

# A Nine-Month Nightmare in Vietnam

By LISE BANG-JENSEN

After months of solitary confinement and threats of execution, William Mathers was a free man. Well, almost. First he was to attend a luncheon in his honor.

Vietnamese officials were surprising Mr. Mathers, an American businessman they had held captive for nearly nine months, with a going-away feast. Held at a hotel outside Ho Chi Minh City, the lunch came complete with ebony chopsticks and white tablecloth. "Let's let bygones be bygones," one official urged, toasting Mr. Mathers with a local beer. "We hope we can be friends and you will return to help Vietnam in the future." The seven Vietnamese then turned to Mr. Mathers, expecting him to return the toast.

Mr. Mathers, a 41-year-old Vietnam War veteran, remembered his manners. He didn't mention the \$10,000 "fine" his family in New York paid to win his release. Nor did he ask why Vietnam confiscated the So Fong, his 80-foot sailboat. Nor did he say a word about the men from Hanoi who had tried to recruit him as a spy. Mr. Mathers simply stood up, turned to his hosts and said, "I'd like to say this is a delightful lunch. Thank you very much."

Two hours later, on April 4, he boarded jet bound for Bangkok and freedom.

## Barren Conscience

Although the saga of Mr. Mathers and his French and Australian crew may rate only a footnote in history, the incident offers a glimpse into the barren conscience of Vietnamese leaders. It shows how their isolation has bred xenophobia, especially toward Americans. It shows their disdain both for the rule of law and for the diplomatic conventions that civilized nations live by. And it raises the question of whether the U.S. and the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations can ever rely on Vietnam's statements of good intentions.

Except for brief press conferences in Bangkok and New York immediately after his release, Mr. Mathers has refused scores of requests for interviews. He granted an interview for this story at his parents' home in New York, because, he said, "I want to get a message back to the Vietnamese that they can't behave this way if they want to be part of the world community."

Easygoing, with thinning blond hair and thick beard grown during his captivity, Mr. Mathers describes himself as "a typical American businessman living overseas who was just sailing his boat from Singapore to Hong Kong."

## Packing Up

The drama unfolded a year ago when Mr. Mathers decided it was time to move back to the U.S. after living in Singapore for nearly 15 years. Before packing his bags, he had to sever his business ties and sell his sailboat. A 1966 Yale graduate, he had remained in Southeast Asia after being honorably discharged from the U.S. Navy in 1970. During his stint as a naval lieutenant, he spent six months in Vietnam in 1969 directing a harbor salvage team.

In Singapore, Mr. Mathers used his Navy diving and salvage experience for several companies. In 1976, he helped found a marine consulting and broking firm. This led to his involvement as a principal in Iposmarine Ltd., an international construction firm that builds prefabricated piers. Last June, Mr. Mathers arranged to sell his interest in the company.

For a few years, the So Fong, a hand-crafted sloop built in Hong Kong in 1967, was more than a hobby for Mr. Mathers, who is divorced and has no children. It was

it could be used when diving for sunken ships. Among the expeditions he had participated in was a dive for a Dutch submarine that the Japanese sunk off the coast of Malaysia in 1941. A Dutch maritime museum, grateful that Mr. Mathers had retrieved the ship's wheel, gave him drawings of the submarine, which he kept aboard the So Fong. Those drawings would later fuel the suspicions of his Vietnamese captors.

## Ready to Sail

On the advice of a sales agent who had lined up two potential buyers for the boat, Mr. Mathers decided to sell it in Hong Kong. He left Singapore in late June and picked up his crew in Koh Samui, Thailand: Michael Flecker, a 21-year-old Australian; two French women in their thirties, Veronique Capron and Annick I. Pallard; and Mrs. Pallard's sons, Cyril, 16, and Colino, 9.

On July 21, the So Fong was sailing about 40 miles off the southwest coast of Vietnam. "All of a sudden he saw a strange fishing boat, heavily armed with guns," Mr. Mathers said. "I suspected they were militia, but they had no flags, no uniforms, no papers."

Mr. Mathers said the Vietnamese took their passports, and seemed especially interested in his U.S. passport. They tied him to a post aboard the fishing boat for three hours, he said; a machine gun pointed directly at him. The So Fong and its crew were then taken to a small fishing



Unknown to Mr. Mathers, U.S. State Department officials, who had been working behind the scenes for his release, were joined in their effort by United Nations Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar, Australian, French, Dutch and Indonesian diplomats; U.S. congressmen and the Vietnam Veterans of America. When visiting Hanoi in late January, Mr. Perez de Cuellar inquired about Mr. Mathers. A few weeks later, U.S. Congressman John McCain, an Arizona Republican who had been a prisoner of war in Vietnam for six years, returned there with a CBS News crew. He also pressed for Mr. Mathers's release.

The months dragged for Mr. Mathers, who had been moved back aboard the So Fong. He was well fed by local standards and never physically tortured. But he was lonely, bored and emotionally drained. His offer to use his engineering skills to replace a dilapidated harbor pier was rejected. His diary entries reflected his despondent mood. The message of several days were marked by

a single word, "Nothing."

"This was my worst period. I thought I was going to go crazy," Mr. Mathers said. Referring to the diary he smuggled out of Vietnam inside a cookbook, he continued, "On Jan. 31, I had my first meeting with an officer since I had been told on Nov. 21 that I would be freed before

**"I want to get a message back to the Vietnamese that they can't behave this way if they want to be part of the world community," the freed businessman said.**

village and later up the Mekong River to Can Tho, a provincial capital about 50 miles from Ho Chi Minh City.

Except for two brief chance encounters, Mr. Mathers didn't see his crew again. The interrogations began immediately. "They wanted to know the details of my family, my marriage, my education, my naval service, my commercial work. They asked about my sex life," Mr. Mathers said.

Despite the barrage of questions, the Vietnamese never told the group why they were detained. "They implied we were there to do survey or salvage work, or that we were on a sabotage or espionage mission. They appeared to be trying to gather information to decide which," Mr. Mathers said.

The hearing said Mr. Mathers wore to compensate for a slight hearing loss was ripped apart by his captors, who apparently believed it was a Central Intelligence Agency listening device. The boat's sophisticated navigational equipment and diving gear also provoked suspicion.

## Getting Help

"In August, they found the drawings of the Dutch submarine. That's when they thought they had really got me," Mr. Mathers said. "They thought I was going to rendezvous with a submarine." More than two weeks passed before the Vietnamese government notified French, Australian and U.S. authorities that they were holding their citizens. On Sept. 20, after two months of captivity, the French

Christmas. They told me there was no news from Hanoi. They said my family, my company and my government had made no attempt to contact me."

Physically, the American was weak. He had deliberately lost about 30 pounds.

"I decided they would put me on trial," he said. "By not eating, I knew I was putting myself in a condition that I'd need urgent medical care. I knew I was courting death. But I didn't want them to be able to parade me around the streets and stage a show trial."

## Better Spirits

Mr. Mathers snapped out of his depression sometime in February. He resumed eating. One of the things that helped him was a popular psychology book he found aboard the boat, "TmO.K., You're O.K."

On the diplomatic front, progress was slow. Foreign negotiators had to tolerate confused Vietnamese messages about Mr. Mathers's plight. In December, for example, a U.S. congressman visiting Vietnam said Prime Minister Pham Van Dong told him he had signed Mr. Mathers's release papers, subject to the approval of provincial authorities. In March, Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach told Mr. Perez de Cuellar and American, Indonesian and other diplomats that Mr. Mathers would be freed within two and a half weeks.

ter Mochtar Kusumaatmadja, who asked about Mr. Mathers at the request of the U.S. government. A few days later, Vietnam announced that the American sailor would be released no later than April 11.

With their timing, the Vietnamese may have hoped to send a message to ASEAN that they can negotiate with Mr. Mochtar or to avert a potential public relations disaster. Mr. Mathers's detention might have distracted hundreds of foreign journalists who were converging on Vietnam to cover the 10th anniversary of the fall of Saigon. It also might have undermined Vietnam's claims that it isn't holding any American prisoners of war.

## Recruitment Effort

Back in Can Tho, Mr. Mathers was told nothing of his imminent release. His interrogators told him he would be released if he agreed to become a spy. "They wanted me to get them information about offshore explorations by U.S. oil companies in Vietnam during the war years," he says.

Mr. Mathers says he was also asked to infiltrate refugee camps in Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia to uncover plots to "destabilize" the Vietnamese government. "They claimed the Orderly Departure Program was a program of the U.S. government to destabilize Vietnam by encouraging technical people to emigrate." The ODP, approved by the Hanoi government, is designed to allow orderly immigration to prevent another flood of boat people.

As a former naval officer, Mr. Mathers was told his contacts would help him meet Vietnam's third demand: the details of military maneuvers by the U.S. and its allies in Southeast Asia.

"I told them I wasn't going to spy for anyone," Mr. Mathers said.

"On March 26, they told me I was on an intelligence gathering mission. 'You will be punished by the laws of Vietnam. You will be imprisoned. This investigation is over.' A few days later, Mr. Mathers was directed to write a letter to Prime Minister Dong requesting "clemency and amnesty."

## 'Forbidden Zone'

In the letter, Mr. Mathers acknowledged he had violated the maritime laws of Vietnam by entering a "forbidden zone. I also understand that the observance of the coastal area and the taking of four photographs by my crew, as well as the nature of So Fong's equipment is evidence of espionage."

At a hearing before provincial authorities March 31, Mr. Mathers was told his amnesty plea had been granted. He would be fined \$10,000. His boat would be confiscated. He would be freed April 4. Shortly after Mr. Mathers's release, a Vietnamese Embassy officer in Bangkok denied his country tried to recruit him as a spy. "We have never had such a policy. He was treated well as he stated, and it is unimaginable that anyone would try to do this."

"Am I angry? No, not at all," Mr. Mathers said flatly, adding "I feel sorry for the Vietnamese people. I saw how afraid the local people were of the government security apparatus."

"I only had to be there eight-and-a-half months," he said. "They have to be here the rest of their lives without any hope of getting out."