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ZPM-ESCAPE. 2 TAKES; 490-760

ZBY NEAL ULEVICH

ZASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

BANGKOK; THAILAND (AP) - HARLO GAY, A BUSHY-BEARDED AMERICAN BUSINESSMAN JAILED IN NORTH VIETNAM FOR HELPING THE CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY, SAID TODAY HE BROKE OUT OF PRISON; SPENT ALMOST A MONTH TRYING TO GET TO LAOS AND FINALLY SURRENDERED AFTER FOUR DAYS IN A MONSOON DOWNPOUR.

Gay, 52, who arrived in Bangkok on Tuesday from Saigon, acknowledged trying to help the CIA evacuate politically important Vietnamese civilians as Communist forces overran the country in April 1975.

He said that was his only CIA mission, and it wasn't successful. Skipping a leaky escape boat, he found open sea where a U.S. aircraft carrier was supposed to be. An attempt to flag down a rescue helicopter in the Mekong River delta failed when Communist forces converged on Gay's fish processing barge, a business venture of his that was to be used as a helicopter landing pad for the evacuation.

"One kid with a gun told me, 'You come to wrong place,' and I had to agree with him," said Gay, who had been in business in Vietnam for 10 years. "They classified me as military, as a spook (spy)."

Gay said he was taken to the Ca Mau Peninsula, the southernmost part of South Vietnam.

"They chained me with leg irons in a bamboo monkey cage; he continued. "It was ridiculous. They thought they had a prize. They were disappointed."

Days later he was moved to Can Tho, the capital of the Mekong Delta; then flown by helicopter to Hanoi and a military prison about 40 miles from the North Vietnamese capital.

Gay, a native of Tacoma, Wash., said he was treated well in the prison, with a private cell containing table, chair, bed of wooden slats and a single light bulb. He was fed twice daily on pork fat and rice - you become acclimated to the fact that you're lucky to have it.

He never saw another Westerner in his 18 months in prison and rarely had a chance to speak with the Vietnamese inmates. He also noticed

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THAT SECURITY WAS BECOMING LAX AS THE MONTHS WORE ON.

IN JUNE, HE SAID, HE WROTE A LETTER TO THE CAMP COMMANDER PROTECTING HIS ISOLATION AND DECLARING HIS INNOCENCE. THE RESPONSE WAS EXPLOSIVE.

"CAMP OFFICERS ACCUSED ME OF HIDING ENEMIES OF THE REVOLUTION TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY. THAT PUT ME IN THE SAME CATEGORY AS NIXON," THEY SAID.

"THEY TOLD ME: 'YOU MAY BE HERE ONE YEAR, YOU MAY BE HERE FOR TWO YEARS, YOU MAY BE HERE FOR FIVE YEARS AND YOU MAY BE HERE FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE.'

"I GUESS THEY DIDN'T REALIZE THEY CAME ON SO STRONG, BUT AFTERWARD I WAS IN A STATE OF SHOCK. I WAS 52 YEARS OLD AND DIDN'T WANT TO SPEND THE REST OF MY LIFE THERE."

"I BROKE THE DOOR LOOSE AND JUST TOOK MY CHANCES ON MISSING THE MOVING GUARD. I HAD FOOD THAT I HAD SAVED UP: SOME DRIED RICE AND OTHER THINGS. THEY LET ME KEEP MY WATCH SO I KNEW THE TIME. THE MOON WAS FULL SO I COULD NAVIGATE AND MOVE AT NIGHT."

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7BANGKOK: MOVE AT NIGHT.

THEN THE MOON WANE, TRAVELING AT NIGHT BECAME IMPOSSIBLE, AND DAY BEGAN TO RISK DAYLIGHT AS HE TRIED TO GET TO LAOS. HE DID NOT KNOW THAT COMMUNIST FORCES HAD TAKEN OVER THAT COUNTRY, TOO.

"I DIDN'T REALIZE THAT A PERSON CAN'T MOVE IN A COMMUNIST COUNTRY WITHOUT BEING SEEN," HE REPORTED. "PEOPLE BEGAN TO SPOT ME. THEN THE AUTHORITIES STARTED MOVING IN."

MONSOON RAINS SOAKED HIM AND HIS FEET BEGAN BOTHERING HIM.

"AFTER FOUR DAYS OF STEADY RAIN, I TRIED TO FIGURE THE BEST WAY TO TURN MYSELF IN WITHOUT BEING SHOT," HE SAID.

HE SURRENDERED TO PEASANTS OF A HILL TRIBE AND DISCOVERED HE'D WALKED NO MORE THAN 30 MILES FROM THE PRISON.

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"I WAS BACK IN PRISON THE NEXT AFTERNOON," GAY SWENT ON.

"WHEN I GOT BACK, THE CAMP COMMANDER ASKED MY WHY IN THE WORLD I ESCAPED WHEN THEY WERE GOING TO LET ME GO ANYWAY. OF COURSE, I DIDN'T BELIEVE THEM THEN.

"THEN THE COMMANDER SAID, 'PLEASE BE GOOD NOW, WE WANT TO GET YOU OUT OF THIS COUNTRY WHOLE. BUT IF YOU ESCAPE AGAIN YOU'RE GOING TO GET SHOT, RIGHT IN THE NECK.'"

IT WAS THEN EARLY AUGUST. GAY DIDN'T KNOW IT, BUT HANOI HAD RELEASED ABOUT 40 AMERICANS AND THEIR DEPENDENTS FROM SAIGON ON AUG. 1.

"BY AUG. 10 I WAS REASONABLY SURE THEY WANTED TO LET ME GO," HE SAID.

EARLY IN SEPTEMBER HE WAS FLOWN TO SAIGON, AND AS HIS DEPARTURE FOR BANGKOK APPROACHED, GAY SAID HE ASKED AN INTERROGATOR IF HE REALLY THOUGHT HE WAS AN AGENT.

"THERE WAS A PAUSE, THEN HE SAID, 'IF YOU WERE A SPY OR AGENT, HE WOULD KNOW.'"

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