

Last Flight from Koh Tang

The *Mayaguez* Incident a Generation Later

By DAVID R. METS

The SS *Mayaguez*
before its capture

A-7 acquired intelligence on Koh Tang
and SS *Mayaguez* after its capture

OV-10 provided air support

U.S. Navy (Douglas Tesner)

The night was clear and the air stable. We could see the SS *Mayaguez* resting barely a mile to the north. We were at 7,500 feet in a lazy orbit to the left in an old 573, a trusty AC-130H. She was in fine shape; none of her complex systems was at less-than-optimum condition. The copilot was holding the speed perfectly, and the autopilot was maintaining altitude. It was a piece of cake to keep the plane on geometry (that is, to keep the aircraft in coordinated flight with the guns pointed directly at the target). All the guns were ready, and our crew was eager to shoot. I gazed sideways through my heads-up display and could see the muzzle flashes of the gun below. Located on the northeastern beach at Koh Tang, the gun's tracers were arcing far beneath

us. I knew that we would obliterate it with the first shot from our 105mm Howitzer. Our navigator was desperately begging Cricket¹ for permission to open fire.

The Context

In the spring of 1975, the United States had suffered some of the most humiliating experiences in its existence. Only months before, our prisoners had been released in North Vietnam. Our forces had withdrawn, and just a couple of weeks before the *Mayaguez* was captured by the Khmer Rouge, both Saigon and Phnom Penh had fallen to communist forces. Only months earlier, President

Richard Nixon resigned in the face of what seemed certain impeachment. President Gerald Ford had assumed the office without being elected. Many thought the rest of the world was wallowing in the notion that America, defeated and humiliated by a third-rate power, had become a helpless giant.

It was just at that moment, on the afternoon of May 12, 1975, that the communist Cambodians, exuberant in the wake of their recent victory over their U.S.-sponsored enemies, grabbed the SS *Mayaguez*. This merchant ship was proceeding through international waters, carrying exchange merchandise. It was headed northwestward toward a destination in southern Thailand. The *Mayaguez* was not a big ship, but it was under the American flag with a crew of 39 people of various nationalities, including American citizens.

The *Mayaguez* managed to get off an SOS before being captured, but the Khmers

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U.S. Air Force

AC-130H provided air support during rescue operation for SS Mayaguez



took the ship without any casualties and brought it to anchor near Puolo Wai Island. The SOS was relayed to Washington in short order, and that evening a U.S. Navy P-3 Orion located the *Mayaguez* at the island. On Tuesday, May 13, the ship was reported under way, presumably headed for the Cambodian mainland port of Kompong Som about 90 miles to the northeast. This aggravated fears in Washington because it recalled the experience of the USS *Pueblo* 7 years earlier. The latter had been brought into a North Korean port before forces could be marshaled to stop it. Once taken to the interior, the chances of rescuing a crew with military force were much diminished.

Captain Charles Miller, skipper of the *Mayaguez*, managed to dissuade the Khmers from going into Kompong Som with the claim that his radar was out and that he could not safely bring the ship in without it. Thus, the Khmers decided to bring it to anchor off the north end of Koh Tang, an island closer to the mainland but still well outside 12 miles and under disputed ownership.

There were still three U.S. Air Force fighter wings in Thailand, and on May 13, they were ordered to monitor the *Mayaguez* and attempt to prevent further movement of the ship and the crew. This included direction to stop waterborne traffic both ways between the mainland and the island. They managed this well, sinking three Cambodian gunboats and damaging four others. However, they could not stop a captive Thai fishing boat from moving to Kompong Som on that same day. A 388th Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW) A-7 pilot reported seeing Caucasians on its deck during low passes. Many shots were fired across the bow, and riot control agents were dropped. The Thai crew was in favor of returning to Koh Tang, but the Khmer guards persisted. Aircraft followed the boat, but the rules of engagement prohibited going inside 12 miles of the coast, so the pilots lost track of

the boat in the haze. Jets were monitoring the situation at Koh Tang during the day with the help of tankers, and the 388th TFW AC-130s with their radars, low-light televisions, and infrared sensors continued the work through the night of May 13.

The Planning

The work continued after dawn on May 14 while deliberations were going on in Washington, Hawaii, and Thailand. As always, information was in short supply, and the planners had to fill gaps in their knowledge with assumptions. Unhappily, perhaps, there were more planners than information. The President, National Security Council, and Joint Chiefs of Staff were working in Washington. The authority in Thailand was the U.S. Support Activities Group (USSAG/7AF) commander, Lieutenant General John J. Burns, USAF, at Nakhon Phanom. He sent the commander of the subordinate 17th Air Division to the coastal base at U-Tapao to serve as the on-scene commander there. He also tried to get authority to go directly to the National Military Command Center in Washington for orders, bypassing the regional commander at U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) in Hawaii. But the USPACOM commander would have none of that. Thus, the USSAG commander had no Army, Navy, or Marine units under his command. Neither the C-141s all over the Pacific, nor the B-52s at Guam, nor the KC-135 tankers there or at U-Tapao were under his direction. However, the long distance communications then had advanced to the point where he could instantly speak with USPACOM or the National Military Command Center.

Meanwhile, the Joint Chiefs of Staff under General David Jones, USAF, were getting forces rolling well before the plan took shape. The Navy was ordered to find and monitor the ship with its patrol aircraft. A thousand Marines flew

from Okinawa to U-Tapao via Air Force C-141s, and B-52s at

Guam went on alert. The Air Force units in Thailand hurried down to Koh Tang to keep track of the situation. Helicopters from all over Thailand converged to muster at U-Tapao. The USS *Coral Sea*, an attack carrier, was near Australia. The carrier changed course for the Gulf of Siam and steamed toward the trouble as fast as possible. The amphibious carrier USS *Hancock*, in port at Subic Bay in the Philippines, likewise set out with its Marines and helicopters with all possible haste. The surface warships USS *Holt* and USS *Wilson* were closer to the action and sped on without delay. Twelve Sailors and merchant mariners also flew out of Subic for U-Tapao in case their expertise was necessary to sail the *Mayaguez* away after recovery. The State Department attempted to contact the Cambodians through the Chinese and to make approaches to the United Nations for assistance.²

During this time, I was the operations officer of the 16th Special Operations Squadron (SOS) equipped with the AC-130s. Our job was to be ready to maintain surveillance and halt waterborne traffic through the night—with no idea how many nights might be involved. The squadron commander flew down to Koh Tang through Tuesday night, so I was left in charge of assuring that we had enough rested crews on alert and ready airplanes to maintain watch all night, every night. It took over an hour to fly down to Koh Tang, and each aircraft could remain on the scene for about 4 hours before coming back. None of our latest airplanes was equipped with external tanks. Neither the AC-130A nor AC-130H was capable of aerial refueling. Moreover, the older AC-130A did not have the endurance of the AC-130H, even when configured with external tanks. The gunship was, therefore, a limited resource and would have to be conserved if it was to be the sole source of surveillance and firepower in the hours of darkness.

On Wednesday, I knew, or thought I knew, from the intelligence brought back by our A-7 pilot that the *Mayaguez* crew was

once taken to the interior, the chances of rescuing a crew with military force were much diminished

not on Koh Tang. But this was not so clear back in Washington. There, the thought had arisen that only a part of the crew was gone and the rest might still be on the island.³ Also, there were wildly varying estimates as to the Khmer strength there. The landing Marines thought they would meet only token resistance. The communications between the higher commands and the Marines at U-Tapao were not adequate, and some of the things known to USSAG were not passed on to them. Lieutenant Colonel Randall Austin, USMC, was designated to command the landing force. He commandeered an Army U-21 to fly down to Koh Tang for visual reconnaissance but was not allowed to go below 6,000 feet, so he could learn little. In Washington, there was urgency about it all. Some have said it was because of the memory of the *Pueblo* capture; others have argued that President Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger had the need to show the rest of the world that the United States was not a paper tiger—that the Nation still could be relied upon as a formidable partner. Moreover, the argument went, Kim Il-Sung in North Korea needed to be sent a message; some were afraid that he would take advantage of our temporary weakness by aggressive moves in the Korean Peninsula.⁴

The option of bombing the mainland with B-52s was soon rejected as overkill.⁵ Gradually, a plan was maturing to land Marines on Koh Tang to rescue the prisoners while at the same time bombing Kompong Som with tactical airpower from carriers. The political leadership wanted to know if it could be done on Wednesday, May 14. But the Joint Chiefs of Staff were strongly against this plan as being too hasty. Later, some in the media claimed that the administration was unwilling to give diplomacy a chance because it might deprive it of a fleeting opportunity to prove that the United States was not weak. But the military leaders argued that they could not be ready that early—in fact, they wanted to delay the landings and the bombing until Friday, May 16.

The resulting compromise was that the helicopters gathered at U-Tapao would carry the Marines to Koh Tang at first light on Thursday, May 15. One of the special operations helicopters from Nakon Phanom had crashed, killing 18 security policemen

and 5 crewmembers, so there were only 11 operational choppers left. Three of these were to be used for a *Mayaguez* boarding party.

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The remaining eight would simultaneously land the first wave of Marines on Koh Tang. The *Coral Sea* by then was to be close enough to launch an attack wave to bomb the airfield at Kompong Som just as the Marines were landing. No prelanding bombardment was permitted for fear that part of the *Mayaguez* crew was still on the island. Air Force assets were to be overhead, however, to deliver close air support after the Marines were ashore. They could not be used for operations against the mainland because that would be a violation of Thai national sovereignty, which was stressed enough with the operations at U-Tapao.⁶

The Execution

I never did get to fire a shot on that Wednesday night. Enemy fire was consistently coming up at us from the beach at the north-eastern cove of Koh Tang. Cricket refused permission to return fire and ordered us to leave the area. So old 573 sped off northward to spread the alarm about the antiaircraft fire coming up at Koh Tang's northeastern cove. There had been no surface traffic during our midnight watch, but we informed the debriefing intelligence officer of the exact location of the enemy gun and wearily went to bed during the early hours of Thursday morning. By 0600, I was back in the squadron trying to make sure that we had crews and aircraft lined up for the midnight rides of May 15.

The three choppers taking Marines to the USS *Holt* quickly did their jobs. They then returned to U-Tapao to prepare for the second

wave of landings on Koh Tang. The landing force of eight helicopters was not so fortunate. The insertion began on both eastern and western beaches at 0609 on May 15. According to Captain Miller of the *Mayaguez*, at about the same time that day, 0620, and many miles away, he and his crew, along with the Thai captive crewmen, were put back aboard the fishing boat for the trip back to their own ship—without Khmer escorts.

The guns on the eastern beach had a better shot at the low-level inbound helicopters than they had at old 573 the night before. Almost immediately, two of the choppers were shot down on the approach. Fifteen Airmen, Marines, and Sailors died at that point. Some did survive, however, and they struggled out of the water and headed for the tree line to get some cover from the heavy fire. Unhappily, their standard radios for controlling close air support were lost in the surf, and it was not easy to organize air support without them. Soon, though, some communication with the aircraft above was set up using a survival radio on guard frequency.

The landings on the western beach were not as bad but still were no picnic. The opposition was so fierce that Colonel Austin's command group was not landed on the proper beach but many yards to the south and out of contact with the main group. After several approaches, the choppers were able to offload their Marines safely. Another helicopter was lost in this operation. It took heavy fire but was able to fly away from the beach a bit, and the pilot ditched the helicopter at sea. Part of the crew was rescued. No one at Koh Tang had any knowledge that the *Mayaguez* crew had already been released. Austin still thought that his mission was to sweep the island to find the crew, but his isolated position and



Marines return from Koh Tang rescue operation to USS *Coral Sea*

RECALL

the fierce opposition prevented him from reuniting the three fragments of his force.

Meanwhile, the Cambodians had made a radio broadcast in their own language at about the time of the initial landings.⁷ They had declared that they were going to release the ship (with no mention of the crew). Not long after, there were air reports of the fishing boat proceeding toward the island with white flags flying. The *Coral Sea* was still some miles away but close enough to be launching its first wave of attacks. The uncertainties made President Ford put a temporary hold on the mainland attacks, but by the time he decided to go ahead, the Navy aircraft were so low on fuel that they had to jettison their bombs into the sea and return to their ship. The second attack wave was launched and hit targets as ordered, as did the third wave—both after the *Mayaguez* crew had been released.

Once President Ford had confirmed that both ship and crew had been recovered safely, he ordered the withdrawal. Only three flyable helicopters had made it back to U-Tapao, but two more had come out of maintenance in the interim. They all loaded up Marines and quickly turned around for Koh Tang. En route, after President Ford ordered the withdrawal, those five choppers were ordered back to U-Tapao with their Marines. However, when Colonel Austin discovered this, he protested and asked that the second wave be delivered as planned. He still did not know the *Mayaguez* crew had been recovered and believed that he had to sweep the island. By the time the second wave arrived, the close air support was working a bit better, and though the opposition was still fierce, they were able to get their Marines ashore without loss of more aircraft or men. It was only at this time that Austin discovered from the incoming wave that his mission was canceled and that the task now was to make a safe withdrawal.

The Withdrawal

Gradually, the Marines, now with somewhat better air support directed by forward air controllers in OV-10s, were able to consolidate their forces on the western beach and to set up some reasonable defenses. However, the outbound trip was not promising. There were so few choppers left for the work that it appeared the landing force might have to

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stay on the beach until the next day—which would mean that the 16th SOS would have to supply an air umbrella of its AC-130s over them through yet another complete night. During the morning, Cricket had ordered one of its gunships to tarry in the area and then to go into U-Tapao for refueling and return to Koh Tang. It did vital work supplying precise close air support when the enemy was so close to the Marines that bombs could not be used. However, there were no fresh crews at U-Tapao, and the delay in the return of the airplane and crew so disrupted the flow that we would have been hard pressed to keep up constant air cover through the night of May 15. Happily, that was not necessary because of the timely arrival of the *USS Coral Sea*.

The presence of the ship eliminated the time-consuming round trip to U-Tapao for the H-53s and even provided the maintenance and refueling help to keep them in commission. One chopper had a fuel line shot out, and the aircraft crew, assisted by ship's personnel, jury-rigged a repair out of rubber hose. On another extraction, an Air Force junior officer decided that the trip to the *Coral Sea* was too far, so he decided to offload his Marines through the front door while hovering, as the *USS Holt* helipad was too small for an H-53 landing. In so doing, though, he was able to shorten the turnaround to save more lives. On the very last extraction, while his pilot was hovering with the tail ramp over the beach, an Air Force technical sergeant, Wayne Fisk, decided on one last sweep on foot around the western beach in search of any Marines who might be still there. He found two, and the last men seen on the island scampered back aboard the last flight from Koh Tang. It was over.

Unhappily, a Marine machinegun crew had been isolated to the south of the lodgment and three of them were indeed left behind—all three killed by the Khmers, and their names are the last ones entered on the Vietnam Memorial in Washington.⁸

The Aftermath

Some Thais, especially the political leaders, were unhappy with the United States.⁹ There was no delaying the redeployment of our older AC-130As. That we got them all out on time was a minor miracle. For the

rest, the operations went on as normal. At first, in the exuberance of the moment, the word that came down from on high was that everyone who flew in the episode would get an air medal, and those who fired their weapons a distinguished flying cross. Still using typewriters, that kept a bunch of folks out of trouble for 3 weeks; there were 14 members on each crew and the total mounted up. But the chest-thumping quickly disappeared. As soon as the word came down that a General Accounting Office team was to visit us and the other air units in Thailand on an investigation of the incident, all those medal recommendations were junked and only air medals were to go to the crews who fired their weapons.

What caused the Khmers to release the crew? That is still unresolved. It could have been their intention all along, as with the crews of other ships that they had detained in the preceding days. It might have been because the local commander at sea acted without orders, and he was countermanded as soon as the senior leadership in Cambodia learned what he had done. It might have been that the Khmer leaders were properly dissuaded by the sinking of the gunboats and the display of airpower prior to the Marine landings. Because the Cambodians announced their intention to release at the time of the landings, which was done within the next 20 minutes, they could not yet have known of the assault. Thus, they were not coerced by the landings. As the crew was released long before the first bomb fell on Kompong Som, the attacks on the mainland could not have persuaded them. It is highly unlikely that they knew of the B-52s on alert at Guam, so it is equally unlikely that they were the cause of the release. Moreover, the decisionmakers probably did not know of the inbound *USS Hancock* with its impressive load of Marines, rotary-wing gunships, and additional troop-carrying choppers. However, maybe they *did* realize that they had stung a giant and that dire things would be possible if they did not act quickly.

Did U.S. action properly impress the rest of the world as to the Nation's capability and will? There were many declarations in the media that said so, but most of them were in America. Even at the time, many overseas reporters scoffed. As always, there

were arguments on both sides among foreign nations. That the United States was able to marshal such forces on such short notice may have impressed some as to the dangers of being an adversary and the benefits of friendship. Others also argued that the United States is irrationally quick on the trigger, and that may have induced caution in potential adversaries.¹⁰ Some sympathized with Cambodia on the territorial waters claims.¹¹

Since President Ford was not elected, there was a good deal of domestic discontent at the time, and some were arguing that he was insufficiently “Presidential” to manage the affairs of a great country.¹² After the initial euphoria, the opposition soon began to find fault. They argued that the whole thing was an overreaction for the purpose of political campaigning. Also, when the victims in the helicopter crash were added to the 18 who died on Koh Tang, the total came to 41—more than the number of people who had been rescued. Henry Kissinger had been criticized as saying that the lives of the *Mayaguez* crewmembers were secondary considerations, which raised a storm of protest.¹³ The argument went that he was so power hungry that impressing foreign adversaries was more important than life itself. It was soon known that General Jones and the Joint Chiefs of Staff had been arguing for a delay until Friday. That added force to the argument that haste makes waste and that lives would not have been lost at all on Koh Tang had that advice been accepted. To claim that President Ford lost the election of 1976 because of the incident would certainly be an oversimplification, as there were many other factors involved.

At that stage of the game, strategic communications had advanced to the point where micromanagement was a real problem. Cricket could communicate directly with the Pentagon and USPACOM, passing information to them from old 573, but there was a breakdown in local communications in that Marine Corps commanders on scene were often out of touch with higher headquarters, even those at U-Tapao.

The command and control relationships were not well defined in advance, and decisions were often made at the higher levels

between Nakhom Phanom and Washington without the knowledge of the ground commanders at the scene.

The AC-130s had frequently trained with the HH-53s and A-7s in simulated rescue exercises, practicing on-scene command and control and close air support. However, there had been no training at all in conjunction with the Marines, nor any practice of assault landing operations. Nor had there been any training with the Navy. Because all the personnel in the air units in Thailand had been on 1-year tours, such experience and training were highly perishable. This was also the case with the Marines on Okinawa, who were on tours of limited duration.

As the Bay of Pigs, the Son Tay Raids, and the *Pueblo* crisis before the *Mayaguez* suggested, if something can go wrong, it will—even when there is time for detailed planning and rehearsal. Five years after the *Mayaguez* incident, *Desert One* went down in the attempt to rescue the Iranian hostages. It did not do any more than the *Mayaguez* case to recommend the efficiency of U.S. joint operations. It was not really in the same category because it was a preplanned event, but like President Ford, President Jimmy Carter was to pay the political price for the shortfalls. Both events were factors in the genesis of the Goldwater-Nichols legislation, and subsequent joint operations do seem to have improved. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Cricket was the call sign for an airborne command and control center built into a C-130 that could loiter in a battle area for long periods, providing direction and control for the lethal aircraft.

² U.S. Comptroller General, “The Seizure of the *Mayaguez*—A Case Study of Crisis Management,” a report to the Subcommittee on International Political and Military Affairs, House Committee on International Relations, 94th Congress, 2^d sess. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), 58.

³ Thomas Des Birsay, *Fourteen Hours at Koh Tang*, Southeast Asia Monograph Series No. 5

(Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), 104.

⁴ Michael J. Hamm, “The *Pueblo* and *Mayaguez* Incidents,” *Asian Survey*, no. 28 (June 1977), 554; “Uncle Sam’s Schooldays,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* (May 30, 1975), 9; “Machismo Diplomacy,” *The Nation* (May 31, 1975), 643.

⁵ Gerald R. Ford, *The Autobiography of Gerald R. Ford: A Time to Heal* (New York: Berkley, 1979), 272, claimed that he rejected the B-52 attacks in favor of carrier bombing because he thought the latter would be more surgical and proportionate to desired results.

⁶ “Uncle Sam’s Schooldays,” 9; Cecile Menetrey-Monchau, “The *Mayaguez* Incident as an Epilogue to the Vietnam War and Its Reflection of the Post-Vietnam Political Equilibrium in Southeast Asia,” *Cold War History*, no. 5 (August 2005), 349–350; John F. Guilmartin, *A Very Short War* (College Station: Texas A&M, 1995), 149.

⁷ Christopher J. Lamb, “Belief Systems and Decision Making in the *Mayaguez* Crisis,” *Political Science Quarterly*, no. 99 (Winter 1984–1985), 682.

⁸ Those lost were PFC Gary L. Hall, USMC, Lance Corporal Joseph N. Hargrove, USMC, and Private Danny G. Marshall, USMC.

⁹ Norman Peagam, “Thailand’s Turn to Protest,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* (May 30, 1975), 12.

¹⁰ Hamm, 551.

¹¹ Michael Morrow, “Ford: Fastest Gun in the East,” *Far Eastern Economic Review* (May 30, 1975), 10; “Machismo Diplomacy,” 642.

¹² William Shawcross, “Making the Most of *Mayaguez*,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, no. 88 (May 30, 1975), 10; Lloyd C. Gardner, “Foreign Policy in IV Acts,” *The Nation* (July 19, 1975), 41; Menetrey-Monchau, 338.

¹³ Shawcross, 687.

when the victims in the helicopter crash were added to the 18 who died on Koh Tang, the total came to more than the number rescued

H-53 was used to carry Marines to Koh Tang during rescue operation