How the paper struggle ended

By DAVE RICHMOND

The story of the Ellsberg papers — the real import of the whole damn thing — is, in a certain way, right here in Jimmy Quinn's bar.

It is 3:30 on Saturday afternoon. An hour earlier the papers were handed over, in principle if not in fact, to a representative of a Congressional subcommittee.

The exchange took place in the Mill Valley Police Station, cluttered with TV equipment and choked by an endless blue stream of cigarette smoke. It was the perfect non-event. But it was visual, just made for TV news.

It's been drizzling on and off all day. The water has seemed to leak from a crack in the sky rather than burst forth in a heavenly torrent. Despite the intermittent inclemency, an undaunted Santa continues to hold forth on his throne in front of the Chamber of Commerce (there is a message in there somewhere). Children and shoppers stroll around Lytton Square.

Down at the Old Mill Tavern there are the conversations about music and musicians, the unhurried game of pool and the Vikings-Chiefs game on color TV. Really, it's just another Saturday in Mill Valley. There is a propriety here that at first glance is not easy to understand. But that's where the story is.

They are almost all here, lined up one by one and running over half the length of Quinn's bar — the characters in the Ellsberg paper mini-drama. Ellsberg himself is about the only absentee. But his wife Patricia is here.

The thing is that all these people are talking and smiling and telling little stories and complimenting each other and carrying on in a decidedly social fashion. As though it was the goddamn Christmas season or something.

Two weeks ago, when the Ellsberg burglary first broke, when people appeared ready to backstab each other to get the papers, when the Defense Department sent a man to Mill Valley to run a hard-line game, you could've asked and received 10-1 odds against the possibility that the first struggle over the papers, even in this post-watergate era, would wind up in Quinn's bar.

Why, then, are we all here? Instead of shooting it out before some US judge? Or watching while FBI types toss Ellsberg's papers in the back seat of some unmarked Ford Galaxie?

Most fingers in this bar point to police chief Bill Walsh when that question arises.

Walsh is leaning at the end of the bar, dressed in his ever-present clear blue blazer. He does more listening than talking, every once in a while breaking into a grin or laughing in a somewhat boom-like fashion. The career cop who grew up in Mill Valley and became chief only when Dan Terzich retired, Walsh has controlled this entire episode.

It was Walsh who, beset though he was by recitations of the Government Code and the gritty near-demands of the feds, repelled the hard charge of the Defense Department. The Defense Department man told Walsh that he damn near had to give up the papers. Walsh told the man, in so many words, to get lost.

Barney Dreyfus, Ellsberg's attorney and a fatherly man who seems to always wear a hat and stay on an even keel, praises Walsh and deputy city attorney George Silvestri as the men responsible for the settlement.

Dreyfus is a liberal lawyer who during his long career has often found himself on the opposite side of the street from the police establishment. But he has known Walsh a long time. Walsh is Dreyfus' kind of cop.

Silvestri, a young athletic-looking man who probably got more than he bargained for when he took the city job a month ago, downplays his own importance. But he calls Walsh "brave and courageous."

Silvestri says all he did was respond to Walsh's instructions. It was Walsh, he says, who mapped out the city's position of holding on to the papers until Ellsberg said it was okay to release them.

Dreyfus, who lives in Strawberry, says that what Walsh did will have national significance "as soon as it sinks in."

Indeed, Dreyfus may be right. Six years ago, with Nixon going to the White House and Efrem Zimbalist at the top of the Nielsens, how many police chiefs would have stood up federal investigators and US attorneys? Even today there is a knee-jerk relationship between local cops and federal law enforcement. Walsh's knee just jerked in a new direction.

Ellsberg has already sung public praise of Walsh, as might be expected. Mrs. Ellsberg, a small woman in a tan pantsuit who emits a wisp of gracious- [illegible] papers [illegible] to smile and laugh, also gives thanks to Walsh.

Mrs. Ellsberg says she has noticed something about the West Coast, and Mill Valley in particular. Roughly translated it is that things are just a little more laid-back here. The press has not hounded her and Ellsberg. And, of course, Walsh has kept her and Ellsberg's interests at heart.

Despite the avalanche of publicity, Mrs. Ellsberg says she and "Dan" have no thoughts of leaving. She recounts tales of their life on the East Coast where people sifted through their garbage and checked on notes to their laundryman. That kind of stuff hasn't happened here.

At the other end of the bar is James Kronfeld, counsel to the House Subcommittee on Foreign Operations and Government Information, the man who will take the Ellsberg papers back to Washington.

Maybe it's his moustache and gold wire-rimmed glasses, but Kronfeld seems the perfect man for Washington to send to Mill Valley. He shows no traces of official up-tightness. He treats Walsh and some others to anecdotes of his career in Washington, peopled by figures like the Kennedys. In fact, it is Kronfeld who buys most of the rather substantial rounds.

The two hours in Quinn's bar take on the nature of a celebration. True, there is the feeling of relief that the first chapter of this story is over. But what are they really celebrating?

Somebody asks Silvestri about the significance of Mill Valley in this thing. There is agreement, provincial though it may be, that if this had to go down at all, Mill Valley was the perfect place for it.

"Maybe this will show that if it happened this way here, it should happen this way everywhere," Silvestri observes.

Silvestri's comment is perhaps the key to the celebrant nature of these proceedings.

In many ways, the Ellsberg papers case is the United States' first post-resignation bout with some of the very issues which over the past two years has laid low America's opinion of itself. There is the question of secrecy, of intervention by branches of the federal government, of who really holds power over United States citizens.

Perhaps the bottom line on Walsh's thinking was that he, just like Ellsberg himself, didn't really trust the buggers who were clamoring for the papers. At the very least, Walsh said at one point that his primary job was to protect Ellsberg's rights.

The darkness of night is begining to paint its way across Mill Valley. Kronfeld has to wait for his plane back to Washington. Others have begun drifting out of Quinn's. The first confrontation over the Ellsberg papers has ended in a small, quiet, tinted-window, neon-sign, neighborhood kind of bar in the center of Mill Valley, Calif. There was something to win here, and somebody won it. It is still too early to say what or who, but the people in Quinn's seem to feel pretty good about.

Jimmy Quinn, the frail but still feisty patriarch of this tavern, has sat in his chair by the window throughout the entire afternoon. He looks out across Lytton Square and carries on conversation with some of the regulars.

As we leave Jimmy is still on his stool, loking as though nothing has happened. But maybe something has.