

## USMC CID and NIS, The Early Days

**By: Carl J. Merritt SA/NIS (Ret)**

In the early 1960's, the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) began expanding and deploying its civilian Special Agent corps to more fully execute its investigative and counterintelligence responsibilities in support of its Navy and Marine Corps customers. Our charter, among other things, mandated that ONI assume primary jurisdiction, where authorized, over most all felony level offenses committed aboard Naval and Marine Corps installations. Our personnel and jurisdictional expansion aboard many Marine Corps facilities was generally, not met with enthusiasm by most elements of the Marine Corps Criminal Investigative Division (CID). Marine Corps CID folks during this ONI expansion period knew full well that they were quite capable of providing full criminal investigative support to the Marine Corps, because after all, they had been doing it quite effectively for many years. Indeed, in those days, the CID MOS education and training provided to USMC CID investigators was, frankly, superior to that being provided to ONI Special Agents. USMC CID had a strong cadre of seasoned and extremely capable senior investigators that ONI, at the time, found it difficult to match. To say, in the beginning, there were tensions, personality clashes and downright hostility between some ONI/CID relationships would be an understatement. Those of us who were part of the early ONI build-up aboard Marine Corps installations learned early on that cooperation and jurisdiction cannot be demanded or even asked for; from the Marine Corp perspective, it would have to be earned.



In early 1966, ONI morphed into Naval Investigative Service (NIS), and was fielding what would become a very substantial presence in Vietnam throughout that war's duration. In early 1966, I was assigned to NISRA Subic Bay, Philippines. I had just returned to Subic from a 60 day deployment aboard USS Enterprise (CVAN-65). Supervising Agent Jack Donnelly summoned me upon my return and informed me, as only Jack could, not to unpack my sea bag because I was being reassigned to Da Nang, Vietnam the following day. I would serve out of

Da Nang during 1966 and 1967, as a member of the first full NIS team stood up in that NISRA. Charlie Baldwin was the SRA and with few exceptions, I consider it to have been my best and most challenging career assignment. NISRA Da Nang, in the early days of the war, demonstrated, to me anyway, how quickly total strangers thrown together could become like family and go on to sustain lifelong friendships. Our primary customer was the Marine Corps and their combat units deployed throughout I Corps, from south of Chu Lai to north of Dong Ha, Khe Sanh and the "Rockpile." NIS had informed Marine Corps that it was capable and ready to provide full investigative and counterintelligence support to any and all USMC forward combat units anywhere in country and that's exactly what we did. The animosities, tensions and jurisdictional competition between elements of NIS and USMC CID continued early on within Vietnam however, I think the Vietnam experience itself did much to create and foster a positive working relationship that today, is certainly unparalleled. Perhaps it was after several too many beers during a NIS/CID liaison meeting at the "Take Ten," the "I Corps Mess," or the "Stone Elephant" or perhaps it was CID, then SSGT Dan Buckle, who retired as a Major, and SRA Charlie Baldwin, suggesting that working and reporting together could actually work. We did, and as can be seen with the current relationship between USMC CID and NCIS, it worked.

This is not to say that there were no relationship bumps encountered along the way. Subsequent to Vietnam, I later served at both NISRA Camp Lejeune and NISRA Okinawa and recall there were still untoward feelings and attitudes within both houses however, it was getting better. I specifically recall one bump in particular that I consider both humorous and professionally fulfilling. Every Special Agent assigned to NISRA Da Nang was expected to carry out a 30 day TAD assignment in Chu Lai. Our team was not large enough to permanently assign a person to Chu Lai thus, the 30 day commitment. The Chu Lai agent worked out of his briefcase, was billeted within Military Police spaces and was expected (at that period) to work closely with MSgt. "Top" Charles Ellis, USMC CID. Top Ellis was one of USMC CID's most experienced and respected senior investigators. He was also one of the most vocal anti NIS/CID cooperation opponents in the system. Our first day together went rather well. There had been a shooting the night before wherein a Vietnamese male in a nearby village had been shot and killed, allegedly by a Marine and for no apparent reason. The incident occurred in what was considered, at the time, to be Indian country but a crime scene was required. Top Ellis stopped by my hooch in the early morning following the shooting, passed me an M-14 and six magazines, and we headed for the crime scene in his jeep. He informed me on the way that the MP Company CO had declined to furnish us with any armed personnel and that we were on our own. The crime scene went without incident;

we resolved the case and my respect for this grumpy representative of the Corps “Old Breed” climbed considerably.



*Where did you say this crime scene was Top?*

We went on to work a number of good cases together over that 30 day period and I'd like to think we got along well although Top Ellis was not known to be a fan of handing out even faint praise. I knew however, I had scored a victory when on my last day in Chu Lai, Top walked me to the chopper pad, shook my hand and said he had enjoyed working with me. I don't think there have been many NIS Special Agents over the years who ever heard that from Top Ellis. Top Ellis retired from the Marine Corps sometime after completing his Vietnam tour. He later returned to Vietnam as a contractor for the Agency and stayed with them for several more years. I learned recently, from retired CID Marine Stu Slagle, President of Marine Corps Law Enforcement Association (MCLEA) that sadly, Top Ellis had passed

away several years ago. Top Ellis was an investigator without peer and, a Marine who wore his greens well.

Although the joke was on me, I would like to share a fond memory that pays homage to the quick wit and, special sense of humor that was part of the late Chuck Ellis. The year was 1966; the place was Chu Lai, RVN. Top Ellis and I were discussing a case with a Bn. Sgt. Major outside the Bn. CP. The specific command is not recalled but the Bn. Sgt. Major was also total Old Breed Marine Corps and he looked as though he might have enjoyed the broken glass he had obviously mixed in with his breakfast eggs. CG, 3RD MARDIV was visiting Chu Lai that day and the whole place was on "Do it right" alert. A Marine Corps Captain walked by as the three of us were talking and, Top Ellis and the Sgt. Major each paused their conversation and saluted; I did not. I was dressed in Marine Corps utilities but carried no visible ID or insignia of rank. The Sgt. Major informed me that he would be most interested in learning why I had shown such disrespect toward an officer and I firmly believed he had already planned a fitting punishment. Before I could respond, Top Ellis interjected and told the Sgt. Major that I was a civilian and probably did not believe in saluting officers. The Sgt. Major appeared neither amused nor pacified as he and Top Ellis continued their discussion. Somewhat later, I chanced to glance to our rear and observed the 3RDMARDIV CG in his jeep, just 10 or so meters to our rear and approaching fast. I yelled, "Attention on deck," (as tough sounding as I could) whereupon the three of us turned and rendered three perfect hand salutes as the CG drove by; returning in kind. When the CG's jeep had passed, Top Ellis turned to the Sgt. Major and, pointing to me, said: "Hey, he might be a civilian but at least he believes in God." I think I saw the Sgt. Major smile.

Semper Fi,

Carl J. Merritt