

Michael Connelly:

You're listening to Killer In The Code: Solving The Black Dahlia & Zodiac Cases. I'm Michael Connelly, and this is Chapter Six. I want to begin today with a mini profile of the killer this podcast is focused on. This is taken from the official records of the investigation. "The crime would indicate a person, to my estimation, who had a mania for publicity. They wanted to gloat over the fact that they had been successful in their crime and got a kick out of it."

Okay, so I think I know what you were thinking. That's got to come from the Zodiac case files, right? He's the one who wrote all the letters to the newspapers and authored the tantalizing ciphers, et cetera, et cetera. Well, yes and no. You could call it an early profile of the Zodiac, but it's actually from the sworn testimony of the lead detective on the Black Dahlia case. Spoken to a grand jury in 1950, almost 20 years before the Zodiac killings took place and the self-proclaimed Zodiac began using publicity to gloat and taunt the public and to hold it in the grip of fear.

A mania for publicity. That detective certainly got that right. There are people who think these cases are so dramatically different, they could never be linked. But on a psychological level, they are much more the same than not. And today we are going to reveal as best we can the man who is behind all of these crimes, Marvin Margolis, aka Marvin Merrill, among many other names. The man who wrote the letters and constructed the ciphers, the man who was a cipher himself.

A quick recap here. Alex Baber, citizen sleuth, an amateur cryptologist, broke the Z13 code. The 13 character cipher said to reveal the name of the Zodiac killer, but also thought to be unbreakable for more than a half a century. The name hidden in the code was Marvin Merrill, the primary alias adopted by Marvin Margolis after he was identified more than 20 years earlier as a suspect in the murder of Elizabeth Short, better known as the Black Dahlia.

Baber's methodology and solution to Z13 has been independently confirmed by some of the top crypt analysts in the world. Other evidence gathered by Baber and a team of veteran cold case detectives has been documented in the previous episodes of this podcast. The bottom line is Margolis, who died in 1993, checked all the boxes, and now we want to attempt to track his movements across time and geography.

It's not an easy task. Margolis at times is a bit of a ghost. He changed names and moved about like a man looking over his shoulder to see who might be on his trail. This is Alex Baber.

Alex Baber:

His own family would call him Skippy because he would skip out for long periods of time that he'd be unaccounted for. The Skippy nickname was obviously a play on his middle name Skipton.

Michael Connelly:

He also changed occupations and careers as often as he moved geographically. At various times he was an artist, an auto mechanic, an engineer, an insurance salesman, a car racing promoter, a computer programmer, and an urban planner. His son called him a serial entrepreneur with most of his endeavors seeing very little success.

Alex Baber:

It appears that he did many things, but he wasn't good at any of them. Throughout the years and decades, he would often change his expertise or field of employment. Some of the family members told me that a lot of the stuff that he did, he taught himself and he wouldn't stay long within that field of expertise.

Michael Connelly:

This is veteran homicide detective Rick Jackson.

Rick Jackson:

My initial thoughts on his moving around a lot, as well as the changing of names. So first of all, the moving around a lot, there are people that do that. There are people that are lost. They can't find jobs. They go from one place to another. That's one thing. But when you couple that with constantly changing names, then it brings it to a higher level of concern about why that's being done. That's a quick pat answer, but that's my reaction to what we see with Margolis/Merrill.

Michael Connelly:

In addition to changing names as he moved, Margolis also appropriated the histories of others while embellishing his own. The biggest task here was trying to determine what was real about Marvin Margolis and what was not. One thing we know for sure is that he was born in Chicago to immigrant parents in 1925. His own father changed his name from Isaac Margolins to Isadore Margolis. It is something that many immigrants do, but it early on exposed Marvin Margolis to the idea that identity was malleable.

Before we go on here, let me say that the timeline and the biographic details we have put together here come from official records, newspaper articles, and interviews with members of Margolis's family. We have agreed not to name members of the family in exchange for their cooperation.

Margolis enrolled at the University of Illinois in 1942, but left after one semester with failing grades. At the time, the country was in the middle of a world war. And in 1943, Margolis walked into a Navy recruiting office in Chicago and joined up. He was trained as a corpsman and sent overseas to the battle in the Pacific. He was attached as a medic to the Marine battalion that made the first landing on the island of Okinawa. What ensued was one of the bloodiest and costliest battles of the war. Over 10,000 American soldiers died on Okinawa. We documented Margolis's time there in chapter one of the podcast. But suffice it to say his experiences there, including one near death experience in particular, was harrowing. Upon returning from the war, he was given a 50% disability for mental neurosis, what would now be diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder. Family members have told us he was treated for this the rest of his life.

Alex Baber:

And he was put on medication. And we discovered through the family members that when he would disappear for these lengthy periods of time, they would reach out to his younger brother, Milton, who lived in Chicago, who had a connection at the local VA. And what he would do apparently was contact this connection, and he would look up where the last prescription was filled. And then Milton would hunt Marvin down and ask him, "What are you doing? You have a family, you have obligations. You need to get back to where you belong."

Michael Connelly:

This is Mitzi Roberts, veteran homicide detective and former supervisor of the LAPD Cold Case Unit.

Mitzi Roberts:

All you have to really do is review the testimony at the grand jury as well as review any of his documents that came out of his time at the war to know that what he saw over in Okinawa was the worst of the

worst. And I think they even mentioned mangled bodies. And he was working in the medical field, so he saw them up. It wasn't just seeing your buddy here get severely injured. He's actually trying to save lives. And from everything I've read, he came back from that war just a damaged man, for sure mentally, just damaged.

Michael Connelly:

Margolis landed in Los Angeles after the war, and in 1946 enrolled at the University of Southern California as a pre-med student. During a grand jury investigation that would delve into the Black Dahlia case four years later, it was revealed by the deputy district attorney who led the probe that Margolis had taken part in a body dissection just months before Elizabeth Short's bisected body was found. We could find no independent confirmation of this. While it was unlikely that a premed student would have a class in which cadavers were dissected, Margolis's wartime experiences may have opened doors at USC for him to take part in what was likely something reserved for more advanced med students. As one of his Veterans Administration evaluators reported in giving him the mental disability, he had dealt with many "mangled bodies" on Okinawa. Either way, Margolis was attending classes at the time he had a relationship with Elizabeth Short and subsequently when she was found murdered on January 15th, 1947.

At some point, Margolis changed his focus and started pursuing a pharmacy degree. Records show that in 1948, he was elected as an officer in the pharmacy school's service organization. A transcript of his grades from that year show him to have been a good student, getting mostly A's in pre-med and pharmacy classes and only one C in biochemistry. Curiously, he had registered at the school under the name Marvin Henry Margolis. His actual middle name was Skipton, and this is the earliest point where we see him engage in identity deception.

Margolis was in the class of 49, but he apparently didn't finish at USC. Instead, he left town and picked up a degree in commerce from Roosevelt College in his hometown of Chicago. Why did he leave town and change schools? At the time, it had been two and a half years since the murder of Elizabeth Short and no arrests had been made in the case.

Early on in that investigation, Margolis had been interviewed twice by the police, and though he initially lied about his relationship with Elizabeth Short, he offered an alibi that his new wife confirmed. Finis Brown, the lead detective on the case, would later testify that, "It was impossible to throw him out as a suspect. It was impossible to tie him in." But 1949 was also when a new police chief took the reins at the Los Angeles Police Department. William Worton was a hard charging former Marine who declared in a widely publicized media statement that the Black Dahlia investigation had been run poorly and been bungled by the original team on it. He called for a grand jury investigation of the murder to refocus the case, but by the time that grand jury was empaneled that year, Margolis was gone. Investigators with the grand jury tried to find him and enlisted the help of the Chicago Police Department, but to no avail.

Finis Brown was left to testify that Margolis was "possibly a very good suspect." How diligently authorities searched for Margolis in Chicago is not clear, but they missed their chance three years later when he was working in Chicago as a used car salesman and was charged with defrauding customers by tricking them into paying higher prices than agreed to for their cars. Margolis avoided jail time and the apparent notice of the LAPD by paying a fine and restitution to several customers, but it was at this point that he left town once again. And when he reemerged, he had a new profession and a new name. He was now in Atlanta and he set up shop as Marvin Merrill, insurance salesman.

Merrill spent at least three years in Atlanta and even started a side gig, which was an auto club for teenagers. He courted membership and publicity with the inclusion of a NASCAR racing champion named Tim Flock as a partner.

But eventually Merrill moved on from Georgia and made even shorter stops in Ohio and Arizona before landing in Kansas. By this time, his first marriage was over and he reinvented himself once again, this time as an artist and an art dealer in the small town of Wellington, 38 miles south of Wichita. He was now known as Skip Merrill, and a profile of the artist that ran in the local newspaper offers some insight into how Merrill blended fact and fiction into a new persona.

The newspaper reported that he had studied under Salvador Dali, the master of surrealism at USC. "I learned a lot of realism from Dali," Merrill was quoted as saying, "He paints the clock, it may be distorted, but it looks like a clock." The Baber team found no evidence that Dali ever taught painting or lectured at USC, though the record is clear that Dali was in Los Angeles at the time Merrill as Margolis attended USC.

Perhaps what is most intriguing about the profile in the Wellington Daily News is Merrill's embellishment of his war record. Here was a man who could truthfully say he was with the Marines on Okinawa, one of the bloodiest and most important battles of World War II. He could talk about building a field hospital in a cave on that island, but apparently that wasn't good enough for him. Instead, he told the newspaper that he had been a member of the Flying Tigers, the legendary group of pilots who flew missions over China during the war. Why did he lie?

It almost seems to me as though Merrill used the newspaper profile to leave hints or clues about the Black Dahlia case. He told the newspaper that he had been a newspaper correspondent, but the truth was the only correspondence was his courting the media in Atlanta and his letters and phone calls to the Los Angeles newspapers as the Black Dahlia Avenger. Then the mentions of the Flying Tigers and Salvador Dali. The reference to the legendary air squadron seemed to be a direct reference to Elizabeth Short and her lost fiancé. During the war, she was engaged to pilot Matt Gordon who flew missions over China and was credited with shooting down five Japanese planes in aerial dog fights. Those plans tragically changed when Gordon was killed in a plane crash in 1945. Was it jealousy that made Merrill embellish his record or was he intentionally dropping a clue into the story?

Alex Baber:

He was indeed a war hero in his own account, right? He's on the front lines as a naval corpsman. He's out there attempting to rescue people. He's tending to the wounded and he comes back and then you have this 14-year gap between the time the murder of Elizabeth Short took place and the time he did this interview in Wellington, Kansas. And instead of just saying, "I was a naval corpsman on the front lines that held a medical unit and took care of my comrades under fire." He injects this stolen valor, as we call it, where he's a Flying Tiger, which is a very unique unit during World War II. There's no reason for him to claim to be a Flying Tiger. As rare as that unit was, and for it to be directly connected to Elizabeth Short through her only fiancé, Matt Gordon, is a very unique and obvious connection that he's making to Elizabeth and himself, in my opinion.

That's a dirty deed. That's him being jealous. That's him having some kind of envy towards Matt and his relationship with Elizabeth long before he knew her. That's obsession.

Michael Connelly:

And Dali was a surrealist painter while Merrill said he was a realistic painter. His work was even described as being closer to the impressionist master, Vincent van Gogh than Dali. But Dali created several paintings that depicted women in ways similar to the Black Dahlia crime scene. Was Merrill hinting that he was influenced by Dali as a killer or a painter? These are questions that obviously can't be answered. You can take a look at some of Dali's work on the Killer in the Code website.

Though in the newspaper profile, Merrill said he was so inspired by Kansas that he could paint there forever, things soured for him when a local art association he had created split into two factions and voted in new leadership. Merrill once again packed his bags. This time he headed west back to California.

Merrill landed in the town of Oceanside in San Diego County in early 1962. On an evening shortly after his arrival, a man called the police department anonymously and said he was about to commit a crime that would baffle the police and never be solved. The next night, a taxi cab driver named Raymond Davis was shot to death in his cab and his body was dumped in an alley behind the mayor's house. The cab was later found abandoned 15 blocks away. The next night, the same man called the police again. He took credit for the murder of Davis and said he was going to shoot a bus driver next. This in turn gripped the community in fear and Marines from a nearby military base were used to ride in buses and taxis for added security.

The murder of Davis, the dumping of his body behind the mayor's house, and the subsequent threat to kill a bus driver drew massive media attention, seemingly underlying the unknown killer's mania for publicity, to use a phrase, from the Black Dahlia killer's profile.

Eight years after the Davis murder, the killing of San Francisco cab driver Paul Stine by the Zodiac would draw comparisons, but like the Cheri Jo Bates case in Riverside, the Davis killing was never formally declared a Zodiac case. Perhaps it was because authorities did not know what we can now reveal. On the night Davis was murdered in Oceanside, his killer abandoned his cab in the 400 block of Pacific Street, which was an 800-foot walk to the house on Elm Street where Marvin Merrill was living, following his recent move from Kansas.

Alex Baber:

I do believe that Paul Stine was, in all likelihood, a piece of the puzzle to connect him back to his earlier murder of Ray Davis. It does make sense.

Rick Jackson:

Paul Stine was the first... It was such a brazen attack because it was done right in the middle of a major city in front of people. He walked away. It was a brazen attack, and I think that was done intentionally to shake things up a little bit. And why not shake things up a little bit by doing something that you've done before in 1962 with the cab driver in Oceanside? Why not do the same thing? Again, it could be part of the game, wondering, okay, are they going to be able to put this all together that it's me, the Zodiac, working before I became the Zodiac. And then seven years later, you do the Paul Stine case to bring it right back into your new hunting grounds, if you will.

Mitzi Roberts:

It just kind of proves that this guy evolved in his MO. I mean, it doesn't fit quite exactly with, of course, the Black Dahlia and the Zodiac, but it's just an evolution and the two are the same.

Michael Connelly:

Baber notes that the investigation has established that Margolis/Merrill was in either close or close enough proximity to the murders of Elizabeth Short, Ray Davis, Cheri Jo Bates, and the five Zodiac victims, all of which remain cases officially unsolved, all of which involved a perpetrator who showed a mania for publicity.

Alex Baber:

He's either the most unluckiest guy on the planet or he's the killer. He's the perpetrator of these crimes.

Michael Connelly:

Marvin Merrill's professional apex may have come briefly in the middle 60s when he had left the art world for the business world and was president and chief engineer of Pacific Project's Consultants, a company planning the construction of a 10-story hotel on the beach in Oceanside. Merrill called a press conference to announce his plans and got a good run from it, but the project never came to fruition and Merrill was eventually sued by his investors who wanted their money back. According to members of Merrill's family, other real estate ventures and development plans followed, but none led to success, like the speculative purchase of land near a projected freeway interchange that never came to be.

Merrill's son described home life at this time as always being tense with the family living hand to mouth and his father often moody and physically abusive.

Even though money was short during these times, Merrill kept a second residence in San Jose where he did work for Intel, the microchip company. Efforts to confirm this through Intel were unsuccessful, but in documents turned over to the Baber team by Merrill's son, there are Intel business cards and W2 tax forms issued by the company to Merrill.

It's unclear whether this was a side job or another career change, but by the early 70s, Merrill was back in the car business, operating an auto repair and tire shop called Buck Savers. He was also back in trouble with the law. Four days before Christmas 1971, Merrill was jailed on multiple charges of defrauding his customers at the shop. Two months later, he was found guilty in court and sentenced to 30 days in jail and three years probation. Those three years coincided with three years of silence from the Zodiac, a period of time when no letters and no ciphers were sent to the media.

Alex Baber:

During this investigation, from the time it starts to the time he's arrested, to the time he's given probation, to the time that the probation ends, the Zodiac doesn't appear again. There's no letters, no phone calls, no attacks. Soon as Marvin Merrill's probation ends early, all of a sudden that same month he reappears and then we have this first letter in 34 months.

Michael Connelly:

Merrill's second marriage came to an end in 1978 after what family members told us was a physical altercation with a teenage child. After that, the family began to lose track of Merrill. His son told us he had lost touch with his father for nearly a decade after the divorce. Records show that Merrill eventually moved north toward the middle of California with addresses in Atascadero and Creston before finally landing in Santa Barbara. Copies of tax returns from these years show him making very little money and alternately listing his occupation as engineer, ex-engineer, and shopkeeper. During his last decade, it appears, at least through banking records, that he used all variations of his aliases and kept separate checking accounts under each name.

In 1992, while he was facing a terminal cancer diagnosis, Margolis rented an art studio in Santa Barbara for \$700 a month. He used the name Marty Merrill and signed a five-year lease commencing on April 1st. Perhaps that was an April Fool's joke from a man who had little more than a year to live.

It was likely in that rented studio on Montecito Street that Marty Merrill created a sketch titled Elizabeth and depicting the upper half of a nude woman with dark hair and the word Zodiac hidden in the shading. It would be the last of the many clues left behind by a human cipher.

Alex Baber:

I believe that his final days knowing that his life was coming to an end, and I have to say this for Marvin, having an understanding of him, that I believe he may have had some regret for what he did to Elizabeth. And the reason I say that is that that sketch in particular isn't one that I think is him bragging. I think it's his calling card so that some days someone would come along and discover it and put the pieces together, maybe for his own reasons, meaning that he finally have his name and face attached to these crimes officially. So he'd go down in history as being the Zodiac and the Black Dahlia Avenger. But I also believe that he wanted the world to know that he hadn't forgotten Elizabeth.

Michael Connelly:

I'm Michael Connelly and you have been listening to Killer In The Code: Solving The Black Dahlia & Zodiac Cases. This chapter was written and produced by Michael Connelly. It was edited by Terrill Lee Lankford with sound design, music, and post-production services by Mark Henry Phillips. Go to our website killerinthecode.com for more information on the investigation. Send us questions and we will try to answer them in an upcoming round table discussion, and be sure to subscribe to the podcast so you will know when new chapters are available. We'll be back soon with Chapter Seven. Thank you for listening.