

UNCLASSIFIED

Again, as was done before for Operations EAGLE PULL and FREQUENT WIND, aircraft, aircrews, and support personnel were identified and prepared for deployment.

DEPLOYMENT

On the evening of 13 May 1975, the helicopter task force was deployed from Nakhon Phanom to U-Tapao Royal Thai Naval Base. Three HH-53C helicopters, call sign JOLLY GREEN, of the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (40 ARRS) and six CH-53C helicopters, call sign KNIFE, of the 21st Special Operations Squadron (21 SOS) deployed.

En route to U-Tapao, one of the KNIFE aircraft crashed. Alert search and rescue (SAR) forces were scrambled to the scene, 37 miles west of Nakhon Phanom. KING 21 and two JOLLY GREEN helicopters proceeded to the crash site, but another KNIFE with a doctor arrived first. The doctor determined that none of the 23 persons on board had survived the crash.

The two SAR helicopters were then diverted to U-Tapao to join the other aircraft which were deployed for the Mayaguez recovery. A third JOLLY GREEN at Korat was also deployed to make a total of six HH-53Cs in place at U-Tapao. Two more JOLLY GREENs were directed to join the task force when they became operationally ready. Maintenance and support personnel were deployed with the helicopters. In anticipation of extended flying operations, spare aircrews and additional supplies were sent to U-Tapao on 14 May.

The 3rd Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group (3 ARRG) personnel augmented the battle staff at the United States Support Activities Group, Seventh Air Force (USSAG/7AF) Command Center to provide the commander with expert and timely advice on SAR operations and rescue forces capabilities.

INITIAL OPERATIONS

On the morning of 14 May 1975, an expeditionary force was assembled to board USAF helicopters to be taken to Koh Tang Island to rescue the Mayaguez and its crew. Two KINGs departed Korat at 0400. KING 21 would assume orbit near the Mayaguez and serve as SAR Airborne Mission Commander (AMC). KING 22 was to escort all helicopters to the objective area and serve as air refueling tanker for the JOLLY GREENs.

The initial plan was to insert United States Marines simultaneously on the Mayaguez and Koh Tang Island. The assault was postponed due to the late arrival of the Marines from Okinawa. Both KINGs then

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

assumed orbit in the objective area and served as a backup communications relay through the 3 ARRG Joint Rescue Coordination Center, call sign JOKER, to USSAG/7AF.

Tactical aircraft sank an enemy gunboat near Koh Tang and when survivors were reported in a life raft, two JOLLY GREENs were launched from U-Tapao to attempt the recovery. The survivors were believed to be Cambodians and their rescue would have provided valuable information of the location of the Mayaguez crew. KING 22 left orbit and returned toward U-Tapao to escort the JOLLY GREENs on their 200 mile flight to the SAR area. An unsuccessful search was conducted and, after several air refuelings, both helicopters and KING 22 returned to Thailand. KING 21 had left orbit to join in the search. When no sign of the life raft was found, KING 21 returned to orbit for the remainder of the day. No helicopter assault took place on 14 May.

MAYAGUEZ RECOVERY OPERATIONS

All aircraft and crews were placed on alert for an early morning launch on 15 May. Additional reconnaissance of Koh Tang was conducted on 14 May. Landing zones were selected by the Marines and the operation planned for a first light arrival at the island. The tactics were changed and it was decided to insert Marines simultaneously on Koh Tang Island and on the USS Holt, a destroyer in the vicinity. The Holt would then pull along side the Mayaguez and the Marines would board the captured ship. Tactical aircraft would be on-scene to protect the assault helicopters. The helicopter crews were briefed at 0230 on the unique mission that was to follow.

The unprecedented use of Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service helicopters for an airborne assault began at 0414, 15 May 1975. Six HH-53Cs and five CH-53Cs departed U-Tapao for Koh Tang Island. They were escorted and supported by two KINGs from Korat. The exploits of all Rescue Service aircraft were extraordinary and warrant individual attention. Where possible, these missions are included as separate narratives. The crews of JOLLY GREEN 11 and 43 performed with such extraordinary heroism that they have been nominated for the Air Force Cross.

The first three helicopters, JOLLY GREEN 11, 12, and 13, were to offload Marines on the USS Holt. The remaining helicopters, KNIFE 21, 22, 23, 31, and 32, with JOLLY GREEN 41, 42, and 43, were to insert Marines on the island.

KING 21 departed Korat and proceeded directly to the vicinity of the objective area to maintain orbit and serve as SAR AMC. KING 23 followed shortly thereafter and intercepted the helicopter task force

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

en route to the island. KING 23, commanded by Captain Paul A. Bauer, continued to serve as escort/air refueling tanker until all available fuel was offloaded. The capability of the JOLLY GREENs to air refuel allowed them to take off with less than maximum fuel and more Marines than the KNIFEs. The unique combination of KING/JOLLY GREEN proved extremely valuable in the hours ahead. KING 23 transferred 36,200 pounds of fuel before it was replaced by KING 24.

JOLLY GREEN 11, 12, and 13 successfully offloaded Marines on the USS Holt. At the same time, the remaining helicopters attempted to land on the island. In flights of two, the helicopters proceeded to the small and hazardous landing zones. KNIFE 21 and 22 went to the west landing zone. KNIFE 23 and 31 proceeded to the east landing zone. KNIFE 32 and JOLLY GREEN 41 held off the east side while JOLLY GREEN 42 and 43 held for insertion off the north shore.

While KNIFE 21 was offloading, KNIFE 22 proceeded in. They came under a totally unexpected and devastating barrage of ground fire. KNIFE 22 aborted the insertion attempt and withdrew from the landing zone. KNIFE 21, with one engine out, jettisoned its auxiliary fuel tanks and limped out to sea, where it was ditched about 3/4 of a mile off shore. The three surviving crew members were recovered shortly thereafter by KNIFE 32, which had aborted an attempted insertion on the east landing zone.

At the same time, KNIFE 23 and 31 attempted to insert on the east shore. Both aircraft were shot down immediately. The Marines and crew of KNIFE 23 made it to shore and took cover in the jungle. The surviving crew members and Marines of KNIFE 31, which had exploded and burned 100 yards off shore, swam to safety. The survivors of KNIFE 31 were later rescued by a longboat from the USS Wilson.

JOLLY GREEN 41

JOLLY GREEN 41, commanded by 1Lt Thomas D. Cooper, Jr., and KNIFE 32 attempted to insert in the east landing zone, but were both driven off by highly accurate hostile fire. KNIFE 32 diverted to KNIFE 21 and recovered the three surviving crewmen. JOLLY GREEN 41 attempted to aid in this recovery. KNIFE 32 successfully offloaded its Marines at the west landing zone, but received severe battle damage and was directed to return to U-Tapao.

JOLLY GREEN 41 tried to insert, but was again driven off by ground fire. A third attempt also met with heavy fire and was aborted. After air refueling, JOLLY GREEN 41 made a fourth attempt to offload. The fourth run in was successful in offloading 22 of the 27 Marines before again being forced to withdraw. Mortar rounds landing on all sides forced them to abort this and a subsequent fifth attempt.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

After six hours and five attempts, JOLLY GREEN 41 was directed to return to U-Tapao for battle damage assessments. JOLLY GREEN 41 air refueled with KING 21, who had descended from high orbit, and returned safely to U-Tapao. Severe battle damage grounded the aircraft.

JOLLY GREEN 42

After JOLLY GREEN 41's second unsuccessful attempt, JOLLY GREEN 42 and 43 were committed to the west beach. By flying just above water, they successfully avoided most of the ground fire. JOLLY GREEN 43 landed on the north landing zone and quickly offloaded. JOLLY GREEN 42, commanded by 1Lt Phillip M. Pacini, was to insert at the south landing zone, but aborted the attempt because of the possibility of the Marines being separated from those already on the island. JOLLY GREEN 42 elected to offload at the north landing zone as soon as JOLLY GREEN 43 departed. Upon touchdown, JOLLY GREEN 42 was immediately struck by intense and accurate small arms, automatic weapons, and mortar fire. Through skillful maneuvering, the helicopter was turned tail first to the beach and the Marines were expeditiously offloaded. JOLLY GREEN 42 then proceeded with JOLLY GREEN 43 to U-Tapao. Fuel system damage precluded internal transfer and only a successful air to air refueling with KING 23 saved the aircraft and crew. The severity of the battle damage forced JOLLY GREEN 42 to be grounded at U-Tapao.

JOLLY GREEN 13

At the same time of the island insertion attempts, JOLLY GREEN 13, commanded by 1Lt Charles R. Greer, offloaded its Marines on the USS Holt and was held in the area for SAR. Almost immediately, JOLLY GREEN 13 was directed to recover the crew of KNIFE 23. As soon as JOLLY GREEN 13 started its run in to the crash site, it began receiving ground fire. JOLLY GREEN 13 landed at the beach, turned its aft cargo ramp inland and prepared to onload the KNIFE crew. The crew was unable to reach JOLLY GREEN 13 because of intense and accurate small arms and automatic weapon fire. Under this devastating barrage, JOLLY GREEN 13 withdrew. Fire developed in the left auxiliary tank and left flare case. Fire retardant foam extinguished the tank fire. Braving intense heat, one of the crew manually jettisoned the flare case, an action that probably saved the entire crew and the aircraft. JOLLY GREEN 13 was severely damaged and unable to use all the fuel available. When air refueling was tried, this system was also found inoperative. JOLLY GREEN 13 managed to make Southern Thailand safely and made a precautionary landing. Immediately, a Detachment 12, 40 ARRS, MH-43F, call sign PEDRO, provided support and JOLLY GREEN 13 was able to return to U-Tapao under its own power, some 20 hours after initial take off.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

JOLLY GREEN 11

Thirty minutes after the assault started, three of the five KNIVES were destroyed and the other two severely damaged and out of action. Only three helicopters remained flyable after the initial insertion attempt. JOLLY GREEN 11, 12, and 43. They were later joined by KNIFE 51, 52, and JOLLY GREEN 44. JOLLY GREEN 11, commanded by Lt Donald R. Backlund, began the recovery of the Mayaguez as lead in a three ship formation directed to offload Marines on the USS Holt. The aft helipad was technically too small for an HH-53C. It provided less than two feet lateral and vertical clearance. The transfer was accomplished in a hover with the nose gear on the deck and the tail over the stern of the ship. This turned out to be the easiest part of a long day.

Immediately after offloading, JOLLY GREEN 11 and 12, commanded by Captain Paul L. Jacob, joined with KING 23 to air refuel. The three KNIFE helicopters were down at this time and their status uncertain. What was certain was that KNIFE 22, with 24 souls on board, was badly shot up and limping back to Thailand. KNIFE 32, also severely damaged, was heading back. KING 21 directed JOLLY GREEN 11 and 12 to intercept and escort these helicopters back to friendly soil. Using the maximum speed possible, JOLLY GREEN 11 and 12 caught up to KNIFE 22 and 32, just before 22 lost an engine and made a forced landing on the coast of Thailand. KNIFE 32 was able to continue on alone. JOLLY GREEN 11 quickly landed next to KNIFE 22. All sensitive equipment was removed from the downed aircraft and loaded on JOLLY GREEN 11. JOLLY GREEN 12 flew protective cover overhead during the transfer. The 20 Marines on KNIFE 22 loaded aboard JOLLY GREEN 11 and the crew of KNIFE 22 remained behind to guard the aircraft. They were later replaced by Army guards and returned to U-Tapao. JOLLY GREEN 11 lifted out of the mud flat and, with JOLLY GREEN 12, proceeded to U-Tapao.

At U-Tapao, the returned Marines were offloaded and both aircraft refueled without shutting down engines. Again each aircraft unloaded Marines and headed back to Koh Tang with badly needed reinforcements. Using tactics devised on the spot, JOLLY GREEN 11 and 12 successfully inserted their Marines on the west beach. Both aircraft received numerous hits from small arms fire and returned fire with their mini-guns. JOLLY GREEN 12 remained under fire in order that a severely wounded Marine could be brought to this aircraft for medical evacuation. Both aircraft provided defensive firepower for each other during the insertions. JOLLY GREEN 12 proceeded as fast as possible to U-Tapao while its pararescue men administered emergency medical treatment to the wounded Marine. JOLLY GREEN 11 remained in the vicinity, air refueled, and maintained SAR coverage.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

JOLLY GREEN 11 joined with JOLLY GREEN 43, whose story will follow. These two helicopters were directed to extract the crew of KNIFE 23, who, with a small garrison of Marines, were trapped in the east side of the island and in danger of being overrun. Earlier, rescue attempts had been aborted because of the intense ground fire. JOLLY GREEN 43 made the recovery attempt under the covering fire of JOLLY GREEN 11. However, on this attempt, JOLLY GREEN 43 received deadly, accurate, automatic weapons fire and had to withdraw. JOLLY GREEN 11 turned its white belly up to the beach in an attempt to draw the ground fire away from JOLLY GREEN 43. JOLLY GREEN 11 then escorted the badly damaged JOLLY GREEN 43 to the USS Coral Sea, providing navigational assistance en route. KING 24 also joined in the escort. After a successful recovery, JOLLY GREEN 11 immediately refueled on the ship and returned to the island with two Navy SH-3s. The SH-3s were not equipped to extract under these hostile conditions. JOLLY GREEN 11, relaying directions from KING 21, positioned them on orbit near the island to be used for SAR, if necessary. JOLLY GREEN 11 was the only H-53 helicopter flying in the area at that time.

With night fast approaching, it became extremely important to get the beleaguered Marines and aircrew off the east beach. JOLLY GREEN 11 was joined by JOLLY GREEN 12 and KNIFE 51 to make another extraction attempt. JOLLY GREEN 11 was directed to make the pickup with JOLLY GREEN 12 and KNIFE 51 providing suppressive fire. JOLLY GREEN 11 started a high speed, low altitude run in from the northwest which terminated in a tight turning approach. The pilot skillfully turned the cargo ramp of the aircraft to the beach with the tail almost in the jungle. Twenty Marines and the five crew members quickly boarded the aircraft. These 25 men were snatched from almost certain death or capture. Repeated enemy attempts to rush the aircraft were beaten back by devastating fire of the helicopter's three miniguns. After confirming with the Marine Commander that everyone was onboard, JOLLY GREEN 11 left the beach under heavy enemy automatic weapons fire and proceeded as rapidly as possible to the USS Coral Sea. Pararescue men administered emergency medical treatment to the severely injured flight mechanic of the KNIFE 23 crew and to several wounded Marines. After offloading on the carrier, JOLLY GREEN 11 again refueled with engines running and departed toward the island. En route, KING 24 directed JOLLY GREEN 11 to return to the Coral Sea to change crews. After being airborne almost 14 consecutive hours, 11 of which were under the most hostile and demanding conditions imaginable, JOLLY GREEN 11 had completed its mission. A relief crew returned the aircraft to U-Tapao that night.

JOLLY GREEN 12

JOLLY GREEN 12 successfully recovered a wounded Marine after the second insertion. JOLLY GREEN 43 and KNIFE 51 and 52 attempted to insert immediately before JOLLY GREEN 11 and 12. JOLLY GREEN 43 was

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

successful and went to the aid of the KNIFE 23 crew with JOLLY GREEN 11. KNIFE 51 and 52 were not as lucky. The order had been given to remove all Marines from Koh Tang Island. The crew of the Mayaguez was safe and the ship secured. The mission now was to save the Marines.

KNIFE 51 and 52 both received severe battle damage while KNIFE 51 was removing wounded Marines. JOLLY GREEN 12 was immediately directed to escort these aircraft back to U-Tapao. KING 24 was escorting these helicopters, but was needed to provide air refueling to the JOLLY GREENs at the island. JOLLY GREEN 12 provided navigational assistance for KNIFE 52 to proceed to the site of KNIFE 22, on the beach in Thailand. KNIFE 51, less severely damaged and with wounded Marines was released to proceed directly to U-Tapao for medical assistance. Two pararescue men of the 40 ARRS aboard KNIFE 51 were instrumental in saving the lives of at least two of the wounded.

KNIFE 52, dangerously low on fuel, made an emergency landing near KNIFE 22. JOLLY GREEN 12 quickly recovered the 26 Marines and departed for U-Tapao. Detachment 12 PEDROS provided support for KNIFE 52 and it recovered under its own power the following day.

JOLLY GREEN 12 proceeded directly to U-Tapao where it was met by an ambulance. The wounded Marine was successfully removed to the hospital. A relief crew, commanded by Captain Barry R. Walls, took over JOLLY GREEN 12, unloaded maintenance personnel and a spare JOLLY GREEN crew and proceeded directly to the Coral Sea. Immediately after landing, the aircraft was refueled with engines running and directed to proceed to the island to aid in the recovery of the crew and Marines of KNIFE 23. While JOLLY GREEN 11 attempted the recovery, JOLLY GREEN 12 and KNIFE 51, the only KNIFE left flying, provided protective fire.

After JOLLY GREEN 11's successful extraction, JOLLY GREEN 12 went to the crash site of KNIFE 23 where it was believed the copilot remained. With KNIFE 51 providing cover, JOLLY GREEN 12 established a hover directly over the downed aircraft. Under intense and accurate fire from the island, JOLLY GREEN 12 lowered its jungle penetrator to the water. Hovering just above the spray created by the rotor down wash, the penetrator was maneuvered to the crew entrance door of KNIFE 23. For almost two minutes, this position was maintained. The flight mechanic of JOLLY GREEN 12 was injured in the leg, but stated that the injury was not serious. Assured that no one remained on KNIFE 23, JOLLY GREEN 12 withdrew to the carrier. The flight mechanic received medical assistance from the pararescue men en route. After a successful landing, the crew determined that JOLLY GREEN 12 was severely damaged and it was grounded. Unknown to JOLLY GREEN 12, the copilot of KNIFE 23 had been recovered by JOLLY GREEN 11.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

JOLLY GREEN 43

JOLLY GREEN 43, commanded by Captain Roland W. Purser, completed its initial insertion and escorted the severely damaged JOLLY GREEN 42 back to U-Tapao. At U-Tapao, emergency repairs were quickly completed and, after refueling and loading, JOLLY GREEN 43 departed with KNIFE 52 for Koh Tang. Despite intense and accurate small arms, automatic weapons, and mortar fire, JOLLY GREEN 43 successfully inserted badly needed reinforcements on the island. JOLLY GREEN 43 then joined with JOLLY GREEN 11 to attempt the recovery of the crew and Marines of KNIFE 23. Flying through riot control gas that had fallen far short of the intended target, JOLLY GREEN 43 and 11 made the run in attempt. Heavy automatic weapons fire severed a main fuel line of JOLLY GREEN 43 and injured a pararescue man. With fuel streaming from the broken line, JOLLY GREEN 43 barely made it away from the landing zone, skimming the surface to gain maximum single engine performance. The crew quickly shutdown the engine and stopped the fuel leak. JOLLY GREEN 11 and KING 24 joined to escort the crippled aircraft to the Coral Sea, 70 miles south of the island. JOLLY GREEN 43 made an extremely hazardous, but successful single engine approach and landed on the carrier, touching down with less than 500 pounds of fuel.

Under the direction of the flight mechanic, a temporary fuel line, consisting of rubber hose and tape, was installed. After refueling, JOLLY GREEN 43 headed back to the island to extract more Marines. As darkness approached, JOLLY GREEN 43 landed on the west beach and, under severe ground fire, loaded 54 Marines. After successfully diverting JOLLY GREEN 44, which was attempting to land on the same site, JOLLY GREEN 43 departed again for the carrier with a load very close to its ultimate lifting capability. After offloading and refueling, JOLLY GREEN 43 again returned to the island, but by that time, all Marines had been extracted. JOLLY GREEN 43 joined with KING 23 and JOLLY GREEN 11 and 44, and headed back to Thailand. After over 16 consecutive hours of flying and five separate approaches to the highly defended island, JOLLY GREEN 43 terminated safely at U-Tapao.

JOLLY GREEN 44

JOLLY GREEN 44, commanded by 1Lt Robert D. Blough, joined the helicopter task force late in the afternoon. The aircraft had just been delivered from Nakhon Phanom, and, after maintenance and fueling, was committed to the extraction of the Marines on Koh Tang.

En route, JOLLY GREEN 44 refueled with KING 23 and was directed to hold north of the island with JOLLY GREEN 43. Shortly thereafter, JOLLY GREEN 44 was committed to the west landing zone. Due to darkness,

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

the entire high speed, low level run in had to be made on instruments. Although the crew had never seen the island in the daylight, JOLLY GREEN 44 was directly on target. JOLLY GREEN 43, which had been committed to the same landing zone just prior, flashed their landing lights and JOLLY GREEN 44 aborted the approach. After JOLLY GREEN 43 departed, a second attempt was made, but was forced back by enemy fire. The third attempt was successful and JOLLY GREEN 44 landed with its tail on the beach and nose in the water. JOLLY GREEN 44 unloaded 35 Marines. Under covering fire from its own miniguns, JOLLY GREEN 44 departed the site and proceeded to the USS Holt, the nearest ship. Again, completely unfamiliar with the ship, in total darkness, and without the aid of lights, the nearly overgrossed helicopter made a successful approach to the undersized helopad. In a hover with the nose gear on the deck of the ship and the tail hanging over the stern, the Marines were transferred safely. JOLLY GREEN 44 returned to the island, and, again under intense ground fire, made a successful approach and landing—37 Marines, including four wounded, were recovered. One Marine, who was hanging from the tail ramp as the helicopter departed, was bodily pulled into the aircraft by a crew member. Emergency medical treatment was administered to the wounded en route to the Coral Sea. After offloading and refueling, JOLLY GREEN 44 again returned to the island, but KNIFE 51 had recovered the final contingent of Marines. JOLLY GREEN 44 joined with JOLLY GREEN 11 and 43, and with KING 23, returned to U-Tapao. In less than six hours, JOLLY GREEN 44 had successfully recovered 72 Marines that might not have survived the night on Koh Tang.

The performance and support provided by the KING aircraft is often overlooked. As did the JOLLY GREENs, all KINGs performed with exceptional heroism. It is fitting that some of their accomplishments be mentioned separately.

KING 21

KING 21, commanded by Lt Colonel Walter L. Lindsey, arrived on-scene before the first helicopters. As SAR AMC, he was responsible for directing all rescue operations. When the first helicopters attempted to land Marines on Koh Tang, three were shot down and KING 21 went into action. Immediately after the first aircraft was downed, transmissions on UHF guard frequency became innumerable. KING 21 directed all aircraft to cease transmissions on guard and finally opened communication channels to the survivors. KING 21 quickly secured the release of A-7 tactical aircraft from the Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center, and proceeded to execute recovery of the crew of KNIFE 23. After directing JOLLY GREEN 11, 12, 13, and 41 to KING 23 for air refueling, KING 21 began at least two separate SARs. JOLLY GREEN 11 and 12 were assigned to escort

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

the badly damaged KNIFE 22 and 32 to U-Tapao. JOLLY GREEN 13 was directed to attempt the recovery of the KNIFE 23 crew. Realizing the situation depended on the availability of fuel for the JOLLY GREENs, KING 21 requested JOKER to launch an additional tanker immediately. KING 23 was escorting battle damaged helicopters to Thailand and was unable to refuel JOLLY GREEN 41 at that time. KING 21 descended from orbit to transfer critically needed fuel to JOLLY GREEN 41. JOLLY GREEN 13, who had received serious damage while attempting the rescue of KNIFE 23, was then intercepted and escorted toward Thailand. Battle damage precluded successful air refueling and, after it was determined that JOLLY GREEN 13 could safely make Thailand, KING 21 returned to high orbit to better conduct SAR operations. KING 21 was replaced by KING 22 after over nine hours of SAR AMC for the operation.

KING 24

KING 24, commanded by Captain Edwin A. Sechez, took over air refueling and escort from KING 23. They immediately intercepted JOLLY GREEN 11 and 43 en route to the island on their second insertion sortie. At 2000 feet, KING 24 successfully refueled both helicopters despite the low cloud ceiling and the constant threat of enemy gunboats known to be operating in the area. After completing these refuelings, KING 24 completed a visual rendezvous with JOLLY GREEN 12 which was returning from its second insertion. After refueling JOLLY GREEN 12, KING 24 intercepted and escorted KNIFE 52, who was returning to U-Tapao with severe battle damage and low fuel. KING 24 provided navigational assistance for KNIFE 52 until JOLLY GREEN 12 assumed the escort. KING 24 immediately returned to the objective area.

JOLLY GREEN 11 and 43 made their first unsuccessful attempt to recover the Marines and aircrew of KNIFE 23. Trailing fuel and with one engine shutdown, JOLLY GREEN 43 egressed toward the carrier. KING 24, knowing the helicopter's fuel was critically low, intercepted JOLLY GREEN 43 and flew the last 40 miles to the carrier at 95 knots, in close trail, and with air refueling hoses extended. Had JOLLY GREEN 43 needed fuel immediately, KING 24 was in position to complete the transfer. Despite the dangerously slow air speed and the low, exposed altitude, KING 24 escorted JOLLY GREEN 43 to the carrier and a successful recovery.

KING 22 AND KING 23

KING 22, commanded by Major John L. Debevec, replaced KING 21 as AMC. KING 23 returned to the area with a new crew commanded by Captain Donald B. Bortner. KING 23 replaced KING 24 as refueler/escort in the objective area. KING 23 assumed an orbit over the Coral Sea and

UNCLASSIFIED

AIR FORCE

PUBLISHED BY THE AIR FORCE MAGAZINE

September 1991, Vol. 74, No. 9

Valor

By John L. Frisbee, Contributing Editor

The *Mayaguez* Incident

It was a "peacetime" military operation conducted by an ad hoc force of airmen, Marines, and sailors.

The last US military forces left South Vietnam in April 1975 in what President Gerald Ford termed "a humiliating withdrawal." US military involvement in southeast Asia had ended. Or had it?

On May 12, 1975, the Cambodian Navy seized an American merchant ship, *SS Mayaguez*, in international waters off Cambodia's coast. The ship was being towed to Kompong Som on the mainland when word reached the White House. President Ford insisted that this not become another *Pueblo* incident. Beyond that, it was important to counter a growing feeling among US allies and adversaries that this country was "a helpless giant," an unreliable ally lacking resolve.

It was far from the simple military operation it might seem. The US had no diplomatic relations with the Khmer Rouge, which had taken over Cambodia a few weeks earlier. US forces in Thailand were inadequate for ground action against Cambodia. There were no US warships in the area.

The President ordered the carrier *Coral Sea* and other Navy ships to steam at full speed to the Gulf of Thailand and US military planes in the Philippines to find the *Mayaguez* and keep it in sight. A Navy P-3 located the ship anchored off Kho Tang Island, 40 miles from the Cambodian shore. Several monitoring aircraft were damaged by fire from the island. This would be no picnic.

A battalion-sized Marine landing team was airlifted from Okinawa to U Tapao AB in Thailand, some 300 miles from Kho Tang. The destroyer *Holt* was directed to seize the *Mayaguez*, while Marines, airlifted and supported by the Air Force, were to rescue the crew, at least some of whom were believed to be held on Kho Tang. Concurrently, the *Coral Sea* would launch four bombing strikes on military targets near Kompong Som to convince the Khmer Rouge the US was serious.

On the morning of May 15, 175 Marines of a planned 600-man force were flown by helicopters of the 3d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group and the 21st Special Operations Squadron from U Tapao to Kho Tang, expecting only light resistance. They were met by a force of 150-200 heavily armed Khmer Rouge troops, who shot down three of the first eight helicopters and damaged two others. About 100 Marines were put ashore, but it soon became evident that substantial reinforcements on the ground would be needed. The assault force was supported by Air Force A-7s, F-4s, OV-10s, and AC-

130s, but the attack was not going well.

While the firefight on Kho Tang was at its height, carrier bombing of targets on the mainland apparently convinced the Khmer Rouge leaders that they had underestimated US resolve. A fishing boat was seen approaching the destroyer *Wilson* with white flags flying. Aboard were the 39 crewmen of the *Mayaguez*. The Marines on Kho Tang were ordered to disengage and withdraw. However, Khmer Rouge troops, perhaps directed by a local commander, continued the battle, turning from defense to attack as Air Force helicopters moved through heavy fire to withdraw US forces. The last of 230 Marines were not evacuated until after dark on the night of May 15. As they had throughout the Vietnam War, helicopter crews performed with unsurpassed heroism. Four CH-53 and HH-53 crewmen were awarded the Air Force Cross, the last to be accorded that honor in Southeast Asia: 1st Lt. Donald R. Backlund, 1st Lt. Richard C. Brim, SSgt. John D. Harston, and Capt. Rowland W. Purser.

Lieutenant Backlund began his day by putting a contingent of Marines on the destroyer *Holt* to assist in retaking the *Mayaguez*. He then landed the rest of his Marines on Kho Tang in the face of heavy fire. Early in the afternoon, Backlund escorted a damaged HH-53 to the *Coral Sea*. He returned to Kho Tang and recovered several wounded Marines and downed airmen at dusk, despite continuous ground fire and a grenade attack. Backlund had been flying since before dawn.

Lieutenant Brim flew his helicopter through a curtain of small arms and automatic weapons fire to land a group of Marines on the island. He courageously held his position, while enemy fire perforated his aircraft, until four seriously wounded Marines were aboard. Later he evacuated an aircraft load of Marines who were under attack and about to be overrun.

Sergeant Harston was a flight mechanic on a CH-53 in the first landing wave. His aircraft was hit and crashed in flames. Although wounded, Harston rescued three survivors from the burning helicopter and gave them covering fire as they swam away from shore. He reentered the CH-53 to rescue another wounded Marine and kept two shot-up leathernecks afloat with his damaged life jacket until they were picked up by a destroyer three hours later.

Captain Purser landed 29 Marines on the island after being driven off in his first attempt. Returning to U Tapao, he picked up another group of Marines and flew them to Kho Tang. While evacuating wounded, his helicopter was severely damaged by enemy fire. He flew to the *Coral Sea*, helped make temporary repairs, then returned to the island, picked up 54 Marines, and carried them to the *Coral Sea* with one engine of his HH-53 shot out. Eighteen Marines and airmen were killed or missing in the assault and withdrawal from Kho Tang. Twenty-three others were killed in a helicopter crash en route from Hakhon Phanom to U Tapao, but the objectives of the operation were achieved. The *Mayaguez* and its crew had been rescued, though at high cost.

The *Mayaguez* incident is no more than a footnote in most histories of the period. It and the men who carried out the rescue deserve better than that. At a time when its resolve was in doubt, the US showed the world that it would pay whatever price was necessary to protect its citizens and preserve its national honor.

Published September 1991. For presentation on this web site, some Valor articles have been amended for accuracy.

Robert LaPointe

From: "John Cassidy" <jcassidy@alaska.net>
 To: "Robert LaPointe" <rlapointe@gci.net>
 Sent: Monday, October 23, 2000 9:27 AM
 Subject: FW: Mayaguez - Richard Vandegeer's memorial
 FYI

v/r

John

-----Original Message-----

From: Jim Henthorn [mailto:jhenthorn@home.com]
 Sent: Monday, October 23, 2000 8:44 AM
 To: DroopstopInn@pedroairrescuechopper.net
 Subject: Mayaguez - Richard Vandegeer's memorial service

As many of you know, 2nd Lt. Richard Vandegeer is the last man on the Wall. He is also a member of my squadron. I *WILL* be attending. Anyone else in the area is welcome to join me.

>From one of the first Dust Devils to one of the last of that era,
 Hand Salute!
 Two!

A round in his memory

Dusty, Jim Henthorn 21st S.O.S. Nov. '67 - May '69
 Knife/Dusty NKP RTAFB; China Post #1, AL, In Exile
 ACA L2850; VHCMA L0444; ICQ #2144451
 TLC-B BOD; E-mail: jhenthorn@home.com
 Homepage: <http://www.nexus.net/~911gfx/vietnam.html>

-----Original Message-----

From: John Warren
 Subject: Mayaguez - Richard Vandegeer's memorial service

Mayaguez veteran, Howard "Al" Corson, will be escorting the body of his Knife 31 co-pilot, Richard Vandegeer to its final resting place at Arlington Cemetery. A memorial service will be held at 1:00 P.M. EST on October 27th at Arlington National Cemetery. The people at ANC request that you check in at the Administration Building before 12:30 P.M. the 27th. They open at 8:00 A.M. You will need to provide your own transportation from the Admin Building the gravesite. While we're unable to attend the service due to our travel schedules, all of us here at Henninger Productions send our heartfelt condolences to the friends and family of Richard Vandegeer and to the families of all the victims of the Mayaguez Incident and earnest hopes for the long overdue return of the missing.

RICHARD VANDEGEER

2LT - O1 - Air Force - Reserve
27 year old Married, Caucasian, Male
Born on Jan 11, 1948
From COLUMBUS, OHIO
His tour of duty began on May 15, 1975
Casualty was on May 17, 1975
CAMBODIA
Hostile, died while missing
HELICOPTER - CREW
AIR LOSS, CRASH AT SEA
Body was not recovered
Religion
PROTESTANT
Panel 01W - - Line 132



[Personal Comments or Pictures - Click Here](#)



CLICK HERE FOR YOUR
FREE 'ELECTRONIC RUBBING'

Return to
The VietNam Veterans Memorial

Or return to
The VietNam Veterans Memorial

(Without Music)

[Donations](#)

[Search Tips](#)

[Guestbook](#)

Search engine script by :

TECHNOTRADE
ONLINE SOLUTIONS

Sponsors of The Wall Page



CITATION TO ACCOMPANY THE AWARD OF

THE SILVER STAR
(FIRST OAK LEAF CLUSTER)

TO

JOSEPH S. STANALAND

Staff Sergeant Joseph S. Stanaland distinguished himself by gallantry in connection with military operations against an opposing armed force on Koh Tang Island in the Gulf of Thailand on 15 May 1975. On that date, Sergeant Stanaland was the Pararescue Specialist of a HH-53C helicopter which flew three sorties spanning more than fourteen hours. Sergeant Stanaland and fellow crew members placed United States Marines aboard the destroyer escort USS Holt and then escorted a damaged aircraft to friendly territory where they recovered its contingent of United States Marines. They then delivered a contingent of United States Marines to the island despite intensive hostile ground fire. They remained close to the island and provided protective fire for another aircraft and escorted it to safety. Later in the day, they returned to the island and again braved heavy hostile fire to successfully remove a group of United States personnel. This courageous action aided in the recovery of the SS Mayaguez and its crew. By his gallantry and devotion to duty, Sergeant Stanaland has reflected great credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

1975Mar-
Jun 75

ARRS personnel assisted in the recovery of bodies and equipment from the crash of a C-141 in the Olympic Mountains, Washington, on 21 March 1975.

12 Apr 75

Eagle Pull. Eight HH-53s and three HC-130s from the 40th and 56th ARR Squadrons, respectively, participated in Eagle Pull, the evacuation of United States personnel from Phnom Penh, Cambodia. One HH-53 inserted a combat control team prior to the evacuation and two HH-53s removed the last 15 military personnel from Phnom Penh following the completion of the evacuation. The Joint Rescue Coordination Center (JRCC) operated by the 3d ARR Group at Nakhon Phanom, exercised operational control of rescue forces. There were no ARRS injuries or casualties although two HH-53s incurred hits from small caliber ground fire.

29 Apr 75

Frequent Wind. Eight HH-53s and three HC-130s of the 40th and 56th Squadrons, respectively, participated in Frequent Wind, the evacuation of United States personnel from Saigon, Vietnam. Two of the HH-53s airlifted 362 evacuees from Saigon to the USS *Midway*. Both aircraft returned enemy ground fire. The HC-130s provided command and control communications and aerial refueling. The 3d ARR Group coordinated rescue operations. No ARRS personnel were injured.



Evacuees from Saigon aboard USS Midway.

13 May-
15 May 75

Mayaguez Incident and Assault on Koh Tang Island. In response to the capture of the SS *Mayaguez* and her crew at sea on 13 May, and after diplomatic measures had been ineffective, President Ford initiated military action. ARRS provided seven HH-53s and

1975 (cont)

13 May-
15 May 75
(cont)

four HC-130s in concert with other United States forces, notably the United States Marine Corps. During operations which lasted 18 hours and 28 minutes, ARRS flew 19 sorties and a total of 70.2



(Top photo) United States Marine and USAF pararescuemen climb aboard an HH-53 during the Assault on Koh Tang Island.

(Right photo) Life-ring from the SS Mayaguez is hung at the Rescue Museum, Kirtland AFB, New Mexico, by Major General Ralph S. Brunkens (left) and Master Sergeant Bill Willingham.



hours. The HH-53s inserted 69 Marines on the USS Holt and 184 on Koh Tang Island. The HH-53s extracted 145 Marines and five downed United States Air Force crewmen from Koh Tang. Two ARRS personnel were wounded-in-action, but no ARRS personnel were killed-in-action. Six of the seven HH-53s sustained battle damage. Later, both Captains Roland W. Purser and Donald R. Backlund were awarded the Air Force Cross.

Subject: New Mayaguez Website for Seized at Sea: Situation Critical**Date:** Fri, 4 Aug 2000 11:39:45 -0400**From:** "John Warren" <jwarren@henninger.com>**To:** "John Warren" <jwarren102@home.com>

Henninger Productions is pleased to announce a permanent presence on the World Wide Web devoted to the **SEIZED AT SEA: SITUATION CRITICAL**. www.Henninger.com/Mayaguez includes rare photographs, previously classified (secret) footage not included in the film, the program's script, a portion of the original music score, and other Mayaguez resources.

"The launch of a Web presence for **SEIZED AT SEA: SITUATION CRITICAL** is important to Henninger's goal of providing content across multiple platforms," said Steven J. Schupak, Henninger's Vice-President in Charge of Production. "As we develop new properties we look for content that has value in other media. We're expanding Henninger's reach by utilizing that content in DVD and Hi-Definition formats, and now on the Web."

SEIZED AT SEA: SITUATION CRITICAL relives events that began on May 12, 1975, just two weeks after the last U.S. forces left Vietnam. On that day Cambodian Khmer Rouge forces seized the merchant marine vessel *S.S. Mayaguez*, the last merchant ship to leave the beleaguered Saigon, igniting an international crisis that is considered one of most important events in Gerald Ford's presidency. Forty Americans had been taken captive, their fate unknown, when Ford convened the National Security Council and decided on a swift military response to punish the Khmer Rouge and rescue the crew. The United States sent more than 200 Marines to invade the island where the crew was believed to be held - Koh Tang - where they met unexpectedly fierce resistance. The Khmer Rouge shot down three U.S. helicopters; Marines who made it to shore were pinned down on the beaches, fighting for their lives. What was not known while the battle raged was that the Khmer Rouge released the Mayaguez crew from a nearby island. The crisis went from bad to worse as the mission shifted to the rescue of the Marines still trapped on Koh Tang. In the end, 41 U.S. soldiers gave their lives to save the men of the *S.S. Mayaguez* who tragically, weren't even on the island the Marines attacked.

SEIZED AT SEA: SITUATION CRITICAL previously secret footage, voice recordings, photographs of the events and personal accounts from President Ford and Henry Kissinger, as well as those of the U.S. Marine survivors and Khmer Rouge participants in the tragic events and bloody battle of the Mayaguez crisis. Other interviews in this authoritative account include Brent Scowcroft and James Schlesinger, who were members of the National Security Council and new evidence suggesting that some Marines may have been left alive on the island of Koh Tang.

SEIZED AT SEA: SITUATION CRITICAL was filmed on location at Koh Tang Island, Cambodia by Henninger Productions of Arlington, Virginia includes using a combination of Super 16mm film and Hi-Definition Video (HDTV). Brian J. Kelly is Executive Producer, Writer and Director; Steven S. Schupak is Executive in Charge of Production; William K. Howard is Producer and Editor.

Established in 1995, Henninger Productions and Henninger Development & Distribution together develop, produce, represent, and distribute awards winning, high quality original television programming which it licenses both domestically and internationally for broadcast and home video. These divisions are backed by one of the country's most successful post production, audio, film lab and graphics organizations: Henninger Media Services, whose clients include ABC, CBS, Discovery Communications, PBS, National Geographic Television, The Martin Agency, Showtime Networks and Circuit City Stores. For further information contact Steven Schupak, Vice-President in Charge of Production, at (703) 243-3444 or go to www.henninger.com. Henninger is located at 2601-A Wilson Boulevard, Arlington, VA 22201.

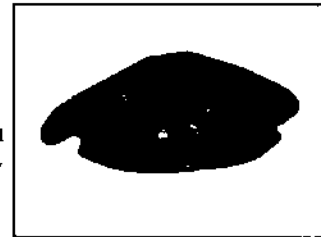
The Pararescue Jumper (PJ)



A1C William H. Pitsenbarger, a PJ who participated in more than 300 rescue missions, is shown putting on parachute, scuba tanks and other equipment for a jump into water. He was killed in Vietnam and posthumously was awarded the Air Force Cross. In Vietnam, PJs--all volunteers--earned more decorations per capita than any other group of USAF personnel.

There is a another display about A1C Pitsenbarger in the Museum's Vietnam History Gallery.

Trademark of the PJ, the maroon beret with ARRS "flash." The donor, CMSgt. Wayne L. Fisk, was a member of the USAF primary recovery team for Apollo space missions VIII, IX, and X, served four tours of duty in SEA as a PJ, and was involved in the attempted rescue of POWs thought to be held at the Son Tay prison camp, earning a Silver Star.



He earned a second one for participation in the recovery of the merchant ship Mayaguez seized by Cambodian forces, the rescue of the crew, and the extraction of U.S. Marines from the island of Koh Tang. As the last man off the island after returning enemy fire, he probably became the last American serviceman to engage in ground combat with Communist forces in the Vietnam War. He carried this beret during that operation; the badge, or "flash," is from another beret he wore during his last tour of duty in Southeast Asia.



Pararescue jumper SSgt. Joseph S. Stanaland (right in photo), and a Marine run for an HH-53 helicopter on Koh Tang Island, Cambodia, during the operation to recover the US-registered merchant ship Mayaguez and crew seized by Cambodian naval forces on May 12, 1975. Six of seven HH-53s involved were damaged and two crewmen were wounded.

The Rescues of Col. Brett and Capt. Young

[USAF Rescue main page](#)

The following is a copy of the recommendation for medals for one Jolly crew of the Mayaguez operation. It is reflective of all those who participated in this operation.

Jolly Green 43 (Captain Purser)

Subject: Recommendation for Decoration for Heroism

The following information is provided for your consideration and action for the award of the appropriate decorations.

- a. During joint operations resulting in the recovery of the SS Mayaguez and return of her crew, the crew of HH-53C Jolly Green 43, consisting of Captain Roland W. Purser, aircraft commander; First Lieutenant Robert P. Gradle, co-pilot; Technical Sergeant Billy D. Willingham, flight engineer; Technical Sergeant Peter S. Harding, pararescuer; Sergeant Thomas J. Bateson, pararescuer; Airman First Class Dennis W. McKiver, pararescuer, displayed extraordinary heroism in military operations against an opposing armed force on and near Koh Tang Island, Gulf of Thailand, on 15 May 1975.
- b. On that date Captain Purser and his crew were tasked with the insertion of twenty-nine United States Marines on Koh Tang Island as number two in a flight of two. He and his crew arrived off the island to learn that three of the four CH-53's tasked with the initial insertion of U.S. Marines had been shot down. One exploded on the eastern landing zone and two others going down in the waters close offshore. A fourth CH-53 was badly shot up prior to insertion and pulled off for the Thailand coastline. Jolly Green 42 was informed by their flight leader, that they would attempt simultaneous insertions on the two western landing zones. Captain Purser began his run in at about 0615. Jolly Green 43 was forced to abort the approach by accurate and intense small arms and automatic weapons fire, sustaining repeated hits in the attempt. Informed by his crew that Jolly Green 42's second attempt at insertion was successful and aware that Jolly 42 had suffered heavy battle damage in the process, Captain Purser diverted to the second western landing zone, successfully discharging his Marines. Sergeants Harding and Bateson and Airman McKiver suppressed ground fire throughout the two approaches despite the fact that the left hand minigun had jammed, forcing Airman McKiver to use his AR-15. Following insertion, Jolly Green 43 escorted Jolly 42 back to U-Tapao where Jolly 42 was grounded because of battle damage. Captain Purser's crew refueled and loaded with Marines for a second insertion. Sergeant Bateson repaired his minigun with parts cannibalized off of Jolly 42. Jolly 43 departed U-Tapao in formation with Knife 52 at 0930. Captain Purser assumed flight lead, arriving off of Kho Tang at 1130. Aware that Knife 52 was unable to refuel in flight and was low on fuel, Captain Purser elected to stand off while Knife 52 attempted insertion. While waiting his turn to run in to the landing zone, Lt. Gradle coordinated the flight activities through Cricket (ABCCC). A few minutes later, Knife 52 had been forced to discontinue efforts to insert his Marines by accurate and intense ground fire around the western LZ's. Knife 52 departed with battle damage and bingo fuel at 1205. Captain Purser and his crew unhesitatingly volunteered to attempt to insert their Marines. They succeeded on their first attempt in spite of intense small arms fire, automatic weapons fire, and incoming mortar rounds on the landing zone. Captain Purser's crew shot their way into and shot their way out of the landing zone with almost continuous suppressive fire from all three of the helicopters mini-guns. They returned fire from weapons located a mere 50 yards of the helicopter. Jolly Green 43 sustained numerous hits. This was one of the last troop insertions of the operation, providing the Marine force on the ground with badly needed manpower at a critical time. Remaining on scene despite battle damage, Captain Purser's crew volunteered to begin extracting isolated groups of Marines on the eastern landing zones. Preceded by an A-7 flight dropping riot control agents, Jolly 43 initiated a low level run-in at 1420. After locating the eastern LZ despite an extremely confusing tactical situation and the confining effects of their gas masks, Jolly Green 43's crew discovered that the gas had fallen short, missing the LZ area entirely and afforded them no protection. By now, the number one mini-

gun had jammed again, this time for good, forcing Sergeant Harding to rely on his AR-15 for protection of the left side of the helicopter. With full knowledge of the desperate situation of the Marines in the LZ, Captain Purser and his crew elected to continue the approach despite the lack of gas cover. As their helicopter entered a hover, intense ground fire erupted. Additional battle damage was sustained from small arms, automatic weapons fire, and mortar fragments. A 12.7mm round penetrated the #1 engine fuel line causing a massive leak. Sergeant Bateson on the ramp minigun was hit and knocked down by a mortar fragment that struck him in the left shoulder. The number two jammed during the approach, leaving only the ramp in operation. With the main fuel line punctured, the number one engine unwound, going immediately to zero torque. Raw fuel under pressure began venting into the rear cabin. Informed of the situation by Sergeant Harding and Airman McKiver and aware that Sergeant Willingham and Lt Gradle were coolly dealing with the failed engine, Captain Purser, in a cabin display of flying skill, all the while under intense fire, nursed his stricken helicopter out of the LZ, obtaining the maximum power from the only remaining engine. Having shut down the number one engine and stopped the fuel leak under Sergeant Willingham's guidance, Jolly Green 43 pulled back under escort from Jolly 11. Aware of the critical tactical situation back at Koh Tang Island, Captain Purser diverted to the USS Coral Sea, making a single engine landing at 1545, landing with only 500 pounds of fuel remaining. With Sergeant Willingham's assistance, US Navy personnel effected emergency repairs to the ruptured fuel line with rubber hosing and duct tape. Captain Purser and his crew then returned to Koh Tang as soon as repairs were completed despite the still unknown extent of other battle damage to their aircraft. Jolly Green 43 departed the Coral Sea at 1700, arriving back at Koh Tang at about 1730. They were to be committed in the final effort to withdraw the remaining Marines from the island in the rapidly fading twilight. Facing ground fire which was still accurate and at times as intense as earlier in the day, Jolly 43 extracted 54 Marines on their first attempt, sustaining numerous additional hits in the process, including a 7.62 round in the main rotor spar. While on the ground loading the Marines, Sergeant Harding and Airman McKiver responded to the constant ground fire, using the one remaining and AR-15's to maximum effect. As the Marines were on-loading, Lt Gradle while monitoring all radio channels, in addition to the intercom, realized that another helicopter was inbound to the LZ they were sitting on. He briefly turned on his helicopter's searchlight allowing the inbound helicopter to avoid crashing into Jolly 43 and its now full load of Marines. His actions prevented a catastrophe that would probably have ended the operation. After off-loading 54 Marines on the Coral Sea, Jolly 43 once more refueled and returned to the scene. Upon arriving, they found that the last of the Marines had just been extracted. In the course of this operation, the crew of Jolly Green 43 logged over 16 hours of flying time, during four sorties. They had made two opposed assault landings, one opposed extraction, and one attempted extraction during which they were forced off scene after losing an engine due to battle damage. They had received battle damage on every sortie, except their last.

- c. Through extraordinary heroism, incredible tenacity, magnificent airmanship and almost unbelievable aggressiveness in the face of the enemy, despite repeated and severe damage to their aircraft, the crew of Jolly Green 43 reflected the highest credit upon themselves and the United States Air Force.

What a way to end the war.

Capture and Release of SS Mayaguez by Khmer Rouge forces in May 1975

Beginning in 1965, the SS **Mayaguez** sailed a regular route for Sea-Land Services in support of American forces in Southeast Asia: **Hong Kong -- Sattahip, Thailand -- Singapore**. On May 7, 1975, about a week after the fall of Saigon, Mayaguez left Hong Kong on a routine voyage.

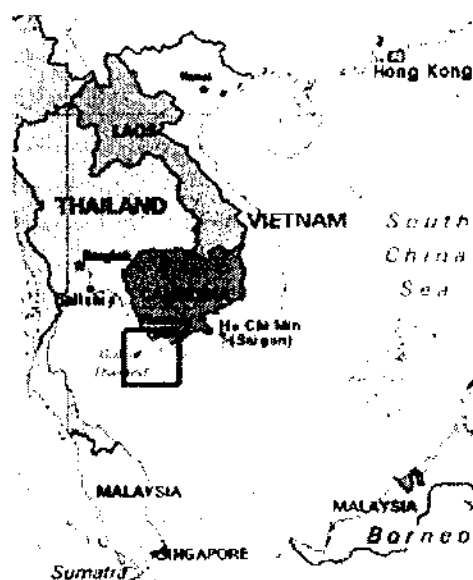
She was launched in April 1944 as SS **White Falcon**, a C2-S-AJ1 (U.S. Maritime Commission) built by North Carolina Shipbuilding Company of Wilmington, NC.

After World War II, she was renamed Santa Eliana. In 1960, she was lengthened and widened by Maryland Shipbuilding and Drydock and converted into a container ship. She could carry 382 containers below and 94 on deck. **She was the first all-container U.S. flag ship in foreign trade.** She was renamed SS Sea in 1964, and SS Mayaguez in 1965.

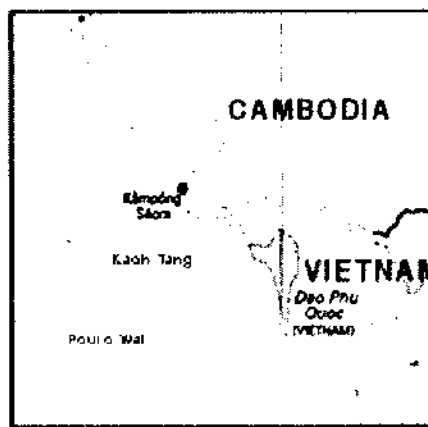


SS Ponce, sister ship of the SS Mayaguez [photo from Sawyer and Mitchell]

On **May 12, 1975** the SS Mayaguez was in a regular shipping lane in the Gulf of Siam about 60 miles from the coast of Cambodia, but only about 8 miles from **Poulo Wai** (Kao Wai), an island claimed by Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. There were many small boats about. Suddenly, a few American-made PCF Swift gunboats headed from Poulo Wai towards the Mayaguez. At 2 PM, a 76-mm shot was fired across her bow.



Southeast Asia. Planned route of SS



Detail of Cambodian coast showing

The Marines showed the MSC mariners photos of the Mayaguez and discussed plans to retake the ship. First Officer Harriman told the Marines they could have the ship under way within 2 to 6 hours after boarding -- if nothing was damaged.

In a three pronged attack:

- Marines were to overpower Cambodian soldiers believed to be aboard the Mayaguez, allowing the MSC crewmen to prepare and sail the ship to safety.
- Marines in helicopters were to make an amphibious assault on **Kaoh Tang** island.
- Navy aircraft from the carrier **USS Coral Sea** were to strike military targets in the mainland Kompong Som area.



Just before boarding the SS Mayaguez, USNS Greenville Victory First Officer Clinton Harriman (left) Second Engr. Michael Saltwick (right) discuss the boarding operation with USS Holt skipper Cmdr. Robert Peterson (center) [U.S. Navy photo from **Sealift**]

At 3 AM on May 15, the Marines, an Army linguist, 6 volunteer USAF bomb disposal experts, 6 sailors from USS Duluth, and the 6 MSC mariners boarded 3 helicopters bound for the **USS Harold E. Holt**, which was to provide a boarding platform for the assault. The CH-53s were too big for the Holt's helicopter pad, so the men in one helicopter clambered down rope ladders; others went down the cargo ramp as the helicopters touched down only their rear wheels.



USS Harold E. Holt alongside the **SS Mayaguez** [U.S. Navy photo from **Sealift**]

Boarding the SS Mayaguez

Air Force planes dropped tear gas on the Mayaguez in advance of the boarding. USS Holt maneuvered alongside and 48 Marines stormed over the side like swashbuckling pirates. They found no one aboard.

About 8 AM the MSC mariners, wearing gas masks, boarded the Mayaguez . Within 5 minutes, they had the emergency diesel generator running. At 8:20 AM the Marines raised the American flag.

infantry entrenched in bunkers in the 1000 feet of jungle between them. A-7D Corsairs provided cover, but the Mayaguez crew was thought to be in a building directly by the gun emplacements.

At 11:30 AM, 100 more marines landed. The plan called for 250 marines in the second wave, but by then there were only 4 helicopters available. Then word came of the safe arrival of the Mayaguez crew on the USS Wilson and the marines planned their withdrawal. Khmer reinforcements coming in from the south were stopped by 15,000 pound BLU-82 bombs.

After the last helicopter left around 8 PM, a head count showed 3 marines were left behind on the island. In 1999, Department of Defense investigators found evidence to indicate one of the Marines was killed a few days later while trying to steal food from the Khmer Rouge. The other two were captured within a few days, executed, and buried on **Kaoh Tang** island.

The final U.S. tally for the assault:

	Killed	Wounded	Missing	Non-battle deaths
Army	0	0	0	0
Navy/Marine Corps	13	44	3	0
Air Force	2	6	0	23*
U.S. total	15	50	3	23

* Crash of helicopter carrying Combat Security Police Squadron in Thailand -- due to mechanical failure

The 6 volunteers from the USNS Greenville Victory were awarded the **Merchant Marine Distinguished Service Medal** and the **Navy Distinguished Civilian Service Medal**.

In accepting his medal, **Hermينو Rivera** stated, "I'm glad to have been able to do something for my country, and I wouldn't hesitate to volunteer in the future."

The reason for the unexpected release of the Mayaguez crew has never been fully understood; among the many theories are successful intervention by China or Israel.

The SS Mayaguez was scrapped in 1979.

Sources:

"Six Brave Men," Howard L. Rosenberg, *Sealift*, July 1975, U.S. Navy Military Sealift Command Magazine

"Medal Winners," *Sealift*, September 1975, U.S. Navy Military Sealift Command Magazine

"Khmer Rouge reveals fate of forgotten Marines," Gregg Jones (Dallas Morning News), reprinted in **San Francisco Chronicle**, May 16, 1999

Americans at War: 1975-1986, Daniel P. Bolger, Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1988

From America to United States: The History of the long-range Merchant shipbuilding Programme of the United States Maritime Commission (1937-1952) Part 2, L.A. Sawyer and W.H. Mitchell London: World Ship Society, 1981

Maps adapted from Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, University of Texas at Austin

Further reading:

SS Mayaguez article in Seafarers Magazine members of mariners union were aboard SS Mayaguez

Proud Sponsor, USMC Vietnam



Welcome Site Map Reunions Roster Contacts Lineage Enlist Now I Corps
VA.gov USMC Vietnam Guns & Zippos Searching Commo Clips Guests
Photos Warveteran Webmaster USMCVTA Links Sponsors About Us

USMC VIETNAM

The Mayaguez Incident

Location, Koh Tang Island, Cambodia
Operation Report Information for date 750515

- 21 SOS was a US Air Force unit
- 40 ARRS was a US Air Force unit
- 4th MARINES was a US Marine Corps unit
- 9th MARINES was a US Marine Corps unit

[Next USMC Viet](#)[Last USMC Viet](#)[All USMC Viet](#)

Description

Shortly after dawn on the 15th, a coordinated attack to secure Koh Tang and the Mayaguez commenced. Concurrently, air strikes from the USS Coral Sea began on the mainland harbor facilities and airbase that could be used to oppose the American operations. At 0400, three USAF HH-53s launched from Utapao and at 0600 offloaded 59 Marines, six MSC plus the EOD team on the Holt. The Holt's helo pad was too small for the 53 which could only set down one set of wheels. The debarkation was through a doorway and took several minutes. With the boarding party in place, the Holt immediately started for the Mayaguez which was 15 miles away. The plan included having Air Force A-7s air-drop tear gas just before the Holt came along side the Mayaguez.

May 15, 1975

US Marines land on Koh Tang Island

Wearing gas masks, the Marines embarked on the Mayaguez and the sailors passed mooring lines to the Marines. The well-organized search was completed in an hour and the deserted Mayaguez was secured. Since the Mayaguez's engines were completely cold, the Holt assisted with the MSC crew prepared and towed the Mayaguez. The two ships were about 3,000 yards off Koh Tang, well within range of heavy weapons.



Also at 0400, the initial assault wave of eight 53s launched from Utapao. At

Holt towing the Mayaguez. Within a few hours the Mayaguez was underway with her own crew under her own power. First the Wilson and then Holt returned to Koh Tang to help with the extraction. They needed more helicopter landing platforms and more fire support. It would be late in the evening before helicopters retrieved the boarding party from the Mayaguez.

LONEY, Ashton Nathaniel
LCPL, MOS: 0311, AGE: 20
Albany, NY, 01W131

MANNING, Ronald James
HN, MOS: HN, AGE: 21
Toronto, OH, 01W131

MAXWELL, James Rickey
PFC, MOS: 0311, AGE: 18
Center Ridge, AR, 01W131

RIVENBURGH, Richard W
PFC, MOS: 0351, AGE: 21
San Diego, CA, 01W132

SANDOVAL, Antonio R
PFC, MOS: 0311, AGE: 19
San Antonio, TX, 01W129

TURNER, Kelton Rena
PFC, MOS: 0311, AGE: 18
Los Angeles, CA, 01W130

Details concerning the second assault wave are sketchy but it did go in. The Marines were able to consolidate their positions. Save for one KIA, not enough water or ammo, and rather steady sniper fire, the ground force was OK. The Marines, Navy, or Air Force had no grid maps of this area. The airborne tactical air control center, the force on the ground, and the Wilson's guns had to work out how to bring supporting fires to the targets. The Cambodians were aggressive and even fired on the Wilson from the island and from a former USN Swift boat! The Wilson armed its gig and put it nearer the island for fire support and immediate rescue missions. A C-130 dropped a 15,000 lb. 'daisy-cutter.' With the Wilson's five-inch guns providing cover, the helicopter operations resumed.

At last light, the extraction began. The ground commander described the events as follows: 'As he (the first 53) settled into the shallow water at the edge of the beach he was greeted by an almost unbelievable hail of SA and AW fire from the ridge to our south and east. Tracers streamed into the perimeter and bounced around like flaming popcorn. The pilot set his aircraft down and took his share of the fire without flinching. As he lifted off, the next aircraft, whose reception by the Khmer Rouge was just as warm, moved into the zone. The troops on the perimeter zeroed in on the source of fire. The

minigunmen on the helos poured streams of fire over the heads of the Marines and into the ridgeline.

Enemy pressure remained strong right up until the last helicopter pulled out.

At approximately 2030, the last helo recovered to the Coral Sea.' The ground force had been delivered to all three ships. Sadly there were three USMC MIAs from a machine-gun position on the perimeter. The entire Marine phase of the operation lasted some 56 hours, but the last 14 were the longest!

This Mayaguez incident narrative was written mostly from USMC and USN sources. What the VHPA desperately needs is better USAF information. The

Last updated: 01/01/2000

The source for this information was The Marines in Vietnam Anthology, P:240+, Please send additions or corrections to:

Gary Roush
webmaster@vhpa.org
VHPA Home Page



SEARCH AND RESCUE

huge oak doors. One Marine shut off the elevators and then tossed tear gas grenades into the shaft. He then joined the others in a race up the stairs. At the fourth floor they turned to throw tear gas grenades down behind them. As they rushed the last steps to the rooftop helicopter pad, panic-gripped Vietnamese smashed through the doors below and surged through the gas into the embassy and up the stairwell. At the top of the stairs the Marines threw more gas and smoke grenades down the well, then they ran out onto the pad barring the small door behind them. They climbed aboard Swift 22, a waiting Marine CH-53. The turbines whined, the rotor blades moved around, picking up speed with each revolution. The ramp came up and the chopper lifted.⁷¹

The log of the joint rescue coordination center summed it up:

APR

29/2325 SWIFT-22 AIRBORNE WITH 11 GSF [ground support forces], ALL EVAC [evacuees] EXTRACTED
29/2357 KING-23 [airborne command aircraft] CLEARED TO RTB [return to base], ETA [estimated time of arrival] 0090.
29/2359 LOG CLOSED. FREQUENT WIND COMPLETED.⁷²

At dawn the rescue crews aboard the *Midway* repaired their damaged helicopters. Throughout the day they watched as forty-eight South Vietnamese Huey helicopters, three CH-47s and even a small, single-engine O-1 observation plane brought out more Vietnamese refugees. When a Vietnamese Air Force major in the O-1 contacted the carrier's air traffic controller to request landing instructions, the controller told him to ditch. The major agreed but added, "Please have a helo alongside, my wife and five children are with me." The ship's captain, who was in the control room, heard the plea. He told the major to land on deck. The Vietnamese, who had never landed on an aircraft carrier, brought the O-1 down successfully without the use of arresting cables or hooks.⁷³

Bad weather delayed the rescue crews departure from the *Midway* until May 2. When they arrived back at Nakhon Phanom the crews went through the usual round of debriefing followed by a party.⁷⁴

America's involvement in Vietnam spanned a generation. Throughout those years, the United States slipped into the conflicts in Southeast Asia. Most Americans thought that withdrawal from Southeast Asia, which began in 1969, ended in the frantic rush to the rooftop of the American Embassy in Saigon. However, the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service faced yet another challenge.

During the first week in May 1975 two merchant vessels bound for Thailand were accosted by Cambodian gunboats. A Korean ship was fired on but escaped. On May 3, the Cambodians seized a Panamanian registered vessel, held it for thirty-five hours, then released it.

On May 12, 1975, the American-registered cargo ship *Mayaguez* was

CEASE-FIRE TO MAYAGUEZ

taken by Cambodian naval forces. Three hours after the seizure, at 6:15 A.M. in Washington, the watch officer at the State Department's Intelligence and Research Bureau awakened Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger with news of America's newest crisis in Southeast Asia. Dr. Kissinger briefed President Gerald R. Ford an hour and a half later. The President called a meeting of the National Security Council for noon.⁷⁸

Meanwhile, the master of the *Mayaguez*, Capt. Charles T. Miller, stalled his captors to frustrate their efforts to move the ship to Sihanoukville harbor on the mainland. The ship was riding at anchor near Poulo Wai island when a U.S. Navy P-3 four engine reconnaissance plane spotted it shortly after dawn.⁷⁹

On the morning of May 13, PACAF headquarters ordered the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service units in Thailand to prepare a rescue force for the thirty-nine crewmen being held by the Cambodians. Meanwhile, following orders from the President, CINCPAC instructed fighter-bombers and gunships to prevent the ship or its crew from being taken to the mainland. The pilots were told to fire warning shots across the bow of the *Mayaguez* if it moved toward the mainland under its own power. If shots across the bow failed to halt the ship, the pilots were to strafe its aft portion in an effort to disable it. Should the Cambodians try to tow the vessel to the mainland, the towboat was to be first warned, then sunk.⁸⁰

It was late on the afternoon of May 13 when crews in Thailand received these orders. That night AC-130 gunships orbited over the *Mayaguez*. One Khmer gunboat fired at the gunship. The Spectre opened up on the boat forcing it aground.⁸¹

Rescue forces swung into action that evening when the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered eight HH-53s from the 3d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group and eight CH-53s (Knives) from the 21st Special Operations Squadron to Utapao on the Gulf of Thailand. They were told to carry seventy-five security policemen from Nakhon Phanom to Utapao as a possible recovery force.⁸² Tragedy struck when one of the CH-53s crashed in a wooded area thirty-seven miles west of Nakhon Phanom killing all aboard: eighteen security policemen and five helicopter crewmen. An HH-53 a couple of miles back in the formation saw the fire. By the time the chopper landed, the heat was so intense that no one could get closer than seventy-five feet.⁸³

On the morning of May 14, at 8:15, two HH-53s took off for a search and rescue mission to assist any survivors of a Cambodian gunboat sunk by strafing A-7s. The chopper crews spotted no one and returned to Utapao. Helicopter crews and air policemen spent the rest of the day waiting for instructions.⁸⁴

Meanwhile, action in the Gulf of Thailand picked up. A few minutes after sinking the gunboat, the same flight of A-7s spotted a wooden fishing boat full of people headed for the mainland. They suspected that the boat

SEARCH AND RESCUE

contained the crew of the *Mayaguez*. In an effort to turn the boat back to Poulo Wai island, the A-7s fired across the bow and dropped tear gas all around.⁸⁵

On board the fishing boat, the thirty-nine members of the *Mayaguez* crew plus some captured Thai fishermen, along with their Khmer Rouge guards, gasped and vomited as the gas took effect. The crewmen wanted to overpower the guards, but the riot control agent incapacitated them as well as the communists. The Thai boat captain tried to turn back, but at each attempt a Cambodian guard put his AK-47 to the Thai's head. As the boat continued to the mainland the A-7s returned to Thailand. The *Mayaguez* crew, first taken to Sihanoukville, was later transferred to Kaoh Rong Samloem, a nearby island.⁸⁶

Other A-7s, F-4s, and AC-130s resumed the watch over the *Mayaguez*. At mid-morning A-7s destroyed a forty-foot patrol boat towing a barge east of Koh Tang. That night an AC-130 sank another patrol boat as it approached the *Mayaguez*.⁸⁷

As the sun set on May 14, no one knew for sure where the crew of the captured vessel was located. Military preparations continued in Thailand, while in Washington the Ford administration made diplomatic approaches to obtain the release of the crew. When it appeared diplomatic efforts had failed, the President ordered the Joint Chiefs of Staff to take back the ship and recover the crew.⁸⁸

Intelligence estimates indicated that a handful of Khmer Rouge guards and Cambodian civilians were holding the ship's crew on Koh Tang. Accordingly, a plan emerged whereby sixty marines would be landed on the USS *Holt*, a Navy destroyer. These men would then board the *Mayaguez*, thus fulfilling the first part of the President's order to take back the ship. Meanwhile, Air Force helicopters would shuttle up to six hundred marines from Utapao to Koh Tang to recover the crew. The plan called for a U.S. Army interpreter, in the first helicopter load, to tell the Khmer Rouge that the U.S. Marines had landed and that the only way to avoid certain destruction lay in immediately handing over the crew of the *Mayaguez*. It was not going to work out like that.⁸⁹

The attack on Koh Tang began early on the morning of May 15. Eight helicopters, five CH-53s and three HH-53s, approached their designated landing zones on the north end of the island in two waves. Their objective was to land marines on the western and eastern sides of the north peninsula. The first chopper to the island, Knife 21, met no resistance until most of the marines had rushed down the ramp and fanned out across the beach. Then the Khmers opened fire knocking out one engine of the chopper as it lifted off the beach. Knife 21 skipped over the waves until it was a mile out to sea, there it settled into the water.⁹⁰

Two Jolly Greens, having just unloaded marines on the USS *Holt*, moved in to pick up the crew of Knife 21. They recovered the pilot, copilot,

and one of the flight mechanics, SSgt. Elwood E. Rumbaugh, after saving the life of his co-pilot by diving under water to pull him from the wreckage, disappeared beneath the surf. He was never seen again and later declared dead.⁹¹

Back on the island, Knife 22 tried to land its load of marines, but enemy fire damaged it too severely. The chopper limped toward the Thai coast escorted by a pair of Jolly Greens. There Knife 22 ran out of fuel and made a forced landing.⁹²

Meanwhile, in action at the island, Knife 23 and Knife 31 headed for the eastern landing zone. As they approached the beach, the enemy blasted them with small arms, heavy machine guns, rockets, and mortars. One chopper antirotated making a controlled crash landing in the surf and snapping its tail boom as it hit. Its crew and twenty marines ran ashore to fight for their lives on the beach. The other chopper burst into flame as it fell into shallow water just off shore. Eight people died in the wreckage. Five more died in the surf as the Khmer Rouge fired at the survivors trying to swim out to sea. Those who made it were picked up by a launch from a U.S. Navy destroyer.⁹³

During this initial assault, a simultaneous effort to recapture the *Mayaguez* was underway. The USS *Holt*, with the marines delivered by Jolly Greens earlier, pulled alongside the *Mayaguez* and the boarding party climbed aboard to find the ship abandoned. The *Holt* then began towing it away from Pong Wat island.⁹⁴

As these events unfolded, the crew of the *Mayaguez* was making its way seaward from where they had been held. As the Thai fishing boat approached the destroyer USS *Robert L. Wilson*, the *Mayaguez* crewmen stripped off their underwear to make white flags. On board the *Wilson* battle stations had sounded before anyone saw the skivvies flying from the mast of the fishing boat. Within an hour the crew of the *Mayaguez* was safely aboard.⁹⁵

An hour after the assault began, there were fifty-four marines and Air Force crewmen pinned down on the two beaches at Koh Tang. Three helicopters had been shot down and two others severely damaged. So far fourteen Americans were dead or missing.

With the crew of the *Mayaguez* safe, the operation became one of disengaging the fifty-four members of the rescue force stranded on Koh Tang. To do that, additional forces had to be landed. Accordingly, three more Jolly Greens prepared to deliver their marines. Two made it on their second try, but the marines were put down in separate locations, one south of the landing zone and the other on a small patch of sand 1000 yards from the other group. The third Jolly Green was repeatedly driven off by enemy fire. By 8:30 A.M. there were 109 marines and airmen on Koh Tang.⁹⁶ With the *Mayaguez* crewmen safe, A-7s, F-4s, and AC-130s could blast enemy positions on the island more freely.

SEARCH AND RESCUE

For the next hour and a half under heavy enemy fire, choppers landed reinforcements. Jolly Green 41 moved toward Koh Tang at ten o'clock. Lts. Thomas D. Cooper and David W. Keith, pilot and copilot of Jolly Green 41, made four attempts to land their troops but were driven away each time. Finally they called in an AC-130 gunship to hit enemy positions with 20-mm and 40-mm fire. Then Jolly 41 shot up the jungle near the beach. Jolly 41 flew in to drop off the five remaining marines. A mortar round exploded nearby before Cooper could pull clear of the landing zone, seriously damaging the chopper. Jolly Green 41 retreated toward Utapao.⁹⁷

But enemy forces were still too strong to allow the marines to disengage and be safely removed. Cricket, the airborne command post, marshalled its still airworthy choppers (all five of them) for this final reinforcement effort. Two CH-53s, Knife 51, Knife 52, and one HH-53 (Jolly Green 43) were in the first wave. Jolly Green 11 and Jolly Green 12 formed the second wave. Knife 51 landed nineteen marines and carried out five wounded. Jolly Green 43 put in another twenty-eight marines. As Knife 52 approached the landing zone enemy fire ripped into its fuel tank. The aircraft commander, 1st Lt. Richard C. Brims, aborted the landing and returned the marines to Utapao. Jolly Green 43, having landed its load of troops, refueled and then orbited just in case an aircrew recovery situation developed. The second wave, Jolly Greens 11 and 12, unloaded their marines to bring the total to 222 Americans on Koh Tang.⁹⁸

In early afternoon, with enemy resistance still heavy on Koh Tang and the leathernecks pinned down in their landing zones or on the beaches, the controllers aboard Cricket turned their attention to withdrawal. Jolly Green 43, flown by Capt. Roland W. Purser and Jolly Green 11 commanded by Capt. Donald R. Backlund, refueled at 2:30 in the afternoon and then orbited near Koh Tang while A-7s, F-4s, and OV-10s strafed, bombed, and dropped tear gas canisters on enemy positions. After this pounding, Jolly Green 43 moved toward the eastern beach where an isolated group of marines was fighting a persistent Khmer force. As the chopper approached the shore, heavy ground fire disabled one engine. Captain Purser continued on, landed and took on a very full load of fifty-four marines. Jolly Green 43 skipped over the waves to make an emergency landing on the aircraft carrier *Coral Sea*. Captain Backlund escorted the damaged chopper to the ship and then pointed Jolly Green 11 toward Koh Tang.

Three choppers remained operational, Jolly Greens 11 and 12, and Knife 51. Another helicopter, Jolly Green 44, previously out of commission at Nakhon Phanom, was being repaired in a hurry. By 4:00 P.M. it was rushing to Utapao.⁹⁹

Meanwhile, Cricket and the forward air controllers directed tactical strikes against Khmer Rouge positions. On the *Coral Sea*, Captain Purser and his men worked with rubber tubes and borrowed clamps to repair Jolly Green 43's disabled engine and ruptured fuel lines. At 5:30 Purser's chopper

CEASE-FIRE TO MAYAGUEZ

rejoined Backlund off Koh Tang. Together they greeted Jolly Green 44, freshly arrived from the mainland.¹⁰⁰

Before the evacuation effort resumed, an Air Force C-130 cargo plane lumbered over Koh Tang to drop a 15,000-pound bomb on the center of the island. The bomb devastated an area the size of a football field. Anyone inside a fifty-yard radius of the explosion died from the concussion.¹⁰¹

After the smoke from the explosion cleared, a forward air controller directed Backlund to make a final run to get the marines off the eastern beach. Backlund knew that those isolated men would probably not survive the night. Jolly Green 11 came under heavy enemy fire as soon as it neared the beach. Captain Backlund, who had been flying since before dawn, backed his chopper to the water's edge and tried to hover a foot above the surf. "I was pretty tired and scared and it was very noisy," said Backlund, "the ramp was moving up and down two, three, to four feet up off the rocks and then it would come crashing down."¹⁰²

Under intense fire, the marines began boarding the chopper, two-by-two. A pair would rise from their position near the trees, fire a few rounds into the jungle, dash to the chopper's ramp, turn and empty their M-16s at the enemy infested underbrush, then toss their rifles into the helicopter and scramble toward the front. One of the first pair of leathernecks aboard, in a hurry to get to the forward part of the cabin, ripped out the intercom system. From that point Captain Backlund, working the controls, had no way of communicating with his pararescuemen and flight mechanics supervising the loading in the rear. SSgt. Harry W. Cash, the flight mechanic manning the rear ramp minigun, was blasting the jungle to provide covering fire for the retreating marines. He yelled into his intercom when the last two leathernecks leaped aboard. In the cockpit Backlund heard nothing. He held the precarious hover. Cash and the other crewmen in the rear yelled into their dead headsets for Backlund to pull up and away. Up front Captain Backlund wondered what was taking so long as he listened to enemy bullets pelting his chopper. Sergeant Cash saw black clad figures emerging from the jungle and swung his minigun to chop them down. One of the figures drew back to toss a grenade. As his arm started forward Cash's stream of fire sliced him in two. The grenade rolled toward the helicopter and exploded. With that Backlund decided that loaded or not it was time to go. Jolly Green 11 moved forward a few yards and then climbed.¹⁰³

At dark there were three helicopters still operating and 202 marines to be evacuated. Knife 51 flew through a hail of small arms fire to pick up 41 of them. Jolly Green 43 followed to carry out 54 more. Then Jolly 44 moved to the beach to load up 34 leathernecks. The remaining 73 men had withdrawn to hold positions only a short sprint from the landing zone. OV-10s and A-7s strafed the nearby jungle, but the Khmer Rouge pressed their attack. At 7:25 P.M. the Marine commander on the island reported that he thought his men would be overrun within fifteen minutes. As an

SEARCH AND RESCUE

AC-130 blasted the dark tree-line beyond the leathernecks, Jolly Green 44 returned from the *Coral Sea*. The marines set up a strobe light to guide the chopper to them. Jolly 44 followed the light to the beach, picked up 40 marines, and headed for the *Coral Sea*.¹⁰⁴

Knife 51 spotted the strobe light. Above the light an OV-10 orbited, occasionally turning on its landing lights to draw enemy fire away from the approaching chopper. Knife 51 settled into the landing zone, picked up the remaining marines, then took off.¹⁰⁵

During the action on Koh Tang, approximately 230 men were landed on the island and then withdrawn. Total U.S. casualties were fifteen killed, three missing and forty-nine wounded. Of the fifteen helicopters that participated, four were destroyed and nine were damaged.¹⁰⁶

America's involvement in the fighting in Southeast Asia was over, and the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service had remained in action even as the last shots were fired. After the *Mayaguez* incident, events moved rapidly to the final withdrawal of all rescue forces from Thailand in January 1976. There were no combat saves after the 3d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group was credited with thirty during the action on Koh Tang. From late in the spring of 1975, the missions flown by rescue units in Thailand were no different from those flown by rescue units throughout the world. These included medical evacuation missions, searches for missing boats, and an aircrew recovery sortie for the two-man crew of a Royal Thai Air Force T-28 which made a forced landing near Ubon.¹⁰⁷

Rescue forces were among the very last to leave Thailand. As bases closed, rescue units were moved to maintain a continuing search and rescue capability. On October 1, 1975, the last American units left Nakhon Phanom, and the 3d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group moved to Utapao. The Joint Rescue Coordination Center transferred with them to continue coordinating rescue forces as they were reduced in numbers by returning helicopters to the United States.¹⁰⁸

When the 3d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group left Nakhon Phanom, the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadrons moved to Korat. There they were co-located with the remaining HC-130Ps and the A-7Ds of the 3d Tactical Fighter Squadron. On October 15 the 56th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron was inactivated, and its four HC-130Ps became part of the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron. The HH-53 and the HC-130P crews coordinated with the A-7 pilots of the 3d Tactical Fighter Squadron to maintain a reduced alert posture. Also, one HH-53 remained at Udorn on a temporary basis to provide a search and rescue capability in northern Thailand.¹⁰⁹

Meanwhile, packing and crating of equipment continued. On December 15, 1975, the Joint Rescue Coordination Center closed.¹¹¹ Six weeks later, on January 31, 1976, Lt. Col. Cleveland F. Forrester, last commander of the 3d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group, cased the unit

CEASE-FIRE TO MAYAGUEZ

flag. The same day, the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron was inactivated at Korat.¹¹² Thus ended an era of unparalleled valor in which the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service gallantly upheld its motto, "That Others May Live."

During its involvement in the wars of Southeast Asia, the U.S. Air Force lost 2,254 aircraft in combat and in normal operations. Aircrew members killed, captured, or missing totaled 1,763. Throughout the war the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service became the greatest combat aircrew recovery force in the history of aerial warfare, saving 3,883 lives.¹¹³ For those flyers who went down, whether in combat or by accident, the best hope of survival was in a quick recovery by air-sea rescue forces.

The air war in Southeast Asia shifted often, varying its intensity, location, and focus as Americans fought enemy forces that ranged along the warfare spectrum from insurgency to protracted and, finally, conventional action. Rescue forces remained flexible to counter each threat and meet every challenge. Wisely, the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service never followed hard and fast rules or established rigid regulations defining how much effort was enough. The rescue crews gave each mission all they had. Nevertheless, when enemy antiaircraft fire was too intense, there was only so much the helicopters (even the giant HH-53s with their armor plate and impressive firepower) could take. As discussed earlier, during the Linebacker II operations of December 1972, not one aircrew member was picked up from North Vietnam's heartland because the targets were in densely populated, highly-defended areas.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, during the operations on Koh Tang in connection with the *Mayaguez* incident, the entrenched Khmer Rouge force, armed with automatic weapons, a few heavy machine guns, rocket launchers, and perhaps one mortar, destroyed four helicopters and damaged nine others, at least five seriously.¹¹⁵ The inherent limitations of the helicopter, slow speed and large size, made it highly vulnerable in a high threat environment.

Almost every modern military organization has, at one time or another, been accused of attempting to fight its present war as it fought its last war. If true, it would seem that we should ignore the lessons of history to concentrate on discovering inventive alternatives to previous tactics and policies. But one should study history to learn from, rather than to repeat, the past.

Those involved in rescue can learn some valuable lessons from the Southeast Asia experience. The most important lesson can be summed up in the concept of readiness. Peacetime rescue forces must be ready to perform combat search and rescue in a variety of situations. Perhaps too much has been made of the lack of preparedness in the Air Rescue Service prior to the Vietnam war. Rescue was no less ready for the very different and difficult kinds of warfare in Indochina than any other organization in the Air Force, or the entire U.S. military. Nevertheless, it would appear that the old Air

SEARCH AND RESCUE

Rescue Service maxim that combat search and rescue was an extension of peacetime operations was finally superseded by events.

Second, the search and rescue task force evolved to overcome the problems of combat aircrew recovery peculiar to Southeast Asia. As a team, the search and rescue task force triumphed over nature and the enemy to save hundreds of aircrew members down in the jungles of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Many of the tactics employed by search and rescue task forces could be used again if the Air Force found itself involved in operations against lightly armed forces fighting in an area with geographic features resembling those of Southeast Asia.

The usefulness of search and rescue task forces in future conflicts will be determined by such factors as the geographic and demographic nature of the battlefield and, of course, enemy defenses. It is questionable that an armada of HH-53s, A-7s, HC-130s and forward air controllers would be able to operate in the highly defended, relatively open areas of Europe, over the flat sands of the Middle East, or above the barren hills of Korea. A future enemy could possess technologically advanced air defenses including modern jet fighters able to detect and destroy aircraft flying at low altitudes, the SA-3, SA-6, SA-11, and a host of smaller, hand-held missiles like the SA-7, and the deadly ZSU-23-4 radar-directed, fully-mobile antiaircraft gun. These weapons would prove vastly more formidable than those in the 1950s vintage air defense system the Air Force faced in North Vietnam.

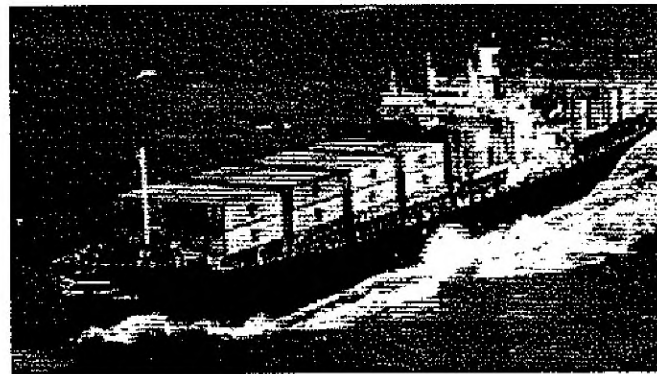
The Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service was ultimately successful in Southeast Asia in saving 3,883 human beings from death, suffering, or captivity because innovation and imagination brought rescue from the SA-16/HC-54 era to the search and rescue task force of the late 1960s. Imagination and innovation within a system receptive to change brought improvement through the introduction of novel tactics and new equipment. Flexibility and readiness in the peacetime Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service will be the key to future success in combat aircrew rescue. That flexibility will require a continuation of the same spirit of innovation and ingenuity that made combat rescue successful in the wars of Southeast Asia.

Capture and Release of SS Mayaguez by Khmer Rouge forces in May 1975

Beginning in 1965, the **SS Mayaguez** sailed a regular route for Sea-Land Services in support of American forces in Southeast Asia: **Hong Kong -- Sattahip, Thailand -- Singapore**. On May 7, 1975, about a week after the fall of Saigon, Mayaguez left Hong Kong on a routine voyage.

She was launched in April 1944 as **SS White Falcon**, a C2-S-AJ1 (U.S. Maritime Commission) built by North Carolina Shipbuilding Company of Wilmington, NC.

After World War II, she was renamed Santa Eliana. In 1960, she was lengthened and widened by Maryland Shipbuilding and Drydock and converted into a container ship. She could carry 382 containers below and 94 on deck. **She was the first all-container U.S. flag ship in foreign trade.** She was renamed SS Sea in 1964, and SS Mayaguez in 1965.

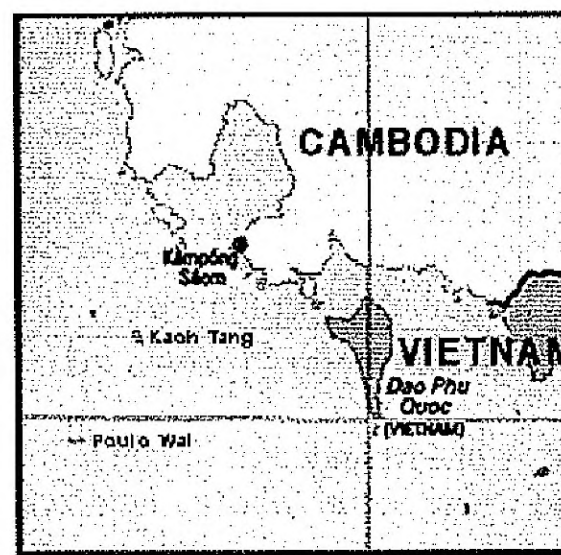


SS Ponce, sister ship of the SS Mayaguez [photo from Sawyer and Mitchell]

On **May 12, 1975** the SS Mayaguez was in a regular shipping lane in the Gulf of Siam about 60 miles from the coast of Cambodia, but only about 8 miles from **Poulo Wai** (Kao Wai), an island claimed by Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. There were many small boats about. Suddenly, a few American-made PCF Swift gunboats headed from Poulo Wai towards the Mayaguez. At 2 PM, a 76-mm shot was fired across her bow.



Southeast Asia. Planned route of SS



Detail of Cambodian coast showing

Mayaguez **Hong Kong, Sattahip, Thailand, Singapore**

Poulo Wai, Kaoh Tang, Kampong Saom

Captain Charles T. Miller heeded the warning and at the same time sent out a Mayday message. Cambodia had fallen in mid-April, and the gunboats were in the control of the **Khmer Rouge**, who had captured 27 crewmen of 7 Thai fishing boats, shot at a South Korean freighter, captured 7 South Vietnamese vessels, and held a Panamanian ship for 35 hours. The crew of the SS Mayaguez received no warning about these events before Khmer Rouge naval forces boarded the SS Mayaguez.

Captain Miller, of Fountain Valley, CA, stalled as long as he could, pretending not to understand, and telling his captors his radar was malfunctioning. Finally, he was forced to follow the gunboat into **Kampong Saom** (Kompong Som, formerly Sihanoukville) on the mainland.

Around noon on May 13, the ship anchored off **Kaoh Tang** (Koh Tang or Kach Tang), a small island 30 miles off the Cambodian coast. U.S. Air Force P-3, Orion, F-4E Phantom, F-111A, A-7D Corsairs, and AC-130H "babysat" the Mayaguez. Just before 4 PM, pilots saw smoke coming from the stack of the Mayaguez. Two Corsairs strafed across her bow and the smoke died down. Many small boats milled around the Mayaguez, making it hard for the airmen to determine exactly what was happening. They saw the 39 man crew board a fishing boat at 7 PM on May 13 and saw people disembarking fishing boats at **Kaoh Tang** island. They assumed - incorrectly -- the Mayaguez crew was on the island.

President Gerald Ford denounced the seizure as an "act of piracy" and demanded immediate release of the ship. Diplomatic efforts were unsuccessful and at 5:45 PM on May 14, the President ordered military action. A Marine Corps detachment at Subic Bay was given the assignment. They were to board a ship at sea -- the first such maneuver since 1826.

Mariners volunteer

Rear Adm. Sam H. Moore, Military Sealift Command, asked for volunteers from MSC ships in Subic Bay to accompany Marines during recapture of the ship to help get her underway. Late on May 13, Captain Raymond Iacobacci of **USNS Greenville Victory** found 6 volunteers among his crew for the dangerous mission [USNS stands for United States Naval Ship -- Navy controlled with civilian crew]:

					
Clinton Harriman, First Officer	Karl Lonsdale, Third Officer	Robert Griffin, Yeoman Storekeeper	Michael Saltwick, 2nd Asst. Engineer	Hermino Rivera, Fireman Watertender	Epifanio Rodriguez, Oiler

Volunteers from USNS Greenville Victory [photos from Sealift]

The volunteers were briefed at 11 PM and at midnight were aboard an Air Force C-141 on their way to Utapao Air Base in Thailand where 1,100 Marines landed after flights from the Philippines and Okinawa. U.S. Air Force planes sank three Cambodian gunboats to prevent their taking Mayaguez crew to the mainland.

The Marines showed the MSC mariners photos of the Mayaguez and discussed plans to retake the ship. First Officer Harriman told the Marines they could have the ship under way within 2 to 6 hours after boarding -- if nothing was damaged.

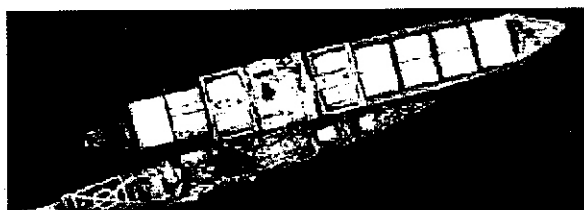
In a three pronged attack:

- Marines were to overpower Cambodian soldiers believed to be aboard the Mayaguez, allowing the MSC crewmen to prepare and sail the ship to safety.
- Marines in helicopters were to make an amphibious assault on **Kaoh Tang** island.
- Navy aircraft from the carrier **USS Coral Sea** were to strike military targets in the mainland Kompong Som area.



Just before boarding the SS Mayaguez, USNS Greenville Victory First Officer Clinton Harriman (left) Second Engr. Michael Saltwick (right) discuss the boarding operation with USS Holt skipper Cmdr. Robert Peterson (center) [U.S. Navy photo from **Sealift**]

At 3 AM on May 15, the Marines, an Army linguist, 6 volunteer USAF bomb disposal experts, 6 sailors from USS Duluth, and the 6 MSC mariners boarded 3 helicopters bound for the **USS Harold E. Holt**, which was to provide a boarding platform for the assault. The CH-53s were too big for the Holt's helicopter pad, so the men in one helicopter clambered down rope ladders; others went down the cargo ramp as the helicopters touched down only their rear wheels.



USS Harold E. Holt alongside the **SS Mayaguez** [U.S. Navy photo from **Sealift**]

Boarding the SS Mayaguez

Air Force planes dropped tear gas on the Mayaguez in advance of the boarding. USS Holt maneuvered alongside and 48 Marines stormed over the side like swashbuckling pirates. They found no one aboard.

About 8 AM the MSC mariners, wearing gas masks, boarded the Mayaguez . Within 5 minutes, they had the emergency diesel generator running. At 8:20 AM the Marines raised the American flag.



Marines wearing gas masks board the SS Mayaguez [U.S. Navy photo from **Sealift**]



Marines raised the American flag [U.S. Navy photo from **Sealift**]

The volunteers hauled out tow lines and cut the anchor chain with an acetylene torch. At 10:45 AM, USS Holt began her tow, while MSC engineers worked to get steam up.

Release of the Mayaguez crew

About that time, a Thai fishing boat approached the **USS Wilson** which was off **Kaoh Tang** island supporting the amphibious assault. Aboard the boat, which was captured by the Cambodians a few days earlier, was a Thai crew and the 39 men of the Mayaguez. They had been set free by their captors after being moved earlier in the day to Kompong Som in a small Cambodian gunboat. They had then been moved again to tiny Kach Island and had been freed there.

At noon, all Mayaguez crewmen were back aboard their own ship. The volunteers continued to assist until 7:30 PM, when they climbed into an Army tug boat and then were flown to the MSC office in Sattahip.

Marine Assault on Kaoh Tang

Meanwhile, on the northern tip of **Kaoh Tang**, the marine assault force arriving at 6 AM on the east and west beaches met heavy fire. Khmer Rouge held their fire until the CH-53 helicopters were close in. Machine guns, mortars, and rocket propelled grenade launchers devastated the helicopters. At 7:30 AM only 109 of the planned 180 marines were on the island in 3 separate locations, with Khmer Rouge

infantry entrenched in bunkers in the 1000 feet of jungle between them. A-7D Corsairs provided cover, but the Mayaguez crew was thought to be in a building directly by the gun emplacements.

At 11:30 AM, 100 more marines landed. The plan called for 250 marines in the second wave, but by then there were only 4 helicopters available. Then word came of the safe arrival of the Mayaguez crew on the USS Wilson and the marines planned their withdrawal. Khmer reinforcements coming in from the south were stopped by 15,000 pound BLU-82 bombs.

After the last helicopter left around 8 PM, a head count showed 3 marines were left behind on the island. In 1999, Department of Defense investigators found evidence to indicate one of the Marines was killed a few days later while trying to steal food from the Khmer Rouge. The other two were captured within a few days, executed, and buried on **Kaoh Tang** island.

The final U.S. tally for the assault:

	Killed	Wounded	Missing	Non-battle deaths
Army	0	0	0	0
Navy/Marine Corps	13	44	3	0
Air Force	2	6	0	23*
U.S. total	15	50	3	23

* Crash of helicopter carrying Combat Security Police Squadron in Thailand -- due to mechanical failure

The 6 volunteers from the USNS Greenville Victory were awarded the **Merchant Marine Distinguished Service Medal** and the **Navy Distinguished Civilian Service Medal**.

In accepting his medal, **Hermينو Rivera** stated, "I'm glad to have been able to do something for my country, and I wouldn't hesitate to volunteer in the future."

The reason for the unexpected release of the Mayaguez crew has never been fully understood; among the many theories are successful intervention by China or Israel.

The SS Mayaguez was scrapped in 1979.

Sources:

"Six Brave Men," Howard L. Rosenberg, **Sealift**, July 1975, U.S. Navy Military Sealift Command Magazine

"Medal Winners," **Sealift**, September 1975, U.S. Navy Military Sealift Command Magazine

"Khmer Rouge reveals fate of forgotten Marines," Gregg Jones (Dallas Morning News), reprinted in **San Francisco Chronicle**, May 16, 1999

Americans at War: 1975-1986, Daniel P. Bolger, Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1988

From America to United States: The History of the long-range Merchant shipbuilding Programme of the United States Maritime Commission (1937-1952) Part 2, L.A. Sawyer and W.H. Mitchell London: World Ship Society, 1981

Maps adapted from Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, University of Texas at Austin

Further reading:

SS Mayaguez article in Seafarers Magazine members of mariners union were aboard SS Mayaguez

[Personal site about Mayaguez Incident](#) dedicated to the brave men who were killed
[Mayaguez Incident Air Force Magazine](#) Air Force Association article

Return to: [**Vietnam**](#)

Return to: [**Past Features**](#)

Return to: [**Index**](#)

6/5/00

www.USMM.org ©1998, 1999, 2000 U.S. Maritime Service Veterans. You may quote material on this web page as long as you cite www.USMM.org as the source. You may not use more than a few lines without permission. If you see substantial portions of this page on the Internet or in published material please notify www.USMM.org

Proud Sponsor, USMC Vietnam



[Welcome](#) [Site Map](#) [Reunions](#) [Roster](#) [Contacts](#) [Lineage](#) [Enlist Now](#) [I Corps](#)
[VA.gov](#) [USMC Vietnam](#) [Guns & Zippos](#) [Searching](#) [Commo](#) [Clips](#) [Guests](#)
[Photos](#) [Warveteran](#) [Webmaster](#) [USMCVTA](#) [Links](#) [Sponsors](#) [About Us](#)

USMC VIETNAM

The Mayaguez Incident

Location, Koh Tang Island, Cambodia
Operation Report Information for date 750515

- 21 SOS was a US Air Force unit
- 40 ARRS was a US Air Force unit
- 4th MARINES was a US Marine Corps unit
- 9th MARINES was a US Marine Corps unit



[Next USMC Viet](#)

[Last USMC Viet](#)

[All USMC Viet](#)

Description

Shortly after dawn on the 15th, a coordinated attack to secure Koh Tang and the Mayaguez commenced. Concurrently, air strikes from the USS Coral Sea began on the mainland harbor facilities and airbase that could be used to oppose the American operations. At 0400, three USAF HH-53s launched from Utapao and at 0600 offloaded 59 Marines, six MSC plus the EOD team on the Holt. The Holt's helo pad was too small for the 53 which could only set down one set of wheels. The debarkation was through a doorway and took several minutes. With the boarding party in place, the Holt immediately started for the Mayaguez which was 15 miles away. The plan included having Air Force A-7s air-drop tear gas just before the Holt came along side the Mayaguez.

May 15, 1975

US Marines land on Koh Tang Island

Wearing gas masks, the Marines embarked on the Mayaguez and the sailors passed mooring lines to the Marines. The well-organized search was completed in an hour and the deserted Mayaguez was secured. Since the Mayaguez's engines were completely cold, the Holt assisted with the MSC crew prepared and towed the Mayaguez. The two ships were about 3,000 yards off Koh Tang, well within range of heavy weapons.

Also at 0400, the initial assault wave of eight 53s launched from Utapao. At



0607 the assault commenced with simultaneous insertions at two LZs. The eastern LZ was on the cove side where the Cambodian compound was located. The western LZ was a narrow spit of beach about 500 feet behind the compound on the other side of the island. The Marines hoped to surround the compound. There were no pre-assault air strikes for fear of injuring any of the crew thought to be on the island. Six 53s were assigned to the eastern LZ. The accounts suggest there would be three waves of two ships. The sequence of events described next may not be correct.

1st LT John Shramm's helicopter tore apart and crashed into the surf after the rotor system was hit by hostile fire. All aboard made a dash for nearby rocks and trees on the beach. As MAJ Howard Corson and 2LT Richard Van de Geer's helicopter approached the island, it was caught in a cross fire and hit by a rocket. The severely damaged helicopter crashed into the sea just off the coast of the island and exploded. To avoid enemy fire, survivors were

See Also:

- LCpl Andres Garcia
- The Final Engagement

forced to swim out to sea for rescue. At this point, the remaining waves were told to use the western LZ.

The Wilson arrived off Koh Tang at 0700 from a different direction than where the Holt was. They slowed to 5 knots, watched the air strikes going in and could see the plumes of oily black smoke rising from the two downed 53s in the cove. As they moved to within 1,000 yards of the island, lookouts shouted there were people in the water. Soon they located three groups of men still within AW fire range from the island. Twelve from MAJ Corson's helicopter were rescued; thirteen, including the pilot, 2LT Van de Geer, were missing.

Sporadic fire was taken by the first two 53s in the western LZ. Another inserted part of its load after repeated aborted approaches and two more could not even get in because of the rapidly increasing intensity of SA and mortar fire into the zone. SSGT Rumbaugh's aircraft was shot down near the coastline. Rumbaugh is the only missing man from this aircraft. The helicopter carrying the command and fire support group made it into an alternate LZ. One last attempt to insert a troop transport was not successful. At this point, all the forces going ashore for the next five-and-a-half hours were on the ground. Three helicopters had been lost. Two had been shot up so badly that they would make emergency landings far from Utapao with their troops still aboard. Three more returned to Thailand or assumed SAR duties after discharging all or part of their troops.

About two hours after the assault began, a P-3 picked up a small target exiting Kompong Som harbor. Visual identification determined the Mayaguez crew was on this Thai fishing boat waving white flags. The Wilson retrieved the crew from the Thai boat and joined the

BENEDETT, Daniel Andrew
PFC, MOS: ----, AGE: 19
Auburn King, WA, 01W129

BLESSING, Lynn
PFC, MOS: 0311, AGE: 18
Lancaster, PA, 01W129

BOYD, Walter
PFC, MOS: 0311, AGE: 19
Norfolk, VA, 01W132

COPENHAVER, Gregory S
LCPL, MOS: 0311, AGE: 19
Port Deposit, MD, 01W130

GARCIA, Andres
LCPL, MOS: 2818, AGE: 20
Carlsbad, NM, 01W132

GAUSE, Bernard JR
HM1, MOS: HM1, AGE: 34
Birmingham, AL, 01W130

JACQUES, James Joseph
PFC, MOS: 0311, AGE: 18
Denver, CO, 01W131

LONDON, Dennis W
SGT, MOS: ----, AGE: 25
Sparks, NV, 01W127

Holt towing the Mayaguez. Within a few hours the Mayaguez was underway with her own crew under her own power. First the Wilson and then Holt returned to Koh Tang to help with the extraction. They needed more helicopter landing platforms and more fire support. It

LONEY, Ashton Nathaniel
LCPL, MOS: 0311, AGE: 20
Albany, NY, 01W131

MANNING, Ronald James
HN, MOS: HN, AGE: 21
Toronto, OH, 01W131

MAXWELL, James Rickey
PFC, MOS: 0311, AGE: 18
Center Ridge, AR, 01W131

RIVENBURGH, Richard W
PFC, MOS: 0351, AGE: 21
San Diego, CA, 01W132

SANDOVAL, Antonio R
PFC, MOS: 0311, AGE: 19
San Antonio, TX, 01W129

TURNER, Kelton Rena
PFC, MOS: 0311, AGE: 18
Los Angeles, CA, 01W130

would be late in the evening before helicopters retrieved the boarding party from the Mayaguez.

Details concerning the second assault wave are sketchy but it did go in. The Marines were able to consolidate their positions. Save for one KIA, not enough water or ammo, and rather steady sniper fire, the ground force was OK. The Marines, Navy, or Air Force had no grid maps of this area. The airborne tactical air control center, the force on the ground, and the Wilson's guns had to work out how to bring supporting fires to the targets. The Cambodians were aggressive and even fired on the Wilson from the island and from a former USN Swift boat! The Wilson armed its gig and put it nearer the island for fire support and immediate rescue missions. A C-130 dropped a 15,000 lb. 'daisy-cutter.' With the Wilson's five-inch guns providing cover, the helicopter operations resumed.

At last light, the extraction began. The ground commander described the events as follows: 'As he (the first 53) settled into the shallow water at the edge of the beach he was greeted by an almost unbelievable hail of SA and AW fire from the ridge to our south and east. Tracers streamed into the perimeter and bounced around like flaming popcorn. The pilot set his aircraft down and took his share of the fire without flinching. As he lifted off, the next aircraft, whose reception by the Khmer Rouge was just as warm, moved into the zone. The troops on the perimeter zeroed in on the source of fire. The

minigunmen on the helos poured streams of fire over the heads of the Marines and into the ridgeline.

Enemy pressure remained strong right up until the last helicopter pulled out.

At approximately 2030, the last helo recovered to the Coral Sea.' The ground force had been delivered to all three ships. Sadly there were three USMC MIAs from a machine-gun position on the perimeter. The entire Marine phase of the operation lasted some 56 hours, but the last 14 were the longest!

This Mayaguez incident narrative was written mostly from USMC and USN sources. What the VHPA desperately needs is better USAF information. The

Last updated: 01/01/2000

The source for this information was The Marines in Vietnam Anthology, P:240+, Please send additions or corrections to:

Gary Roush
webmaster@vhpa.org
VHPA Home Page



brief ARS material we have suggests the 40th ARRS was the primary player in the show, that they sustained two WIAs but no KIAs and that their aircraft had battle damage but no losses were mentioned. Other sources indicate that the two USAF KIAs were from the 21st SOS. Please contact the VHPA Records Committee if you can provide any more information.

Proud Sponsor, USMC Vietnam



[Welcome](#) [Site Map](#) [Reunions](#) [Roster](#) [Contacts](#) [Lineage](#) [Enlist Now](#) [I Corps](#)
[VA.gov](#) [USMC Vietnam](#) [Guns & Zippos](#) [Searching](#) [Commo](#) [Clips](#) [Guests](#)
[Photos](#) [Warveteran](#) [Webmaster](#) [USMCVTA](#) [Links](#) [Sponsors](#) [About Us](#)

10:19 AM ~ Sunday, November 25, 2001
1999-2001, USMC Vietnam, Washington DC
All Rights Reserved ~ Page 7,441



Welcome to the Comment Section. This portion of the site is for all interested parties to say their piece about the Mayaguez incident and The Battle of Tang. Be forewarned that the comments in this section can and will be controversial.

From Dr. John Guilmartin posted July 29, 2001

"To the Koh Tang Beach Club and other interested parties. I promised members of the Koh Tang Beach Club who attended the 4 May Koh Tang "What happened?" symposium at the Jolly Green Reunion in Fort Walton Beach that I would get back to you concerning Ralph Wetterhahn's book, The Last Battle, with a candid assessment. It took longer than I expected, but here it is.

For others who were not in Fort Walton, or who are just getting involved, I am the author of A Very Short War: The Mayaguez and the Battle of Koh Tang, published in 1995 by Texas A&M Press. Larry Barnett and I were the symposium discussion leaders. It was a very intense and informative experience: four hours of exchanging memories and concerns in an attempt to determine what actually happened, particularly to your three missing buddies, Hargrove, Marshall and Hall.

I have carefully read The Last Battle, starting with those parts of the operation with which I am most familiar (for those who are tuning in late, when the operation went down I was an H-53 pilot assigned to the 40th ARRS, one of the two Air Force helicopter squadrons charged with putting the Marines on the island and, as it turned out, getting them off. I did not participate in the insertions or extractions, but

knew those who did and interviewed many of them shortly after the fact). I would like to be able to recommend The Last Battle to you. Regrettably, I cannot.

The reasons go to the heart of the book, starting with inadequate source attribution. Simply put, many of Wettehahn's citations are so imprecise that the reader has no way of differentiating between the source and the author. In reviewing his accounts of what happened, over and over I found myself asking "Is that what his source said-whether with regard to a document he consulted or an individual he interviewed-or is that his, Wetterhahn's, conclusion?" Frequently, where it counts most you can't tell.

In addition, in those portions of the book where I am familiar with the events and the sources, there are numerous errors of fact that can be checked against other sources... and evidently weren't.

Example: The account of the initial insertions on Koh Tang is hopelessly garbled. Knife 32 did not make an intial pass over the east beach. Mike Lackey, the pilot, saw the smoke from Knife 31's burning aux tank, held off and asked ABCCC ("Cricket") for clarification, diverted to rescue the crew of Knife 21 and then went in to the west beach. Jolly Green 41 was not the first helicopter in the first wave to attempt an insertion on the west beach after Knife 21 was fatally hit during. Jolly Green 41 was, in fact, the last of the first wave helicoters to try to put her Marines into the west beach. I could go on.

The account of the final extractions isn't any better. Jolly Green 44 started her first approach to the west beach with her landing light and searchlight inoperative. Wetterhahn says it was because they were "shot out" earlier in the day. Wrong. Jolly Green 44 had never been anywhere near the island-or enemy fire-until then. I can speak to this point with

some authority, having put 44 in commission back at Nakhon Phanom that afternoon. Further, Wetterhahn has Jolly Green 44's crew experiencing vertigo and going into the water in their initial attempt to put their Marines aboard Henry Holt "unaided by lighting." Where he got that, I have no idea. Jolly Green 44's crew had lots of problems that night, but trying to land on an unlighted pad aboard Holt wasn't one of them. Henry Holt was an aviation-capable frigate and her pad would have been properly lighted-she was well out of small arms range from Koh Tang with no reason not to turn the lights on-and I'll guarantee you that if Holt hadn't turned the lights on I'd have heard about it from Jolly Green 44's crew. For the record, JG 44's pilot, Bob Blough, was at the Fort Walton symposium, but hadn't had a chance to read The Last Battle. I'll be very interested in what he has to say about the accuracy of Wetterhahn's account. I don't expect any surprises.

All of this may sound like nit-picking over details, but details are important in war... and in attempts to try to unravel the truth of what happened afterwards. The above details are ones with which I am intimately familiar and to which I can testify to with certainty. But not all of Wetterhahn's slip-ups are minor. In the most glaring, he has Air Force Colonel Loyd Anders (Yes, Loyd-with one "L"-not Lloyd as Wetterhahn has it; he apparently didn't check the records, or maybe his copy editors did him in), the Director of Operations of the 56th Special Operations Wing who was in charge of planning of the helicopter assault on Koh Tang, aboard ABCCC during the operation, personally calling the shots during the initial insertions. Wrong. In fact, Anders was at U Tapao.

The above error was so unnecessary that I started by giving Wetterhahn the benefit of the doubt. Why manufacture something like that? I asked myself "Why in the world would Anders have been aboard ABCCC?" The ABCCC organization had its established procedures and manning; certainly, the

ABCCC command structure would never have let an outsider take charge of their battle staff without extraordinary pressure from above. Anders, whose responsibilities were on the ramp at U Tapao, would have had no reason to go. I couldn't believe that Wetterhahn would simply have made the whole thing up to spin a better story... but he did. I checked. Eye witness. On the ramp at U Tapao.

The above is all prelude to getting at the question of what happened to Echo Company's M-60 team. In his explanation, Wetterhahn depends heavily on Em Son, the presumed Kyhmer Rouge commander of communist forces on the island, and on then-captain Mykle Stahl, Echo Company commander. I tend to believe that Em Son is more or less who he claims to be, if for no other reason that Wetterhahn-to his credit-located and interviewed Em Son's family. Beyond that, I will not go.

Specifically, I am utterly skeptical of Em Son's claim that his Khmer Kraham force defending the island numbered only eighty-six. I'm sorry. Eighty-six men, no matter how highly motivated and well led, don't fight a reinforced Marine rifle company to a standstill, particularly when it had decent air support after Spectre got into the fight. Moreover, we have two independent American intelligence estimates that estimated Koh Tang's defenders as a battalion of around 200 men, an estimate that Colonel Austin and Captain Davis, to name two, consider credible, and-to me the cruncher-an intercepted communist transmission from the island shortly after the battle reporting casualties of 55 killed and 70 wounded (Very Short War, p. 126). I am prepared to believe that Em Son's men were tough-all the Marines I have talked to who were there say as much-but 145% casualties with no reinforcements is a little more than I am prepared to swallow.

As for Stahl's testimony, he left his Marines behind and thus

has an axe to grind. He also has a record of exaggerated, self-serving claims. In the last volume of the Marine Corps' official history of the Vietnam War, The Bitter End, he claims personal responsibility for having turned the second wave back to Koh Tang after the National Military Command Center had ordered it to return to Thailand. The notion that a Marine Captain, isolated aboard an Air Force helicopter over the Gulf of Siam and working through an Air Force pilot, a captain or lieutenant, could have done that all by himself-without leaving any imprint on the historical record except for his own, unsubstantiated claim-is preposterous.

Wetterhahn has advanced our quest for the truth about the missing three Marines, in part by pressing his sources harder than previous researchers had done, myself among them-for example I did not press Jim Davis and Gunny Mac hard enough to get the story of their offer to take a boat up to the beach the day after... but I would not go to press with that story had not MacNemar and Davis personally confirmed it to me. Wetterhahn played a part in obtaining the Em Son interviews, though the extent to which those are self-serving is anything but clear. Certainly, Wetterhahn does not address the issue in his book and until he does I will remain skeptical.

In the final analysis, Wetterhahn has not come up with an adequately documented and convincingly argued account of the action-indeed, his account of the action is shot through with easily-avoidable errors-and in particular of the fate of the missing three Marines. His explanation may be on target, and then again it may not. His treatment of the American side of the operation does not inspire confidence: if he can't get the American command and control structure right, how can we trust him with the Khymer Rouge? Finally and most basic, he does not give us the evidence on which he based his judgments and on which we can base ours. The case is very much an open one."

JOHN F. GUILMARTN, JR.

Larry Barnett's URL:<http://www.geocities.com/lbarnett777/>

Larry's email direct:[Larry Barnett](#)

Something you like/dislike about the site?? Ring up the:[Webmaster](#).

[Back to home page.](#)

[Over to related website page links.](#)

[Over to the chat room.](#)

[Over to the articles page.](#)



John Guilmartin; B.S., United States Air Force Academy, 1962; M.A., 1969; Ph.D., 1971, Princeton University.



Professor Guilmartin is an authority on military history, maritime history, and the history of technology. He is an early modern Europeanist whose research focuses primarily on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He also is interested in aerospace history and has written about the Vietnam war and the Gulf war.

Professor Guilmartin is well known for his *Gunpowder and Galleys: Changing Technology and Mediterranean Warfare in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974). More recently he has published "The Cutting Edge: An Analysis of the Spanish Invasion and Overthrow of the Inca Empire, 1532-1539 (Kenneth J. Andrien and Rolena Adorno, eds., *Transatlantic Encounters: Europeans and Andeans in the Sixteenth Century*; Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991): 40-69 and *A Very Short War: The Mayaguez and the Battle of Koh Tang* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M Press, 1995).

Professor Guilmartin is currently working on a book whose working title is *Galleys and Galleons: Gunpowder Ordnance and the Changing Face of Warfare at Sea, 1300-1650* for the British publisher Cassell; this book will be part of *The History of Warfare* series edited by John Keegan.

His e-mail address is Guilmartin.1@osu.edu. Professor Guilmartin also provides personal pages.

[Return to the Ohio State History Faculty Page](http://www.history.ohio-state.edu/people/guilmart.htm)