ESCAPE WITH HONOR: A STORY OF VIETNAM

Garth Glazier

TERRY MCNAMARA WOULDN'T ABANDON HIS VIETNAMESE CO-WORKERS, EVEN IF IT MEANT A PERILOUS RIVER TRIP.

BY MARC LEEPSON

The word "honor" has a way of coming up regularly when you talk to Terry McNamara about his extraordinary experiences in Vietnam. Which is not surprising considering McNamara, who retired from the Foreign Service in 1993 after having served three tours in Vietnam, titled his well-received 1997 memoir *Escape With Honor: My Last Hours in Vietnam.* McNamara's book told the memorable story of his final Vietnam tour of duty, which began when he was named U.S. consul general in the Mekong Delta in August 1974.

It was a time when the Republic of (South) Vietnam was falling into the anarchy that would lead to the takeover of the country by the North Vietnamese Army on April 30, 1975. As the months went by and the end of the nation of South Vietnam drew near, Terry McNamara's main concern was the physical safety of hundreds of Vietnamese citi-

zens who worked for the U.S. Foreign Service — people whose lives would be in danger after a communist takeover. "I felt a personal responsibility," McNamara said in recent wide-ranging interview. "We lived with these people for years and to just walk away from them, abandon them, was too much. They had been loyal to us. They had been friends. It was a point of honor."

McNamara's dilemma was compounded by orders he received from the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. "I was being told that I should leave the Vietnamese behind and just take the Americans out," he said. "I couldn't do that." The orders were to take out the American employees via helicopter. The problem was that only three small helicopters were available.

"We could have gotten all the Americans out on the helicopters," McNamara said. "With three loads maybe it would have been a strain, but we could have done it. But there was no way in the world we could have taken any Vietnamese out by helicopters."

Faced with upholding what he saw as his commitment to his Vietnamese employees and their families, McNamara devised an ambitious plan. He would lead the effort to take his American and Vietnamese employees out by water, by sailing 70 miles down the Bas Sac branch of the Mekong River from Can Tho and out to sea.

It was a daring plan, and one that ultimately succeeded. But not before McNamara and company overcame some daunting obstacles involving the Viet Cong, the CIA, the South Vietnamese Navy, the U.S. Marines and the U.S. Navy. Ultimately, McNamara and his small staff led some 300 Vietnamese citizens out of the country and to the safety of exile in America.

From Katanga to Vietnam

In retrospect, two aspects of Terry McNamara's life loom as important factors in the success of his April 1975 seaborne escape-and-rescue mission: his Korean wartime service in the U.S. Navy and his Foreign Service experience in several overseas hotspots.

Francis Terry McNamara was born in Troy, N.Y., in 1927 into a large, extended Irish-American family. He ran away from home and joined the Navy near the end of World War II. McNamara tried college after the war, then rejoined the Navy in 1950, and saw action in the Korean War aboard the heavy cruiser, St. Paul. After his Navy service, McNamara finished college and went to graduate school at Syracuse University before entering the Foreign Service in 1956.

He soon became an Africa specialist. In the early 1960s McNamara was living in Elizabethville, the Katangan province capital of the newly independent Congo, when Katanga seceded from the Congo and what McNamara called a series of "small wars" erupted. "The U.N. Peace Enforcement mission came in and we supported it and they went to war with the Katangans," he said. "I was living in the middle of all these wars. We had our consulate sacked about five or six times. It went on for two years. It was more dangerous than Vietnam ever was — far more."

After several other African stints, McNamara volunteered to go to South Vietnam in 1967. He did so, McNamara said in a 1993 Foreign Service Oral History Project interview, "in part" because the war "was the great historic event of our time. I wanted to be part of it — to see it up close." McNamara arrived in Vietnam in January 1968, just before the massive Tet Offensive. His job: working with USAID in the joint civilian-military pacification program known as CORDS (Civil Operations for Rural Development System).

After surviving the vicious Tet fighting in Saigon, McNamara was sent to Vinh Long Province in the Mekong Delta to replace an adviser who had been killed during the recent fighting. He was made chief of rural development in charge of the civilian developmental programs and a village pacification program. His advisory team was made up of about a dozen civilians and about 250 military personnel.

McNamara stayed in Vinh Long until September 1968. He spent the rest of his first Vietnam tour, which ended in April 1969, as deputy province senior adviser in Quang Tri Province just south of the Demilitarized Zone.

"Living in Quang Tri in those days was a little bit like being in Verdun in World War I," McNamara said. "The North Vietnamese were just across the Ben Hai River, on the 17th parallel. They would shell, using artillery that they had dug into caves on the other side of the river. They'd wheel them out and fire some shells at us. Quang Tri City was just within their artillery range."

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After that eventful tour, the Foreign Service made McNamara an offer he couldn't refuse: Principal consular officer in Danang. "There was no consular post in the country outside Saigon since the closing of the consulate general in Hue," McNamara said in 1993. "It was important to have a diplomatic listening post in central Vietnam, the most politically active region in the country and the furthest from Saigon." The job turned out to be a very political one. He spent a good deal of time working closely with non-communist opponents of the South Vietnamese regime.

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The Great Escape

Terry McNamara left Danang in August 1971. He spent the next three years first at the Naval War College, and then as chargé d'affaires in Dahomey. The next time he saw Vietnam was in August 1974 when he arrived in Can Tho as one of four American consuls general in South Vietnam. It was a job in which he was in charge of about a thousand employees who worked out of 16 offices spread throughout the 18 provinces of the Mekong Delta in southern South Vietnam. Most of the employees were Vietnamese who worked alongside about a hundred Americans and a handful of Filipinos and Koreans.

It was not exactly a calm time. For one thing, the North Vietnamese Army was on the march southward. The U.S. Congress, in reaction to widespread public disenchantment with South Vietnam's long war against the communists, had cut back drastically on American aid to the South Vietnamese government. As for the U.S. consul general in Can Tho, he was beset with his own problems, most significantly a troubled relationship with the CIA and the U.S. embassy in Saigon.

Early in 1975, the military situation started going seriously downhill in South Vietnam. "As things began to deteriorate elsewhere in the country, I started thinking about evacuation and how to make sure that none of my guys in the 16 offices all over the Delta got left behind," McNamara said. "We had an evacuation plan, which was

Photos: Cary Kassebaum

The landing craft, filled with departing South Vietnamese, going down the Bas Sac River. Inset: McNamara defuses a confrontation on the river by talking with Commodore Thang.

worthless. It called for closing the consulate general and driving to Saigon. That would only work under the most ideal circumstances, like if there wasn't an invading army seizing the territory we were supposed to cross."

Failing that, the plan called for using helicopters to evacuate, which McNamara realized also was unworkable. "When I considered our numbers, I began to realize this would require a major commitment of helicopters, as well as troops to secure LZs [landing zones]. It was just mind-boggling," he said."Finally, I looked at the feasibility of a water-borne evacuation down the Bas Sac River to the sea."

Then there was the daunting question of determining which Vietnamese employees and family members McNamara could offer safe passage. McNamara estimated that, counting family members, there were some 5,000 people in his employ. "When I started to come to grips with the numbers, I knew there was absolutely no way I could ever get the means to get 5,000 people out of Can Tho," he said.

"Forced to Play God"

Then, late one night, McNamara devised a way to narrow down that figure. "After a lot of soul searching I decided that setting up a system of priorities was the only way to do it." McNamara, with the guidance of his American top staff, set up three categories of employees. Group A consisted of people McNamara "thought would be in mortal danger if they were taken prisoner by the Viet Cong." Group B consisted of "people who could make it in another culture, in the United States or France — educated people who spoke foreign languages and had skills so that they could get jobs." The C category contained everyone else: "the guards, the char ladies, the guy who had 10 children and spoke no language aside from Vietnamese and had no salable skills."

Making those choices was not easy for McNamara, or for his American Foreign Service employees. McNamara called the selection process "a soul-scarring experience" in which he and others were "forced to play God in making what might mean life-or-death decisions." Early in April 1975, McNamara began closing consular offices and sending potential evacuees from the top two categories to Saigon where chances were much better they could secure passage out of South Vietnam. Then, on April 29, with the enemy on the outskirts of Can Tho, McNamara set in motion the river evacuation plan.

The highest priority was getting out those Vietnamese who would be in mortal danger if captured by the Viet Cong.

But first he had to overcome opposition from the embassy in Saigon, from the local CIA station chief, and from several people on his own staff who, McNamara said, "were absolutely against going out by water." Those who opposed his plan, McNamara said, "were just not as committed to the Vietnamese as those of us who had spent years in Vietnam and who had gotten to know the Vietnamese as people and not just as paid informants. Moreover, many were frightened. They believed their own intelligence reports that we might be overrun any minute. They considered going down the river just short of suicidal."

The seventy-mile trip McNamara envisioned, he says, "wasn't suicidal, nor was it without risk." He was aided immeasurably by his Can Tho staff, especially his deputy Hank Cushing and Cary "Kass" Kassebaum, a former Peace Corps volunteer who served as a province representative. "My ex-Peace Corps volunteers like Cary Kassebaum did not panic," McNamara said. "They and my junior FSOs were rock solid. Moreover, these two groups were among the most insistent on our moral responsibility to take care of those Vietnamese who worked for us."

With the North Vietnamese Army literally at the gates of Can Tho, McNamara put his plan into action early in the morning of April 29. He and his staff rounded up hundreds of Vietnamese civilians and their families and ushered them aboard a rice barge and a former Vietnamese Navy LCM, a lightly armored landing barge known as a "mike boat," which McNamara had quietly procured for the river journey.

McNamara personally oversaw the loading of the boats, determined, he said, "to monitor who got on," he said. "I feared overcrowding. I also wished to assure places were given those on our priority lists." To lighten the tension, McNamara donned a helmet liner several of his Marine guards had given him. Painted navy blue, it was adorned with a large gold star and the sarcastic inscription "Commodore of the Can Tho Yacht Club." The helmet "was a joke," McNamara said. "I put it on

because I felt that one of the best ways of maintaining morale and preventing panic was to appear confident, even lighthearted. So I tried to joke with people and to relieve tension."

It turned out to be an extremely tension-filled morning. "The Vietnamese, naturally, were worried and scared," McNamara said. "My young Marines and CORDS old-timers were businesslike but joined in my show of bravado. We tried hard to maintain a calm, matter-of-fact front. As we started on this adventure, I was not as full of self-confidence as I tried to appear."

After several mechanical glitches, McNamara's two-vessel convoy set out down the river. They soon joined forces, as planned, with a second LCM piloted by a former Vietnamese naval officer who knew the river well. Altogether, the small flotilla carried some 300 Vietnamese, 18 Americans, and six Filipinos.

Choosing which Vietnamese to take and which to leave behind was a "soul-scarring experience."

Armed Standoff on the River

As they continued down the river, McNamara and company could hear machine-gun fire as the final hours of the Vietnam War raged around them. Then, about seven miles into the trip, the convoy took fire — not from the enemy, but from a group of South Vietnamese navy "monitor" boats. "The lead monitor fired a machine gun volley over the bow of the leading LCM," McNamara said. "The signal was unmistakable. I gave the order to stop."

A young Vietnamese Navy lieutenant told McNamara he had orders from South Vietnamese Army (ARVN) Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khoa Nam, his corps commander, to stop the evacuation because McNamara's group contained ARVN personnel and draft-age males. What followed was a very tense standoff.

"The navy people wanted to come on board our boats. I refused to let them," McNamara said. "We were at an

impasse surrounded in midstream with awesome 40- and 20-millimeter guns pointed down our throats. Most of the males on our three boats were heavily armed. If the navy people had come on the boat and tried to take any of the Vietnamese off, there could have been a shootout. I could not allow this to happen. All three boats were full of women and children."

McNamara decided to pull some strings. He asked the Vietnamese Navy lieutenant to contact Commodore Thang, who was in charge of the South Vietnamese Navy in the Delta. Not coincidentally, McNamara had gotten the commodore's wife and children evacuated through Saigon several weeks earlier. Ninety nerve-wracking minutes later the commodore showed up in a small boat.

"We greeted each other as friends," McNamara said. "He smiled at me, [and said] 'You don't have any officers, soldiers or males of military age on your boats, do you?'"

"Of course, not," I replied. "The people in our boats are all my employees and their families."

The commodore said the evacuation could continue, but first introduced McNamara to a young sailor whose elderly father was on one of McNamara's boats. "He encouraged the sailor to say good-bye to his father in full view of all of the other sailors," McNamara said. "It was a very touching good-bye. The young sailor was staying behind. This disarmed the other sailors whose animosity disappeared."

To ease tensions further, McNamara gave the rice boat, which was limping along on a broken propeller, to the South Vietnamese sailors. "We took the people who had been on the rice barge and divided them among the two LCMs," he said. "This meant that all our people were in modern, seaworthy craft behind protected armor. I was greatly relieved."

Then the two LCMs resumed their journey, but not before McNamara had the Americans disarm all the Vietnamese on board. "Perhaps they had no choice, but we got no resistance," he said. "My men circulated among the Vietnamese reassuring them in their own language. We kept the guns on the top of the engine compartment behind the steering post. The Marines were there to guard them. We also had a machine gun off

one side and a BAR [Browning automatic rifle] off the other side. All of the Americans were armed."

The Last Shots Fired

In the middle of the afternoon, about a half hour after the South Vietnamese Navy incident, McNamara's convoy again took fire — this time from the Viet Cong. "Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash," McNamara said. "I turned my head instinctively in that direction. To my horror, I saw a long rocket with flame at the rear. I jammed the throttles to full speed." He ordered the Marines to return fire. "We put up a tremendous volume of fire. Some of the Vietnamese got hold of M-16s and supplemented fire by the Marines and my CORDS people. One or two rockets were fired and we put up such a volume of fire that they must have decided to leave us alone."

The convoy escaped unharmed. That short but intense skirmish on the Bas Sac River on April 29, though, is historically significant. McNamara believes — and no one has challenged his assertion — that, as he puts it in his book, "these were the last shots fired by Americans" in the nation's longest and most controversial overseas war.

Soon after that incident, about midway in their journey, the tiny flotilla approached a known Viet Cong infiltration route that crossed the river. "The VC held the banks on both sides of the river and often occupied the islands in midstream," McNamara said. "The channel narrowed as it passed between the islands. We would be dangerously close to shore."

Just as they were about to enter what McNamara called "the most perilous part of the trip down river," there was a tremendous downpour of rain. "The rain covering our passage through this very dangerous patch was another piece of extraordinary good luck," McNamara said. The convoy made it through the area without encountering the enemy. The rain stopped soon after they emerged into the wide river below the islands.

At about seven o'clock, after some 12 hours on the river, McNamara and company reached the South China Sea. He decided to push on out to sea to rendezvous with the U.S. Navy ships he believed were waiting to pick up Americans and South Vietnamese. McNamara had sent several radio messages to the evacuation fleet telling of his convoy's imminent arrival.

"Symbolically, as the sun set, we left Vietnam," McNamara remembered. "I remember looking back as the sun set over the Mekong Delta for the last time. God, it was beautiful. A beautiful big red-orange sunset over the flat, lush region."

As night was falling, McNamara's two LCMs headed into the open sea with only a rudimentary navigational system. There was no compass in his boat and he could not be sure of his directions as the night became increasingly dark and low clouds obscured the stars. It turned out that McNamara's only point of reference was intermittent gun flashes from a big battle going on on shore.

Rescue on a Dark Sea

Adding to his navigational woes, McNamara did not know how much fuel he had, and he had problems communicating with the Vietnamese captain of the other LCM. After considering laying by for the night near the shore, McNamara decided to make a run for some bright lights he saw in the distance.

Those lights turned out to be the Pioneer Contender, an American freighter contracted by the CIA for evacuation purposes. "The ship had a Marine contingent aboard as guards. As we came alongside, they were not happy about these strange boats coming out of the night. Initially, they were reluctant to let us come aboard. Finally, we convinced them that we were fellow Americans and not pirates or VC saboteurs."

The Marines hauled McNamara and company aboard using rope slings. "We were on the ship; we were safe," McNamara said. "But they hadn't been waiting for us; they didn't expect us. There was no Navy ship anywhere near the mouth of the Mekong. The Navy had simply forgotten."

The ship then made its way to an anchorage off Vung Tau before taking the Vietnamese to Guam, where they stayed in a resettlement camp before being flown to the United States. McNamara and the Americans hitched a ride aboard a Korean PT boat, which took them to the evacuation ship U.S.S. Blue Ridge, which soon sailed for the United States.

The harrowing journey was over. Terry McNamara overcame great odds to deliver his Vietnamese and Americans out of Vietnam. Would he, in retrospect, have done things the same way?

"I can't think of anything else," he said in 1999. "I'd have to do it again. I was being told that I should leave the Vietnamese behind and just take the Americans out. I couldn't do that."

It was a matter of honor. ■