoming rocket was not aware of our non-combatant status, however dignified by our laminated card. "Same-same" for a land mine or anti-personnel mine, AKA booby trap.

I can vividly recall occasions when Marines or Army soldiers shook their heads in total disbelief at seeing two

NIS agents ride out of the city in a jeep with only small arms and a small prayer to protect us.

As far as mentioning interesting investigations, they came on a daily basis. There were no PIO's (Preliminary Investigation Only). There were cases of atrocities (7H), rapes of South Vietnamese women at field locations you never heard of (8F), dollar-piastre-MPC (military payment certificate) conversion schemes (6C), toss the grenade at sarge (7G), and drug cases ad nauseum.

There were surveillances and searches, arrests and convictions. There were reports to write and leads to send back to "the land of the big PX." One day you were in a jeep heading for a Marine tank battalion, the next in a helicopter bound for an advanced tactical base.

The following week you were in a YFU heading up the coast to a swift boat base, and next you were flying out to a carrier in the Gulf of Tonkin because a message arrived saying the

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captain requested NIS agent assistance (such messages always neglected to say why and were devoid of details).

You can get those who were there to tell you about the steak cook-outs, the poker games, the hard drinking, the jungle-rules volleyball games, the R & R trips to Hong Kong or Bangkok, or other "good times". I won't attempt to steal their stories. They got them the old fashioned way...they earned them.

The cadre of those agents with 84SV and 84DV on their Personnel Management System data sheets is dwindling. Among themselves, they know one another. They are GM15's and GS-12's, and grades in between. They are on the street and they are behind desks. But they equally share the Vietnam Experience.

They are lifetime members of an elite club within an elite organization. There are no membership dues...they have already paid their dues. Some would do it all over

again. Others would definitely do it differently. All agree the experience is unforgettable.

The great miracle, astounding to those who were there, is that all of us returned. No NIS Special Agent was killed in Vietnam!

The Author

William M. Biscomb has been a NIS Special Agent for 20 years, serving in 10 different components. He has been a "street agent", a NISRU representative, an Assistant Special Agent-in-Charge, twice a Special Agent-in-Charge, and Assistant Regional Director for Operations, and has held various positions at Headquarters. He is currently the Assistant Inspector General at NIS.



END OF THE TOUR

S/A Bill Biscomb, at right, is congratulated by S/A Allan Kersenbrock after receiving the civilian Vietnam Service medal. S/A Kersenbrock was the Supervising Agent (the equivalent of the RDO today) of NISO Vietnam. Looking on is Cmdr. Donn Burrows, USN, the Commanding Officer of NISO Vietnam.