

Freed American tells of ordeal in VN jail

AN American war veteran jailed for 16 months in Vietnam said yesterday that authorities there subjected him to "terrible mental pressure" and refused to let him meet the Vietnamese woman he sailed there to rejoin.

Robert Schwab, 44, said while he was not physically mistreated, the Vietnamese kept him in solitary confinement for more than a year, denied him all access to the outside world and interrogated him on numerous occasions to determine if he was a spy.

"It really was a failure," Schwab said of his quest to bring back "Mai," whom he met as an Army private in the central highlands in 1972, left behind during the communist advance and evacuation of Saigon in April 1975 and reestablished contact with six years later.

To try to bring her out, Schwab took a 5.5-metre sailboat on a 13-day, 965-kilometre trip from the Philippines to Vietnam, crossing waters often plagued by typhoons and pirates.

Schwab was freed on Thursday after US President Ronald Reagan took a personal interest in the case and instructed senior US officials to negotiate his release. Washington and Hanoi do not maintain diplomatic relations.

Official Vietnamese media, which made no mention of Mai, said Schwab had violated territorial waters and infringed on the country's security. A reliable diplomatic source who requested anonymity said Schwab was released after paying a \$10,000 (about 260,000 baht) fine.

According to his own account at yesterday's press conference, Schwab, after leaving the Army, stayed on in Vietnam and worked for private agencies and the US Government until the 1975 evacuation. He said that in 1981, he joined in a fruitless foray into Laos to search for US prisoners allegedly sighted there since the end of the war.

Schwab said that during his captivity, the Vietnamese would not allow him to meet Mai, a pseudonym for his friend, now 31 years old.



Robert Schwab at yesterday's press conference: "It really was a failure."

Requests to meet with Foreign Ministry officials to discuss the case were denied, he said.

But he said his captors showed some concern. "I was even given pictures of her at one point," he said.

Without elaborating, Schwab said he had discovered new information about her, and could not say if he still regarded her as his fiancée.

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Schwab, who appeared gaunt and disoriented, said he spent "terribly emotional... lonely and depressed" days in solitary confinement in a 12 by 14 foot room with a tile floor, a hard bed and a desk. He said he lost ten pounds despite receiving adequate, well-balanced meals.

He said he passed the time exercising, writing, and "talking to myself."

Schwab said he was first held in Qui Nhon, in the central province

of Nghia Binh, then in the major port city of Danang up north, then back in Qui Nhon. The last year or more was spent in solitary confinement "from beginning to end" in a regular prison in Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon, he said.

He said the Vietnamese never formally charged him with any crime but interrogated him for extended periods about "foreign affairs" and other matters. He said he faced "terrible mental pressure" and "just about every available means was used to increase that pressure."

Schwab said he first met Mai in her family's coffee shop in the central province of Gia Lai-Cong Tum. He said he was drawn to her because she was "a very traditional Vietnamese girl."

In 1975, he said, he received her parents' permission to take her to the United States, but then decided against it. Her family had just made the arduous flight southward from the

by Peter Eng

communist offensive in the central highlands, and when he saw Mai during the Saigon evacuation, she was very thin, silent, emotionally crushed and "crying her heart out."

"She would have felt like a deserter," if she had left with him and abandoned her family, he said. Schwab said he made contact with her in 1981 through a refugee in Thailand and the letters indicated they remained very much in love.

He said he considered various means of getting her out before deciding to approach the Vietnamese "in an obviously innocent, but dramatic, way ... such (that) I would be (both) innocent and capture their imagination and the Press's imagination."

But his plans of calmly landing ashore, presenting himself to the village headman, and then waiting for authorities so he could negotiate Mai's exit fell apart. Fishing crafts towed his boat in and he was immediately jailed.

"I definitely recommend that anyone with a problem of this nature use official avenues of approach rather than the South China Seas," Schwab said.

Richard Childress, the Asian Affairs director of the National Security Council who negotiated Schwab's release, said a resolution was eased by recent increased cooperation between the United States and Vietnam on accounting for Americans missing in action from the war and on other humanitarian issues.

Considering Schwab's illegal entry, background, and natural suspicions the Vietnamese would have had, "in another time... the outcome could have been very different," Childress told the press conference.

He said Washington could not condone what Schwab had done.