

Schwab tells of his capture in Vietnam

THE former US Green Beret freed on Thursday after 15 months in solitary confinement in Vietnam, said yesterday he wanted to press Hanoi to release his girlfriend by using an innocent yet dramatic approach.

Speaking one day after arriving in Bangkok, Robert Schwab, who describes himself as a "scholar-adventurer", said he planned to land in Vietnam by boat from the Philippines in broad daylight.

After landing, he hoped to walk up to the leader of the local community, inform him of his intentions and wait for the authorities.

Mr Schwab, captured off the central coast of Vietnam in April 1985, had hoped to bring back "Mai," a Vietnamese woman he says is the girlfriend he left behind when the Communists took over in 1975.

He was accused of violating Vietnamese territorial waters and infringing on the country's security. They also suspected he was a spy.

"What I tried to accomplish was to effect the permission for the girl I intend to marry to leave Vietnam legally to return to the US."

He said the successful attempt by photo-journalist John Everingham in rescuing his wife by swimming across the Mekong River to Laos had no effect on him.

Mr Schwab had considered using a speedboat to rescue Mai, 31, "but that would have been too complicated and very expensive."

Although it seemed a "radical" idea, Mr Schwab said he thought he would impress the Vietnamese authorities of his genuine intentions using an "innocent yet dramatic way so as to capture their imagination."

He also planned to capture the imagination of the Press since there were hundreds of reporters in Ho Chi Minh at the time covering the 10th anniversary of the fall of South Vietnam.

The adventurer said he had "communications set up so that the Press would know several hours after I had made it."

But the only thing that went right was the sailing, Mr Schwab said.



Robert Schwab: 'She remained in my mind as an extraordinary girl.'

"Everything else went wrong. It was really a failure."

A letter that was to have been posted by a friend from Hong Kong informing Washington of his intentions failed to arrive.

The US Government realised he was missing in late June, 1985.

Mr Schwab had no contact with the outside world apart from his interrogators until the end of June this year when the Vietnamese gave him a letter from Richard Childress, a National Security Council official, dated May 31.

Before arriving off the Vietnamese coast after about 13 days at sea, he lost radio communication. Then instead of arriving unassisted, Vietnamese fishermen captured him and towed his \$1,200 boat ashore.

He was detained in the central province of Nghia Binh for four days before being transferred to Da Nang and detained at a sea resort.

The mental pressure, he said, started to build when interrogation started during the initial two weeks.

Although lonely and depressed, he said the accommodation at the resort was like an upcoun-

try Thai house: A 12-foot by 14-foot room, tiled floor, a hard bed and desk.

"The food was inadequate at times, but most of the time it was adequate and balanced."

The next two weeks he was left alone, before being moved back to Nghia Binh where he was interrogated for another two weeks.

Finally, he was taken to a prison in Ho Chi Minh City and placed in solitary confinement until he was released.

Mr Schwab said he first met Mai in 1972 in her family's coffeeshop in the city of Cong Tum, in Giai Lai-Kong Tum Province.

"I think highly of a traditional Vietnamese girl, and she was the archetype of that," he said.

"She remained in my mind as an extraordinary girl. When the country was falling in 1975, I decided that I would like to marry her."

Just before the fall, when he was working with the US Embassy on the evacuation, he met her and found her "in terrible psychological shape and crying her heart out."

At that point, he said, she did not want to leave her family because she would feel like a deserter. "So it seemed better not to take her at that point."

But the adventurer's father, Robert Schwab jr, told UPI in Atlanta yesterday: "This girl wanted to come with him (she was 17 at the time). She pleaded with him. But he left, and it has always bothered him."

Mr Schwab jr said his son had refused her pleas to leave "because she was still a child and had a fine family there."

After leaving Vietnam, Mr Schwab travelled around the region, spending time in Thailand and in 1981 went across into Laos in search of Americans missing in action.

In 1981 he met a person who knew Mai's family and was told she had "severe nervous trouble" and he felt guilty.

He managed to contact her through letters, and she indicated in her letters that she wanted to come out.

During his interrogation, Mr Schwab said, he asked the Vietnamese about Mai but was told they would discuss the matter "later".

He never met Mai during his detention but was given photographs of her by the Vietnamese authorities.

Mr Schwab said the Vietnamese knew her real identity, almost from the very beginning.

Asked what he was going to do next, Mr Schwab said: "I'm still undecided. I still have to do some more thinking about where to go from here."