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Missing Persons Finding Mr. Smith

Missing Persons



A sensitive missing person investigation case came into my office from an out of state client in 2002. A man was searching for his brother whom he had not seen since 1969. The brother, who I will call Mr. Smith, went missing from the U.S. Military in Okinawa in the early 1970s while he was a low-ranking enlisted soldier. He was eventually determined to have deserted from service by military investigators.

The Smith family didn't hear from him in those three decades and the military was not much help. The family wanted him found. His brother provided an old picture of Mr. Smith from 1968, his date of birth, and his issued social security number.

I knew it was a hard find, but never envisioned what was to come. This intense investigation turned into a nine-month roller coaster that wove through six states, Japan and Canada. It ended in Florida. It is, quite frankly, the most successful private missing persons locate investigation of a live missing person I have ever worked. A book could be written about it.

During the investigation, the evidence revealed Mr. Smith had changed his name 10 times, his location over a dozen times in various countries and states, and he used at least five or more false social security numbers in the 33 years of being on the lam.

Initially, the case was being worked hard with no real breaks for months. Then a lead was developed from Mr. Smith's real social security number that led to a cell phone purchase in southern Florida around the year 2000; this was a critical development and a major break in the case. Working that lead, a hotel where the subject had lived in Florida was located. A major problem was the hotel had changed ownership a number of times and Mr. Smith was no longer there – the hotel was empty and being renovated. At first, it wasn't known under what name Mr. Smith had been registered at the hotel. And, even if the name was known, it was unlikely anyone in the area would recognize the picture of Mr. Smith from 1968 obtained from the family. It was a critical point in the investigation.

We decided to age the 1968 photo of Mr. Smith. An expert was consulted at the National Center for Exploited and Missing Children that aged the photo. Armed with aged photos of Mr. Smith, 10 alias names, and a host of social security numbers, a trip to Florida was necessary. So off I went.



Three Florida licensed NALI member investigators were hired to join the team; each investigator was assigned a specific task. One canvassed the hotel; another investigator poured over paperwork, a different investigator accompanied me to the local beaches and businesses near the hotel canvassing for leads, showing the aged pictures, all to no avail.

Meanwhile, support staff was working the case hard from my office and located the south Florida store where the cell phone was purchased. The store manager was cooperative. It was learned that Mr. Smith had purchased the cell phone and the service using his real SSAN but under a different name – another break in the case.



It all led back to the hotel. The identification of the prior owner of the hotel at the time of the cell phone purchase was developed and identified. He was located in Florida and interviewed in person. The prior owner of the hotel was a treasure trove of information.

He said Mr. Smith was registered as a long-term guest at the hotel around 1999 under a completely different and new alias name and had given the hotel yet another fake social security number. The hotel owner claimed there was a man who committed a string of bank robberies up and down the east coast who was nabbed around 1999 while living at the hotel, and he had kept some of this man's belongings including some identification documents, one with a picture. A comparison was made of the aged picture to the photo on the identification card of the man who had been doing these bank robberies.

It was a perfect match. At this point, the four NALI investigators working the case were cautiously confident the most recent alias Mr. Smith was using at the hotel was the one he was arrested under after his last bank robbery. It turned out to be true.

Through the good work of the NALI team of investigators, the last bank the subject robbed was identified. A police report from this bank robbery was obtained, which revealed yet another photo of a man who appeared to be Mr. Smith. Now it was a matter of tracking our bank robber down.

The image shows a detailed police report form titled "INCIDENT/INVESTIGATION REPORT". The form is filled with various fields and text, including names, dates, and times. At the bottom of the form, it says "Printed by: ARLAND, PASO-980" and "Date: 11/27/08".

Further investigation revealed Mr. Smith was doing time in prison in another state under the alias name and social security number he had used while committing the latest bank robbery in Florida. The man had done a lot of time in various prisons, all under alias names and false social security numbers. Incredulously, Mr. Smith was now in prison under a completely different name. Prison authorities had no knowledge of the true identity of Mr. Smith, who was currently serving time in their jail. It's hard to believe, but the feds, the military, all the officials

of the prisons in which Mr. Smith had served time, and all the police officers and federal agents who interviewed him, never knew his true identity. It turns out the police and feds do not cross-reference their investigations with military.

After confirming the location of the prison, a trip to the prison under an attorney-investigator visit was necessary. The family agreed to hire a trusted lawyer to represent Smith. During the visit to the prison, communication with Mr. Smith was through a divider window by telephone. Prison officials could listen and that was the last thing anyone wanted for obvious reasons. Written letters and jotted notes were held up to the glass. The bank robber was told his true identity was known; I wrote, "I know you are really Mr. Smith" and held the written words to the glass that separated us. The response was animated- Smith literally fell off his chair. His identification was confirmed, and he wanted to see his brother.

But how would Smith's brother get into the prison to visit him without blowing his cover and subjecting him to additional prosecutions for other crimes he may have committed, including desertion from the US Military? Well, that is another story for another time. Suffice it to say that the client and his family were ecstatic beyond words and appreciative to have the opportunity to reunite with their long lost loved one. Where is Mr. Smith now? He is out of prison after serving his time and right where he should be- with his family!

Lessons learned:

1. The National Center for Exploited and Missing Children is available to help investigators with their aging expertise. Go to www.missingkids.com.
2. Don't give up just because you have an extremely difficult missing persons case. Put the case down for a few months and go back to it for another "fresh" look.
3. Have other sets of investigative eyes take a look as well. Form a team like I did to get different ideas, theories, and investigative themes and strategies.
4. The true moral of the story is to never underestimate the power of NALI teamwork. Thank you Rory McMahon, CLI; Kerry Farney, CLI; and David Wasser, CLI. I couldn't have done it without you.