

# UNDERCOVER OPERATION IN VIETNAM

*Submitted by Retired SA Tommy Brannon*

In March 1965 I reported to Saigon, Vietnam as a Special Agent with NCIS. The Vietnam War was ongoing and I was assigned to conduct criminal investigations and counter-intelligence assignments, which was a new endeavor. When I arrived in Saigon, U.S. Marines landed at Red Beach Two, north of Danang. Their mission was to secure the air base in Danang, which freed the South Vietnamese troops for combat duty.

The 3rd Marine Amphibious Force, 3rd MAF, was under the Command of LtGen Lewis Walt, USMC, a highly decorated Marine of WW II and Korea. Shortly after the 3rd MAF unit arrived, NCIS assistance was requested regarding investigations involving criminal activity. I volunteered to go on the assignment and conducted an investigation for the 3rd Battalion, 4th Marine Division involving the theft of morphine serrates and their illegal use. The investigation took me to Phu Bai, a remote village located in the Northern part of South Vietnam. I was able to identify the culprit responsible for the theft and obtain a confession regarding the incident.

I returned to Saigon and was soon notified of a request for NCIS to establish a new office in Danang. The office would service the Marine 3rd MAF force covering all of the area for the command. Additionally, located in the area was a U.S. Navy command, which would have billeting and other essential units to assist NCIS.

I was asked if I was interested in the assignment and I jumped on the opportunity to establish the office. I knew the work would be dangerous and most likely require seven days a week work and on call 24 hours a day. Nevertheless, I accepted the assignment, believing it would be a challenge.

I reported to the command in August 1965, and was assigned quarters in Danang City. I was fortunate the command provided an office in the Navy facility called the White Elephant, located in downtown Danang on the river. I had no staff and would have to do all the administrative work myself, as well as respond to the complaints as soon as they were initiated.

Shortly after arrival, I was asked to contact General Walt. The Navy had provided me with a USN jeep and off I went. I found General Walt to be one of a kind; he was a highly decorated Marine, the recipient of three Navy

Crosses, having earned them in WW II and Korea. He also had several Silver Stars, three purple hearts, and as all Marines indicated, was a Marine's Marine. I thought at the time, what an honor to serve a person of this caliber. General Walt went on to receive his forth star prior to retirement.

During the next year, I conducted a number of successful investigations and began to observe numerous investigations were beginning to surface involving narcotic activity with Marine units in the I Corps area. About this same time, due to the volume of investigations, the Marine Division Provost Marshall, Major Les Barrett, contacted me and asked if I would like to have a Marine 1st LT assigned to assist me. Several months later, as I recall in October 1965, Major Barrett also assigned a marine, SGT Dan Buckle, who was an experienced CID investigator. I jumped on the opportunity as I could use both marines to facilitate transportation, helicopters, and other modes of transportation and also as a backup. In those days, I made frequent road trips up Highway One, which was a Viet Cong infested area and dangerous to travel. An armed Marine accompanying me was a welcome opportunity. So Lt Mike Anderson joined me. I arranged for his quarters to be moved to a location in downtown Danang where we opened an office which would also be used as berthing quarters. He was delighted as it beat living in a tent. Mike hailed from Chicago, Illinois and we hit it off immediately, since I was born in Chicago and raised nearby in Southern WI. Later on in my tour I was very fortunate to get SGT Dan Buckle, an experienced CID investigator assigned to assist me. Lt Anderson left the Marine Corps after his assignment in Vietnam. SGT Buckle remained in the Marine Corps, reaching the highest enlisted status (E-9) and Warrant Officer W-2, and was then commissioned and retired as a Major with 32 years of service. Well done my friend. I might add I recently hooked up with Dan after 49 years. He is doing well and enjoying the fruits of his success and long distinguished career.

On one occasion I was summoned with Major Barrett, the PMO, to General Walt's command where he noted he was extremely concerned about the influx of narcotics. Investigations had increased substantially in the area and almost all were predicated upon the use of narcotics and/or dangerous drugs.

During one briefing, General Walt asked if I had any suggestions as to the locations where narcotics or dangerous drugs were emanating from. I told him myself and SGT Buckle had heard rumors of narcotics coming from an area outside of the Danang Air Base in a village called "Dogpatch". I also reported I was aware that narcotics could be purchased openly at any pharmacy in the Danang area.

General Walt then asked if I could conduct some type of operation and somehow document this information. I told him I believed I could and then asked permission to

get a Marine out of jail who I had investigated for involvement in marijuana usage. I was confident the Marine could assist me and felt he had learned his lesson. General Walt agreed and made arrangements for his release to my custody. I also requested permission to acquire a USMC utility uniform which I would wear while posing as a Marine corporal. Fortunately, SGT Buckle utilizing

his extensive contacts procured for me a Marine utility uniform. I also asked to utilize Marines to conduct the operation which he also agreed to. Walt cautioned me to be careful as the Dogpatch was a known area where Viet Cong frequented. I told him I was also aware that the Dogpatch area was frequented by Vietnamese prostitutes and it was my intention to only go there in the daytime hours under the guise of seeking prostitutes for the Marines I would be taking there. Lastly, I contacted the Navy payroll office requesting money to conduct the operation and for the purchase of the narcotics in the event we could pull off the operation.

After all arrangements were made and a plan set, I thought of one other possibility and that was to ask SGT Buckle to photograph the narcotic transaction if possible. My thoughts were, I would enter Dogpatch Village under the guise of soliciting prostitutes for the young Marines and hopefully, ask for and purchase narcotics from the Vietnamese at the location. Next, I had to ensure that under no circumstances was anyone to engage in narcotic use. I had heard from informants I interviewed that opium smoking as well as sale of black market stolen beer and alcohol also took place at the location. I figured that if that took place, I could pretend to smoke/use the opium and hopefully somehow photograph transactions. During my briefing of the young Marines, I brainstormed the idea of the Marines soliciting prostitutes, drinking alcohol, and the photographing the opium/narcotic transactions, if any.

Everything was now in place and we intended to be all armed when we went to Dogpatch. I instructed all if at

any time the situation appeared dangerous, then we must abort immediately. I certainly didn't want to get killed and knew if I got any Marines killed or wounded NCIS would come down on me. The entire mission was also approved by my supervisors in Saigon and at the headquarters staff in the Philippines. I knew this was to be the first ever narcotic operation in Vietnam, so I was aware of the far-reaching consequences if something went wrong.

Then came the day. Off we went, four Marines and myself dressed in Marine Corps utilities posing as a Corporal. I

carried a standard issue .45 caliber revolver and the money to purchase narcotics, alcohol or if necessary solicit the prostitutes. On the way to the village, I again pointed out the importance of safety and concern for each other. The Marine photographer, SGT Buckle, had his camera, and I asked him to try to photograph any narcotic transactions and Vietnamese in that process.

Shortly thereafter we entered Dogpatch and the Vietnamese prostitutes

started selling alcohol and marijuana. It went off like a movie. SGT Buckle started photographing the Vietnamese Mama-san selling me "Chu Lae Bombers", marijuana and some black tar opium. The elderly Vietnamese woman also handed me a pipe containing opium and I pretended to smoke it while the matter was photographed. Next to me was another older Vietnamese woman cutting the opium and fortunately we were able to get photographs of the act. The bottom line is we got numerous

photographs of the narcotic transactions and I decided to get the hell out of there with the photographic documentation. Then we headed for downtown Danang where we each went into local pharmacies and asked to purchase known narcotics. We pulled that off without a problem.

A side note to this issue was prior to conducting this operation, the U.S. Army had a Provost Marshall's Office commanded by a Colonel. He was briefed on the operation to include the pharmacy allegations and openly advised there were no such problems in the Danang area. He later



The author and a LCpl purchasing opium and marijuana in 'Dogpatch'



The author pretending to smoke an opium pipe in 'Dogpatch'

would eat those words when knowledge of the success of the operation was made to General Walt.

When the photographs were developed by the Marine Corps, I prepared the first ever intelligence report (IR) regarding narcotic activity. That report was provided to NCIS headquarters in the Philippines. They in turn provided a copy of the report to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (CINCPAC), Admiral John McCain, Senator John McCain's father.

For my action in the operation I received a commendation from General Walt, and from my agency, as well as from CINCPACFLT for a job well done, noting the operation was carried out with photographic evidence and represented the first ever report of narcotic problems in the armed forces in Vietnam. After SGT Buckle and I documented our transactions in "Dogpatch", we had a meeting with the Commodore at the Naval Support headquarters in Danang. We spent several hours showing him the narcotics and photographs of the transactions with our report stating that this was the beginning of the introduction of narcotics to our troops in South Vietnam. As we both knew, that report was right on the money.

When I left Danang, Charlie Baldwin relieved me. Baldwin was lucky as he brought with him many Agents which allowed him to do the job. I was alone for my year and had it not been for SGT Dan Buckle and LT Mike Anderson I don't believe I would have had the success I had. Thankfully, many years ago I was fortunate to serve with SGT Buckle and LT Anderson. As I look back now almost fifty years later, I served at many locations throughout the world but Vietnam was the most rewarding of all the assignments in my three decade of service with the NCIS.

Later in 1966, I left Vietnam for service in the Philippines, the Republic of China and Japan. While in those locations I was able to return for eight years for temporary assignments to Vietnam for widespread crimes directly attributable to narcotic use. The problem continued until the Department of the Navy initiated the drug urinalysis program, which today is used by many civilian agencies throughout the United States.



Dan Buckle who assisted the author with investigations within the 3rd MAG.

## Departure of "Our Friend"

### Editor's Note:

For several years Retired Special Agent Roy Mosteller has been submitting material to the United States Navy Memorial in Washington, DC, for inclusion in their Navy Log to honor former Navy and Marine Corps personnel and on a number of occasions his submissions have been for former ONI/NIS/NCIS personnel. After viewing the May 13th broadcast of "NCIS", which honored "Our Friend" Ralph Waite who had portrayed Jackson Gibbs, the father of SA Leroy Jethro Gibbs, Roy was pleased to learn Waite was a former Marine and was subsequently able to write the below Service Memories which has been added to Waite's Log page.

Roy believes that Waite may be the only NCIS cast member who served in the US military although David McCallum, who plays "Ducky," had military service in the British Army during the 1950's.

You can go to <http://navylog.navy Memorial.org/> and search for other 'Sea Service Warriors'.

Ralph Waite is probably best known and remembered as an actor for playing "John Walton", patriarch of the family in the TV series "The Waltons" (1972 to 1981). However, he had a varied career that encompassed much more. Following graduation from high school he joined the Marine Corps



in which he proudly served from 1946 to 1948. He then attended and graduated from Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. Following a brief period as a social worker he earned a master's degree from Yale University Divinity School and was ordained a Presbyterian minister. He next landed a position as religious editor for the publisher Harper and Row where he took an interest in liberal politics. By 1963 Waite had decided on an acting career and commenced acting in Summer Theater and in off-Broadway productions. His acting talents were readily recognized which led to a long career as a character actor, appearing in numerous movies and TV shows from 1967 to 2014. During the 1990's he ran unsuccessfully on three occasions as a candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives. In 2008 his association with the Navy was renewed when he commenced appearance on the TV show "NCIS" in a recurring role as Jackson Gibbs, the father of Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs. The "NCIS" telecast on February 20, 2014, was his last TV appearance; the story line depicted his death and was in memory of "Our Friend." On February 13, 2014, Ralph Waite died peacefully in Palm Desert, California, of age-related illnesses at age 85.