

A Daring Mission Saves 12

Bethesda Photographer Rescues Wife's Kin

By Edward Walsh

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Dick Swanson, a 40-year-old free-lance photographer, left his home in Bethesda last Thursday to make a desperate, last-minute attempt to circumvent international bureaucracy that stretched half way around the world in order to rescue the family of his Vietnamese wife.

Yesterday Swanson, who spent five years in Vietnam as a photographer for Life Magazine, stepped off a United Airlines flight from Los Angeles at Dulles Airport with most of his wife's relatives.

There are 12 of them, ranging from Mrs. Swanson's 60-year-old mother, Mrs. Ngo Thang Lang, to her 2-year-old nephew, Tam.

After briefly embracing his wife Germaine who had stayed behind in Bethesda, Swanson wheeled and began shooting pictures of the Vietnamese who stood in a neat row behind him, anxious looks on their faces.

The happy airport reunion after more than four years of separation climaxed a rescue effort in which Swanson flew on both commercial and military aircraft, commandeered a Vietnamese military

truck and talked his way adroitly around and through several bureaucracies.

Two earlier, more conventional, attempts to get the family out of Saigon had failed.

"The key thing is to get someone from the family there in Vietnam," Mrs. Swanson said as she calmly awaited the return of her husband and family at the airport yesterday. "Otherwise you have to be very lucky or have a lot of money and bribe your way out."

With \$200 in Swanson's pocket when he left last Thursday, bribery was out of the question and, as it turned out, unnecessary. He arrived in Saigon early Saturday afternoon on a China Airline flight from Hong Kong.

Locating his wife's brother-in-law, a South Vietnamese air force colonel who elected to stay behind and who the family hopes now has escaped to Thailand, Swanson rounded up a Vietnamese military truck and went looking for the family.

Finding them, and getting them to Tan-Sonnhut airbase, was relatively easy, Swanson said, despite the fact that on his sec-

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two American servicemen killed by hostile fire in South Vietnam.

Early Sunday morning Swanson said, the paperwork system necessary for refugees to leave Tansonnhut was breaking down and the base itself was mobbed with desperate Vietnamese, many of whom had been waiting for days for the chance to escape.

"I knew there wasn't going to be any more time," Swanson said. "Then I spotted a door marked 'no admittance' and went in."

Behind the door, Swanson found an American official with power to stamp and sign the papers necessary for the family's escape. Flashing his press card, he said he wanted to interview the man. The interview lasted a few minutes, until Swanson said he would have to return to his place in line with the other refugees "unless you (the American official) can help me."

Swanson said he had already "snatched" the required papers and filled them out himself. He showed them to the official, who asked, "are all these your relatives?" Told they were, Swanson said the official—"Bam!"—signed the papers and stamped them.

Thirteen hours after arriv-

ing at Tansonnhut, Mrs. Swanson's family was ready to board a U.S. Air Force plane—one of the last to leave Saigon—when they faced one final danger. Vietnamese military officers stood by the plane's boarding ramp and were taking away all draft age young men, a clear threat to Mrs. Swanson's four draft age brothers.

Thinking quickly again, Swanson told the young men to grab babies that were on an airbase bus with them, hold the babies up to their faces and rush by the military officials. The ruse worked.

It was like that all across the Pacific. In Guam, Swanson said, he "snatched" some more papers, filled them out himself and talked another American official into expediting their move to the next stop, Honolulu. By Tuesday night they were in a motel in Los Angeles and last night in Bethesda.

Left behind, in addition to Mrs. Swanson's brother-in-law, was a sister-in-law who chose not to leave Vietnam with her husband—a final separation caused by the war.

It was the second time the family had fled en masse because of the Indochina war. The first occurred in 1954, nam for the south after when they left North Viet-

Communist forces took over Hanoi.

For Mrs. Swanson's family, the adventure may just be the beginning. They are now in a strange land, living in a four-bedroom home where the Swansons live with their two children. The future is uncertain.

"The first thing Dick always said was don't worry about that, just get them out first," Mrs. Swanson said.

At Dulles, where he was met by some neighbors and friends and where his 3-year-old son, Justin, saw his Vietnamese grandmother for the first time, Swanson emphasized that U.S. military officials had been "fantastic" in helping the refugees all across the Pacific. There was one final foul-up, he recalled, when two marine guards would not allow him and his relatives to leave the Camp Pendleton marine base in California.

By then, Swanson said, he was practiced at dealing with bureaucratic snarls and a marine colonel soon intervened. Swanson said the officer ordered that they be allowed to leave the base and, speaking fluent Vietnamese, told the 12 refugees: "Have a nice trip. I hope we meet again in this small world."



Dick Swanson (center) holds son Justin as his wife Gemmaine (to his immediate left) surveys her flock of rescued relatives.

By Joe Heiberg—The Washington Post