

Nicholas MacNeil, obituary



Nicholas Christopher Howe MacNeil, 85, a retired Foreign Service officer, died at home in Staunton, Va., on May 23, 2025, from complications of Parkinson's disease. Born on Aug. 31, 1939, in New Jersey, Mr. MacNeil and his sister Elizabeth spent their childhood years in Haiti, where their parents lived from 1947 to 1967. He attended Ridley College, a Canadian boarding school, and then Princeton University, followed by four years in the Navy, including two years on a landing ship, tank (LST).

In 1966 Mr. MacNeil joined the Foreign Service, first serving in Guatemala. Then, after eight months of Vietnamese language training, he went to Vietnam for 18 months as a district adviser with the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Afterward, he earned a master's degree in public administration at Harvard Kennedy School in Cambridge, Mass., where he met his wife, Linda Blackwelder.

In 1974 Mr. MacNeil was assigned to Danang to report on security conditions. His wife and 8-month-old daughter, Marcia, joined him. In March 1975, the South Vietnamese government collapsed in Danang, and they were among the last to leave. Mr. MacNeil received the State Department Award for Valor for his role in assisting American civilians and Vietnamese refugees to escape from the city.

Mr. MacNeil's final post was Bogotá. He left the Foreign Service in 1976 to join the Carter-Mondale campaign and became Richard Holbrooke's assistant in Atlanta. When the Carter transition team moved to Washington, D.C., Mr. MacNeil was asked to be their liaison with NASA. In 1980 he reapplied to the Foreign Service and was assigned to a Vietnamese refugee program based in Bangkok, where his family joined him. They had three more overseas postings: New Delhi, Montreal, and Fiji. He retired in 1996.

In his free time, Mr. MacNeil enjoyed renovating a house in Alexandria, Va. He loved sailing: For two summers, he taught sailing at Fishers Island, and in Fiji, he sailed a Hobie Cat. He went on camping trips with his son, John, to the Canadian Rockies and Pacific Northwest. He loved Haiti and felt that his life had been strongly influenced by the spirit and suffering of that country.

In 2001 Mr. MacNeil and his wife moved to Staunton, Va., where he enjoyed the city's cultural life and served on the boards of the Valley Conservation Council, the Staunton

Kiwanis Club, the Staunton Democratic Committee, and Rail Solution, an initiative to reduce truck traffic on Interstate 81.

Mr. MacNeil was predeceased by his parents, Charles and Barbara MacNeil, and by his son, John, who died in 2020. He is survived by his wife of 53 years, Linda Blackwelder MacNeil; his daughter, Marcia, spouse Ricardo Espitia, and their two sons, Timoteo and Ian; his daughter, Laura, and husband Matthew Tolbert; his daughter-in-law, Ruxandra Pond, and her two daughters, Zelda and Isadora; and his sister, Elizabeth Wells.

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