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Group of spies holds meeting at Hyatt Regency, but it's no secret

By Kathy Lally

The man in the blue and brown plaid jacket smiled enigmatically.

"We can't tell you a thing," he said in a low voice. "It's all classified."

Then he slipped away into the crowd without giving his name.

The annual reunion of the National Counter Intelligence Corps Association was in full swing at the Hyatt Regency of Baltimore yesterday, and if you were wondering who that man was peering out from behind the potted palm, well, he was probably one of the retired spies.

"Spies!" laughed Dave McCarthy, a retired Chicago insurance and commodities broker. "We couldn't find a bottle of Old Forester in a telephone booth."

That set off a round of guffaws and more jokes among the cluster of four men reminiscing in the lobby of the Hyatt.

"We're on our way to the hospitality suite," Mr. McCarthy said. "That's where we tell the lies."

Most of the 200 men attending the convention, which began Thursday night and ends today, served in World War II. They started out as Army corporals and worked their way up in the intelligence unit.

There are about 500 members in the NCICA. The last war any of them served in was the Korean conflict.

But their stories had few cloaks and daggers. Most of their memories were of shipping out, or of a few wild nights in Baltimore while undergoing training at Fort Holabird, or of first sighting a Pacific Island, or of trying to find a good beer.

Still, they spent the war in some danger, sometimes slipping behind enemy lines, but most often at the very front of the lines with the troops, hoping to find stragglers or documents or records, anything that could be analyzed to reveal something about enemy plans or movements.

"I went to India," said Lyle Beauchamp, a retired U.S.F.&G. claims investigator from Towson. "As the troops went out, we took over the towns and organized the government. It was very important to get all the documents, the police records, everything we could."

"It was the high point of his life, though it seemed like a tragedy at the time," interjected Mr. Beauchamp's wife, Millie.

Mr. Beauchamp said the local NCICA group has been meeting in Baltimore since 1946 and usually gets together about five times a year. This is the fifth time the national convention has been held here.

"We're interested in the security of the country even though we're not young enough to work for Uncle Sam," he said. "We tell stories, one thing leads to another, but we're still interested in hearing about national security."

Many of the men left the military after the war but stuck to work that had an investigative bent.

Emmerich Beck, now 77, returned to New York City to a Pinkerton detective job. He was in Italy and Austria during the war.

"We were against their spies, their saboteurs," he said. "We were all looking for Hitler."

Mr. Beck became warden of a prison in Austria, where he interrogated prisoners.

"Anyone captured would have to come by my little desk," he said.

His fondest memory of the war was appropriating the Gray Bear Hotel in Innsbruck for troop sleeping quarters. "That was the hotel where my mother spent her honeymoon," he said.

Mr. Beck and Mr. McCarthy were joined by Frank Brown, a 68-year-old retired salesman from West Chester,

Pa., who recalled his first action, on June 11, 1944.

"It was a beautiful sunny day on an island in New Guinea," he said. "There was a little beach with mountains behind. A priest was saying Mass on the bow of the ship. I thought, 'This is paradise.'"

Soon he found himself racing ashore in the tropical heat, looking for documents and counting and searching dead Japanese.

"We had to get this information and preserve it for analysis," he said. "We couldn't let the souvenir hunters get it."

Across the lobby sat Bob Ebaugh, who moved from Westminster to Florida last year. He retired from the U.S. government in 1973. After some prodding ("You'll never get him to stop once he starts," laughed Bill Hoffman of Texas), Mr. Ebaugh agreed to tell his war story.

That was the time he impersonated President Franklin D. Roosevelt in Tehran.

"It was at the Tehran Conference in 1943," Mr. Ebaugh said. "Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt were meeting at the Russian Embassy."

The Russians reported that German paratroops had landed in Iran, planning to assassinate Roosevelt and the other leaders. The leaders were sequestered, except that Mr. Roosevelt had to drive from the embassy to a nearby American base before leaving the country.

"You're going to be the clay pigeon," was what they told Mr. Ebaugh. "You will ride in his car."

They took out the bullet-proof glass from the car and put it in the car Roosevelt actually took, Mr. Ebaugh said. Mr. Ebaugh, unprotected, climbed into the car wearing Roosevelt's cape, pince nez and hat. ("We had the same size head.")

"And what else?" a fellow conventioner prompted.

"Oh, I had my own cigarette holder," Mr. Ebaugh said.

"I waved to the crowd, and they waved to me," Mr. Ebaugh said. "I had quite an uneventful ride, but I was ready to hit the floor as soon as the shooting started."