

WILLIAM M. MATHERS  
AND THE  
AMERICAN VESSEL "SO FONG"

Mr. William Martin Mathers is a former U.S. Naval Officer who served on active duty from 1966 to 1970. He served one tour in the Republic of Vietnam, from 1969 to 1970, as a Navy diving and salvage officer in marine salvage operations. Mr. Mathers left active duty as a Lieutenant and has most recently worked as a partner with the IPCO Marine company in Singapore, which specializes in marine construction projects. He is the owner and captain of the American registry vessel, "So Fong", an 80 foot wooden schooner built in Hong Kong in 1937. The "So Fong" has been home ported in Singapore and has been used in the past as a charter vessel for sailing, fishing, and diving. It is insured for \$300,000.

In July 1984, Mathers and a crew of five (two French women with two of their children and one Australian man) were sailing the "So Fong" from Singapore via Thailand to Hong Kong where Mathers intended to sell the vessel. On July 21, in the vicinity of Con Son Island approximately forty miles off the Vietnamese coast, they were stopped by a Vietnamese Navy patrol boat and escorted to Can Tho City in the Mekhong River Delta. Mathers and the crew were accused of violating Vietnamese territorial waters and were suspected of conducting espionage activities. They were subjected to lengthy interrogation and were required to sign statements acknowledging their "violation" of territorial waters.

On September 21, the two French women and their two children were released after intervention by the French Government. The French Government was required to sign a guarantee for a penalty of \$2,500 which was assessed against the French nationals. Specific charges were never mentioned to the French nationals. The penalty itself was actually paid by Mathers' company, IPCO Marine in Singapore. On November 29, the Australian national was released upon payment of a fine of \$5,000, for having "violated Vietnamese territorial waters and for taking unauthorized photographs of the Vietnamese border region". This fine also was paid by Mathers' company, IPCO Marine.

Mathers is under investigation for violation of Vietnamese territorial waters and, according to the released Australian national, also for "oceanographic and geographic survey of Vietnamese territory, surveying Vietnamese oil installations, and diving on wrecks to recover Vietnamese treasure". The Vietnamese base these suspicions apparently on their search of the "So Fong", which revealed sophisticated diving equipment, Mathers' old Navy uniform with rank insignia (Service Dress Blue, with Lt.jg stripes), and design plans for two World War II era Dutch submarines. The Netherlands Ambassador in Bangkok has since provided the Vietnamese Embassy here with an official explanation for the submarine plans (that is, Mathers had conducted salvage diving operations on one of them in 1982).

The Australians and the French have made efforts to gain Consular access to Mathers and to act as our representatives in resolving this case. The Australians in particular have indicated an eagerness to do whatever they can to assist and, on November 15, the Australian Ambassador in Hanoi delivered a package of sundries to the Vietnamese authorities for Mathers. The Vietnamese have never confirmed delivery of the package to Mathers, however, and there has been no direct contact with Mathers since his apprehension. There is some question about the status of the investigation on Mathers, with Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials alternately stating that it is complete or that it is in the hands of the Ministry of Interior and still in progress. Codel Montgomery and Codel Solarz have raised this case with senior Vietnamese officials during recent visits but the responses provided although encouraging remained noncommittal. On January 8, 1985, Ambassador Dean formally advised the Vietnamese through their embassy in Bangkok that the Australians had agreed to an official U.S. request to ask in our behalf in the Mathers case. The Vietnamese have since informed the Australians, however, that they will not accept letters for Mathers since "the case is still under investigation".

The French and Australian crewmembers all stated that they were well treated in detention and that Mathers, although the real focus of attention, was not particularly disadvantaged because of his U.S. citizenship. He had been kept isolated from the others but has spent most of his detention aboard the "So Fong". Debriefings of the released crewmembers indicate that Mathers is being well treated and is in good condition and that the "So Fong" has been well maintained and is seaworthy.

*Elements :* 1) Counter revolution

2) attempt to expand U.S. - S.V. relations