

NIS in Vietnam

By Tom Brooks and Bill Manthorpe

From the beginning of its existence, the Naval Investigative Service (NIS) was active in Vietnam. Even before the creation of NIS on 4 February 1966, ONI special agents were in Vietnam as early as 1965.

As the war had been getting hotter and the number of US military personnel in-country increasing, the originally small US Naval Support Activities in Saigon and Da Nang became the principal administrative and housekeeping commands supporting the buildup of US forces of all services. Thus, investigative responsibility related to such functions as postal service, finance, pay, exchange and other support activities also fell to the Navy.

Investigative support was originally provided to the Naval Support Activities by special agents (SA) assigned to the Counterintelligence Support Center Subic Bay traveling to Saigon and Da Nang on temporary duty. The agents assigned to this duty were Maynard Anderson and Bob Kane. By 1965, their activities had reached the point where Resident Agencies (RA) of the Subic Bay Center were established in Saigon and Da Nang. The Saigon RA was staffed by LT Bob Dothard and SA Milt Steffin. In Da Nang, the first SAs were Charley Baldwin, Tom Brannen and Carl Merriitt.

Unfortunately, in early 1966, one of the first major cases of RA Saigon was to investigate charges against the Commander NAVACTS Saigon, CAPT Archie Kuntze. SA Ken Nickel, the Assistant Supervising Agent from the just-established NISO San Francisco (formerly DIO 12ND) was flown in to direct that case. Coincident with his arrival in April 1966, NISO Vietnam (NISOV) was established with SA Nickel as the first Supervising Agent.

Shortly thereafter, NAVACTS Saigon was disestablished and replaced by Naval Forces Vietnam, which was also the Naval Advisory Group Vietnam. In July 1966, the former XO of NISO San Francisco, (then) LCDR Bill Manthorpe arrived in Saigon to take up duties as the first CO of NISO Vietnam. He was also assigned additional duties as the Counterintelligence Officer on the COMNAVFORV staff, subordinate to the N2, CAPT Bob Dowd, and as the Senior Counterintelligence advisor to the Vietnamese Navy.

In time, as the US presence expanded, so did the size of NISOV. Field offices were generally opened in most areas where there was a sizeable USN/USMC presence. At the height of the US presence in Vietnam in 1968-70, the headquarters and largest Resident Agency (NISRA) was in Saigon, with the other major NISRA in Da Nang. One-man satellite units were located at Quang Tri, Vung Tau, Cam Ranh Bay and Can Tho. At its high point, NISOV numbered six officers (four in Saigon, two in Da Nang), a dozen enlisted (primarily YN 2505s), 21 SAs and eight Vietnamese.

The Commanding Officers were 1630 Intelligence Specialists. Beginning with Bill Manthorpe (1966-67), they included

LCDR Bill Brubaker (1967-68), LCDR Bill Armbruster (1968-69), LCDR Tom Brooks (1969-70), CDR Donn Burrows (1970-71), LCDR Gene Moore (1971-72) and LCDR Bill Derryberry, who was the final CO, closing NISOV in 1972, after which it reverted to TAD agents from Manila.

The Mission

For most of NISOV's history it concentrated on investigations. There was a sizeable US Army intelligence/counterintelligence presence in-country, and most counterintelligence activity affecting USN interests in II, III and IV Corps was accomplished via liaison with CIA and appropriate Army units. Counterintelligence in support of the Marines and Navy in I Corps was done by Marine counterintelligence units, liaison with the Army, and liaison with CIA; there was a small effort on the part of NISRA Da Nang to recruit and run agents in areas adjacent to USN/USMC installations to report on movements of VC in the area.

In 1969 NISOV made the decision to expand US Navy-run counterintelligence operations. In coordination with the US Army 525th MI Group, an "Installation Informant" program was established. In cooperation with the Vietnamese Navy Security Bloc (VNSB), NISOV recruited Vietnamese from within the work force at USN installations and tasked them to report on other Vietnamese employees who might be VC sympathizers or any other security problems they became aware of. Ultimately, NISOV used its own Vietnamese employees as case officers. The program produced a goodly amount of information on Vietnamese employees and uncovered some graft, theft and cheating. It never found any VC, but it persuaded NISOV that there probably weren't any. Some other interesting situations included:

"The Cookie Lady." It did uncover one "leak" of classified information when an informant reported that a Vietnamese from among the work force was selling Navy documents from out of the burnbags to the lady who sold cookies on the street corner. Expecting that it had uncovered the first elements of a major spy ring, NISOV sent its Vietnamese case officer to get to know the cookie lady. He bought three cookies from her and she obligingly wrapped them up for him—with a US Navy CONFIDENTIAL message. She had been buying scrap paper from the Navy employee to wrap her cookies. Neither she nor the Navy employee could read English. What we had was a case of competitive free enterprise rather than sinister espionage. But what we also had was a lousy physical security situation which NISOV was able to help remedy.

On the Waterfront Other CI ops included developing informants on the Saigon waterfront to report on VC infiltration of the longshoremen, boat people, deck hands, etc., who worked cargo from the many ships hauling supplies up the Saigon River. Again, no VC were found. Quite to the contrary, Vietnamese and Chinese "mafia" so tightly controlled the waterfront that no VC could get in. The mob simply found the business of theft and pilferage so profitable that they maintained iron-fisted control. Nobody moved around the Saigon

waterfront without their knowledge and permission; they had no fear of the VC and no interest whatever in having them around. They were happy to report and cooperate as long as it didn't impinge on "business."

AWOLs. Another area of CI interest was the large AWOL population who lived (relatively freely) in the Saigon suburbs along Plantation Road, the route to Ton Son Nhut airfield. No one ever knew how many were out there, but there were many, and they included Marines and a few sailors. They made their living via the black market, money manipulation, smuggling and drugs. They, or the Vietnamese underworld with whom they were frequently in league, operated a thriving industry, complete with the ability to manufacture false documents, ranging from orders and ID cards all the way to American passports. The law enforcement and CI organizations operated informants among them and watched them, but the "powers-that-be" had no interest in moving toward apprehending them. They were too numerous, many were armed, and they were protected by the Vietnamese in the area. NISOV never detected any VC infiltration or use of the false documentation capabilities, etc. Again, the criminal element had little interest in cooperating with the VC. There simply was no profit in it.

Vietnamese Cooperation

From time to time NISOV had to call on the VNSB for direct assistance. They helped whenever they could. A good case-in-point was the capture of LCDR Jack Graff, USN, the Fourth Coastal Zone Intel Officer—the only US Naval Intelligence Officer captured by the VC.

Jack was flying as an observer in a US Army Mohawk which was hit by groundfire and crashed in the mudflats along the coast of Kien Hoa Province in III Corps. He was "one of our own" and had compartmented security clearances, so the COMNAVFORV N2, CAPT Robert Pyle, and his deputy, CAPT Mike Kleczewski, were very anxious to get him back. The Army's Joint Personnel Recovery Center (JPRC) was brought in, but they offered little hope. No US units had any intelligence capability in the area, and there was no Saigon government presence within 40 or 50 miles; even that presence was tenuous.

CO, NISOV called on his Vietnamese counterpart, CDR Hai, and his deputy, CDR Vy, for help. They located a very brave Vietnamese Navy LTJG who had relatives in the area. Several times he rode his motorbike through "Indian Country" to establish contact and learn the whereabouts of the two captured Americans, Jack Graff and the pilot. In return for the intelligence they provided, the Vietnamese relatives wanted to be airlifted out of the area and resettled elsewhere, once the American rescue team swooped down and rescued the pilot and observer. They provided useful intelligence but, sadly, the Americans were unable to react in time.

Tom Brooks recalls: "We finally mobilized some Vietnamese irregulars and former VC (known as Kit Carson Scouts) and a couple of helicopters and went in, but by this time the trail was cold and we had lost them. Jack was subsequently

killed trying to escape, but the pilot ultimately got out. It turned out we were only about 24 hours behind, but that was too much to get Jack Graff back. I vividly recall sitting in Ben Tre on 11 December 1969, waiting for a **helo** back to Saigon with LT Ron Lodziewski, my VNSB advisor. I have never forgotten that very brave LTJG; nor, have I forgotten the very inept US people who could not mount-out a responsive **effort**, once we provided the intelligence. There is a great deal more to the story, but the point I would like to illustrate was the cooperation, capability and occasional bravery of my Vietnamese counterparts. The only recognition that the LTJG received was a handshake and a rather emotional thank-you from me. It was enough for him."

In the Field

The criminal investigation side of the house involved cases ranging from the murder of a USO singer to the "fragging" of a US Navy CPO to a plethora of theft smuggling, money manipulation and other abuses, as well as the standard narcotics and petty crimes. One particularly gruesome criminal investigation was the case of the USMC security guard at the US Embassy who lost his sense of reality and killed several of his fellow security guards in the main hallway of the **embassy**. Following the murders he calmly proceeded to the Marine House, shaved his head, donned a toga-like outfit fashioned from bedsheets and declared himself to be Jesus Christ.

NISOV turned down many cases which could have been front burner in any other NISO. They simply couldn't take all the cases they were asked to take. At the height of the US presence, there were only 21 Special Agents. They could have profitably employed five times that many.

SA Carl Merritt, one of the first agents in Da Nang, recalls what it was like to support the Marines in a combat situation: "Criminal investigation and **counterintelligence** activities are available in any combat zone; you just have to go out and find them. We discovered instantly that we had a selling **program** ahead of us. Crime **and/or** evil was indeed present, but the specter of war often overshadowed American military command's ability to actively do anything about it. We set out to contact every Navy and Marine Corps command in the I-Corps area and make it known that we were in-country and there to provide criminal investigation and counterintelligence support whenever and wherever they needed it. In the case of most Navy commands, this was pretty much restricted to the Da Nang and Chu Lai area. The Marines were a different matter; they were spread out all over the I-Corps area and were always moving. We caught Marine Corps units where we could, sold our program, serviced them as necessary and moved on. It didn't take too long before some of us, usually the single ones, were on the road and in the field with the Marines all the time.

"**Transportation** was exclusively via military aircraft, be that chopper, C-130 or with Air America. We learned very quickly that folks carrying colorful mail bags got priority treatment on all flights, so we traded our briefcases for bright

orange or red mail bags. Once in the general area where the requesting unit was deployed, we often had to attach ourselves to combat units in order to reach the command requesting assistance. The Marines offered no free rides, and some of our Special Agents found themselves active participants in combat operations because they had elected to "hitch a ride" in getting to where we had to go. Those Special Agents that served Marine units grew very close to them, and by that aspect alone the NIS mission in Vietnam was extremely successful.

"In and around Da Nang, the Special Agents usually dressed in civilian attire. In the field, they wore the Marine Corps uniform, but void of any insignia or markings identifying them as NIS. On occasion, they found themselves explaining their status/existence to a Marine Corps officer or staff NCO in whose area they were working, but it never, to my knowledge, caused any problems. With regard to weapons, we usually carried whatever the Marines carried, i.e., the .45 cal. pistol. This choice was purely a matter of logistics (availability of ammunition) and the fact that few Marines carried revolvers. Most of us found it prudent to be totally familiar with all Marine Corps infantry small arms because, as I indicated earlier, the Marines offered no free rides. A few Special Agents, captivated by the romance and general availability of exotic European automatic weapons, opted initially to carry a Swedish K, the M-1 carbine or some similar non-Marine Corps-issued weapon. Usually one trip to the field cured this, in that they not only looked strange but they soon found themselves being lectured to by some Marines who informed them that these weapons do not sound like Marine Corps weapons and that often the distinct sound of a weapon is all there is to identify it as being used by friend or foe."

LT Steve Argubright recalls: "Andy Lambert was in the officer's club in Cam Rahn Bay one night and decided he'd go back to his office to work. Right after he left, a VC 120mm howitzer round hit the club and killed practically everybody in it and destroyed the building."

Tom Brooks comments: "The Special Agents with whom we worked were uniformly outstanding. All were volunteers. They were dedicated, hard-working professionals and we had great admiration for them. The two men who were my Supervising Agents in 1969 and 1970—Don Shunck and Al Kersensbrock—were two of the finest men I have ever worked with. When I returned to the US I told the DNI (then RADM Rex Rectanus) that I wished the 1630 community at large possessed the level of professionalism and dedication I found in the NIS Special Agent Corps."

Frustration

The Special Agent's work was not without frustration. They could spend days bouncing around airports trying to get a ride to wherever the investigation was. Once they got there, the crime scene was seldom undisturbed and witnesses were "out on an operation," transferred, or simply unavailable or unwilling to talk. While they were out there they lived in the mud, the tent, the "hootch" or whatever was the element of the

unit where the investigation took place. When the unit took incoming mortar rounds, so did they. When the unit got dysentery from the water, food or whatever, so did the Special Agents.

A particular frustration was the lack of jurisdiction of NIS, or any other US military law enforcement or investigative organization, over the American civilians who were non-government employees but were living in Vietnam. Many had Vietnamese wives or girlfriends, had learned their way around Vietnamese society and the Vietnamese underworld, and were very profitably involved in the black market, money manipulation and narcotics. NISOV arrested several and confiscated contraband, but had to let them go. NIS had no jurisdiction, there was no American law enforcement organization that did, and the Vietnamese authorities had no interest. All NISOV could do was harass them—bust them, confiscate the narcotics, money or whatever, and hope to drive them out of business by costing them money. The business was so lucrative NISOV was little more than a minor irritant.

NISOV Special Agents did hit upon one ploy which increased the ability to harass. Among the various Vietnamese law enforcement agencies was a small outfit called the Treasury Fraud Repression Unit. They operated under a unique law which allowed them to keep half of the "take" from any arrests they made. If a case promised to provide the potential for seizing gold, money or other valuables, they proved very interested in arresting Americans. Again, this worked mainly to harass, since the arrested American would scream to the American Embassy, who usually got him released after a few days in the Vietnamese slammer.

The Special Agents were anxious to bust one American civilian in particular. He was a narcotics smuggler as well as being involved in just about anything else nefarious which you might imagine—and a few things you probably never have imagined. NISOV once intercepted a shipment of raw opium destined for him; it would have brought millions on the streets of the US, once refined and smuggled in. It didn't phase him. NIS finally made arrangements with the Department of Justice that Justice would arrest and prosecute him if NISOV could get him back to the US. In a classic "sting" operation, NISOV SAs collared him, put cuffs on him, and hustled him into a USAF aircraft bound for Travis AFB. He couldn't believe what was happening to him. He was "being kidnapped!" He was a big man and he tried to resist going on the aircraft. The result was a few bruises, leading to screams of "brutality" as well as kidnapping when he arrived in California and the waiting arms of US Marshals. The Federal judge who heard his case wasn't interested in his complaints. Off to jail he went. A very valuable precedent was established.

Diversity and Flexibility

Diversity and flexibility were key to NISOV successes. The case of the mutiny on board the SS Columbia Eagle illustrates the point. The ship, under time charter to the US Government, was enroute Da Nang with a load of napalm when

two crewmembers seized control of the ship in South China Sea, put the majority of the crew in lifeboats, and then proceeded toward Cambodia to declare their opposition to the US involvement in the war in Vietnam. Unfortunately for the mutineers, the ship docked at Kompong Som the day a military coup was staged in Cambodia, deposing Prince Sihanouk on 1 March 1970. The Cambodians had more important issues on their agenda than catering to two strange Americans declaring anti-war sentiments. The lifeboat-embarked crewmembers were rescued by a passing Greek freighter and were eventually dropped off at Sattahip, Thailand.

CO NISOV dispatched SA Don Webb and LT Norm Idleberg to Thailand to investigate. They interviewed the crew and, once the ship/cargo was released about a month later, they boarded the ship in the Gulf of Thailand and interviewed remaining crewmembers while the ship headed for Subic Bay. Don and Norm met the ship by traveling via Air America from Saigon to Phu Quoc Island, thence by Army helicopter to a USCG cutter in the Gulf of Thailand, and finally via small boat from the cutter to the Columbia Eagle. Norm Idleberg recalls: "By that time we were not only numb but scared silly because we didn't know if any crewmembers who accompanied the mutineers to Cambodia were part of the conspiracy." An interesting experience and a graphic example of how the military and civilian sectors of NISOV worked together to accomplish our most extraordinary mission in Vietnam—not your typical tour in NIS!

Special Agents Remember

Despite the hazards, there were also lighter moments. For SA Palmer, one of those moments came at the Navy base in Dong Tarn. "The transient area for officers was near an Army helicopter base that was rocketed every night by the VC. One time there were three of us in a little hootch when they started attacking the helo base. But those rockets were terrible and the VC couldn't aim them very well, so the three of us in the hootch went running for the sandbag bunker which was right outside.

"I guess I was the slowest because I was the last one out of the hootch. Just as I hit the door of the bunker, a rocket went off. It was probably about 150 meters away, but it seemed like it was closer. I dove into the bunker and came down on the other two guys. Then everything was quiet...deathly quiet. Suddenly, I heard this muffled noise. It was the guy on the bottom. He was face down in the mud with the second guy on top of him and he was about to suffocate. We started unpiling, and as the tension eased we started laughing. We were really scared, and then all of a sudden this happened and we just laughed."

Being scared was not uncommon, but most people tried to hide it, and NIS Special Agents were no different. SA Bill Worochock said, "People were probably more scared when they were alone. But when they were among themselves there was a tendency to be macho or to show off their bravado. I made a strong effort not to be alone."

SA Bill Biscumb observes: "You can get those who were there to tell you about the steak cookouts, 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 Draw Down

The final year of NIS in Vietnam began 29 March 1972, although no one knew it at the time. CDR Bill Derryberry relieved CDR Gene Moore on 29 April 1972. The draw down of NISO Vietnam had begun earlier with the closing of offices in Da Nang and other locations. By 1 March 1972 all of the outlying offices had been closed and all in-country and Thailand coverage was from the Saigon office. In June, the Saigon office moved to the COMNAVFORV compound from the Cholon District. The "new" offices were located in the same spaces that had previously been occupied by the NAVFORV N2 staff.

The in-country US Navy population was changing. Because of the draw down in forces, more senior enlisted personnel remained in-country. This greatly reduced the overall case load of investigations. The reduction of NIS agents at the same time kept the individual agent case load about the same. A graphic representation of the reduction can be seen in the NISO Vietnam photo album, presented to the Director after the office closed down. Annual pictures of the NIS personnel go from the large groups down to the final two agents, one NISO Rep, one yeoman, one Vietnamese interpreter and one secretary. The Senior Resident Agent was Ken Seal. He returned to the States in January 1973. The Saigon office, which had been a part of NISO Philippines since April 1972, was officially closed 28 February 1973. The last NIS agent departed the first few days in March.

CDR Bill Derryberry, the last CO NISOV, recalls the final days: "As 9 March approached I was told that, due to a stalemate in the negotiations with the NVN, my departure date was moved to 12 March. I continued my advisor role, hosted a couple of NIS agents from NISO Philippines, and waited. After several alerts I was called at 0200 on 29 March and told that I would be leaving that afternoon; eleven months to the day from when I arrived in-country for one of my most interesting tours of duty as a Naval Intelligence Officer. I was on the second plane out. Its departure time was determined when the second aircraft with US POWs left Hanoi. I will never forget walking across the tarmac to the airplane under the eyes of the North Vietnamese contingent that was there to see that the US complied with the terms of the treaty. During the next two days, all remaining US combat forces were airlifted out of South Vietnam."

NISO Vietnam, NISO Rep Vietnam, COMNAVFORV and the US Navy in Vietnam were no more.

[RADM Brooks served as DNI from August 1988 until his retirement in August 1991. CAPT Manthorpe, who retired from active duty in 1978, is presently the civilian Deputy DNI. Ed.]