

12 May 1975: Koh Tang, Cambodia (additional information on this mission is found on page 155). The American merchant ship **SS MAYAGUEZ** is sailing ^{IN INTERNATIONAL WATERS,} through the normal shipping lane of the Gulf of Siam en route from Hong Kong to the Thailand port of Sattahip. It is late Monday afternoon when two small Cambodian gun boats suddenly approach and fire warning shots across the bow. The gunboats pull alongside and nine men armed with automatic weapons, rocket launchers and grenades board the **MAYAGUEZ**, they are soon learned to be forces of the Cambodian revolutionary Khmer Rouge. The radio officer is able to transmit several quick "Maydays" before he is denied further communications and word of the seizure quickly reaches the White House.

President Ford demands the ship and crew be released

IT IS NOT THE DUTY OF THE MILITARY, OR NAVY, BUT THE OBLIGATION OF THE SHIP'S CREW TO RESIST TO THE POINT OF DEATH. THIS IS THE ONLY WAY TO SURVIVE IN THE LIGHT OF THE PRESENT SITUATION IN INDOCHINA.

immediately. During the next sixty some hours the State Department is attempting diplomatic resolution while the

Defense Department is gathering its military forces and

THE ACT APPEARS TO BE FOUNDED UPON THE BELIEF THAT THE UNITED STATES LACKS THE WILL OR ABILITY TO ACT DECISIVELY IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

considering its options. Tuesday morning, U.S. Air Force

spotter planes fly nearby and are fired upon as the

Cambodians move the ship through uncharted waters to a

ABOUT ONE AND ONE HALF MILES OFF THE NORTHEASTERN TIP OF
position, near Koh Tang Island and drop anchor. The

MAYAGUEZ crew is removed to a Taiwanese fishing vessel and taken to the Island. But from the air, U.S pilots are not able to observe with certainty whether the crew remains on

the Island or is removed by one of the boats moving between the Island and Sihanoukville on the mainland. They strafe and bomb the area around the boats in an attempt to turn them around, but some continue on even after being covered with tear gas. Meanwhile, the military options are ~~THE PROBLEM IS TO SEIZE THE SHIP AND RESCUE THE CREW MEMBERS~~ narrowing. Among the many options under consideration the most expeditious one with the probability of success calls for the movement of elements of the 1st Battalion, Fourth Marines from the Philippines, and the 2nd Battalion, Ninth Marines, from Okinawa to U. Tapao Thailand. The task of delivering the Marines from U Tapao the 190 miles to Koh Tang Island is assigned to the USAF 21st Special Operations Squadron and the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron stationed at Nakhon Phanom, Thailand. Both squadrons utilize large helicopters. The 21st is to supply seven CH-53s (call sign Knife), and the 40th is to supply eight HH-53s (call sign Jolly Green). These are well armed helicopters, air refuelable, and capable of carrying twenty to twenty-seven fully equipped Marines round trip, U Tapao to Koh Tang Island and return with some time over station. This is an unusual mission assignment for the normally Special Operations and Combat Search and Rescue squadrons, but no other assets are available within the time constraints. The assault force is briefed at 0100,

Thursday 15 May, and the helicopters begin lifting off at 0414. Orders are for Jolly Green 11, 12 and 13 to deposit a contingent of fifty-nine Marines, plus nine others, on board the **USS HOLT** who will become a boarding party for the **MAYAGUEZ**. The remaining helicopters will place a force of approximately 180 Marines on two beaches at the north end of the Island. Pararescuemen aboard each helicopter are: Jolly Green 11, John Eldridge, Joseph Stanaland, Brad Marx; Jolly Green 12 (First Crew), David Grey, Burt Cook; Jolly Green 12 (Second Crew), David Patterson, Randy Styer; Jolly Green 13, Karl Froehlich, Ronald Lundrigan, Steven Lemmin; Jolly Green 41, Thomas Beranek, John Ferris, Fred Rhinehart; Jolly Green 42, Michael Brown, Lewis Dunham; Jolly Green 43, Peter Harding, Thomas Bateson, Dennis McKiver; Jolly Green 44, Bruce Daly, David Ash; Knife 51, Wayne Fisk, ^{2 K L L P K D} ___?___ Cooper. En route, the helicopters are given a preview of the day by being fired upon by Khymer Rouge patrol boats. Offloading the Marine boarding party from the Jolly Greens to the **USS HOLT** requires the helicopter to hover, but not set down on over the vessel's small helicopter pad while each man deplanes one by one through the crew door taking about ten minutes each to unload. Simultaneously, the remaining helicopters approach the Island. Knives 21 and 22 approach the East beach while

Knives 23 and 31 approach the West beach. It is now
THE RESISTANCE AND STRENGTH OF THE ENEMY FORCES ARE MUCH GREATER THAN
 shortly after 0600, and the beginning of a long day. As *EXPLODED.*

Knife 21 lands and begins to offload the Marines and Knife
 22 comes to a hover, a storm of small arms and heavy
 automatic weapons fire erupts from the jungle. Knife 21
 loses an engine and even though they become airborne they
 are unable to maintain altitude, and ditch in the water a
 short distance from the Island. The craft rolls over and
 sinks. Knife 22 sustains heavy damage and lands on a
 Thailand beach eighty miles east of U Tapao with its
 Marines still on board. Knife 23 is just touching down on
 the West beach when even more intense fire erupts and they
 lose an engine and the tail pylon is shot off. The Marines
 and helicopter crew scramble off and head for cover in the
 tree line. Knife 31 is less than fifty yards out when it
 is hit by small arms and heavy automatic weapon fire. They
 try to abort and climb away but the aircraft explodes into
 a ball of flames; however, the pilot is able to set it down
 in about four feet of water. Knife 32 and Jolly Green 42
 successfully insert their Marines, and after aerial
 refueling reach U Tapao, but are badly damaged and out of
 commission. Jolly Green 11 and 12 escort Knife 22 to their
 emergency landing, then return to U Tapao along with Jolly
 Green 43 where they reload and return with a second load of

Marines. Knife 51 and 52, which have now become operational are also now in the force. The boarding party is placed pirate-style aboard the **MAYAGUEZ**. They find the ship deserted, and the **USS HOLT** attaches a tow and begins pulling the vessel clear of the area. The guided missile destroyer **HENRY B. WILSON** arrives off the East beach and spots survivors from Knife 31 swimming in the water. Soon after making rescue, a small vessel is spotted coming from the mainland. ~~From a White Flag~~ A television camera with zoom telephoto lens reveals it is the **MAYAGUEZ** crew aboard a Thai fishing boat. With the ship and crew back in American custody; it now remains the task of disengaging the Marines from the Island. But the landing zones are not yet secure enough for the helicopters to land and withdraw them. The Marines ~~are under heavy fire from the Communist troops.~~ Air Force and navy fighter-bomber aircraft are hitting the enemy positions from the air. The Henry B. Wilson is shelling the beach and an AC-130 Spectre, with its' varied firepower, is providing direct fire support as well. The operation is now becoming a series of rescue missions. Further attempts are being made to insert additional Marines but their efforts do not bear immediate success. They face intense small arms fire and take many hits. Jolly Greens 11 and 12 are successful at offloading their

Marines and Jolly Green 12 takes wounded aboard. Jolly Green 43 and Knife 51 are successful at offloading their Marines. The landing zone is anything but secure, but a combination of suppressive Marine fire and PJ and flight engineer manned helicopter mini-guns hold down the enemy response until the helicopters get in and out. Jolly Greens 11 and 43 are tasked to attempt the rescue of the isolated group on the East beach. A flight of A-7s lay down a screen of tear gas and Jolly Green 43, its' crew wearing gas masks, flies in for the rescue. Due to the wind, however, the gas becomes a white backdrop and silhouettes the helicopter. As '43 slows to a hover the Communist gunners open fire severing a main fuel line on the left side. The left engine shuts down and fuel under pressure spews into the cabin area. Jolly Green 11 escorts them to a safe landing on the **U.S.S. CORAL SEA**. They are both promptly invited to leave by the Captain who declares he will have his people "cut off the rotor blades and push them overboard." He has aircraft in the air which are due back shortly, and the helicopters are blocking the landing deck. Repairs are quickly made and the Jollies are soon back in the fight. Jolly Green 13 lands on the north beach and is immediately plastered with small arms fire. Aborting the mission and the quick jettison of a burning

flare case by Pararescueman Steven Lemmin saves the crew, but a damaged fuel tank and fuel lines render the aircraft no longer battle-worthy. They are able to fly to within twenty-five miles of U Tapao before being forced to land near a road, due to low fuel. With evening approaching, Jolly Green 11 is tasked to attempt the recovery of the twenty-five Americans from the East beach, supported by Jolly Green 12, Knife 51, Jolly Green 43, a gig from the **HENRY B. WILSON**, and two SH-3's from the **U.S.S. CORAL SEA**. Jolly Green 11 hovers backwards into a large rock outcropping, sitting the ramp on them like a loading dock. Spectre opens fire, PJs Wayne Fisk and ~~Ray~~ Cooper knock the cabin windows from Knife 51 and provide suppressive fire. **WILSON's** gig is laying fire just north of the landing position. Some of the Marines are dug in along the tree line and are reluctant to board, probably because they are not sure of their chances of a successful escape. The downed aircrew from Knife 23 recognizes that this may very well be their last chance out and they run for the helicopter. The Marines now follow and come scrambling, returning fire at the enemy, ducking the spinning helicopter tail rotor blades, climbing over the backs of the guys in front, everyone screaming, four and five men deep, trapping those closest to the ramp, attempting to

scale over and onto the ramp. The pararescuemen are hauling bodies from the back of the stack, dragging them up and over the others, tossing them aboard behind them. As the helicopter quickly pulls away from the rocks, one Marine is still hanging off the ramp clinging onto the mini-gun mount. Pararescueman Brad Marx pulls him on board to safety as PJs John Eldridge and Joseph "Stu" Stanaland provide emergency medical treatment to the wounded. A C-130 drops a fifteen-thousand-pound BLU-82 bomb on the center of the island. Believing there is still a survivor on board Knife 23, lying in the water, Jolly Green 12 attempts a rescue. Knife 51 gives cover fire with its' mini-guns, but enemy fire is too severe. Jolly Green 12 is badly damaged and the flight mechanic is shot and wounded while operating the hoist. Jolly Green 12 is able to recover on the **U.S.S CORAL SEA**, but is out of the fight. Extraction of the remainder of the Marines from the West beach area is initiated just as the sun is going down. Knife 51, Jolly Green 43 and 44, with cover fire from a variety of ships and aircraft, make swift pickups from the beach and transport them to the **U.S.S. CORAL SEA** and the **U.S.S. HOLT**. There are as many as forty Marines on board for some trips. After a number of attempts, Knife 51 lands backwards onto the now flooded beach. Under intense

fire the remaining Marines board the helicopter. Pararescueman Wayne Fisk leaves the helicopter twice to ensure that no Marines are left behind. Hurrying along the beach he is engaged by enemy fire. He responds with his GAU-5 and so becomes the last U.S. ground combatant of the Vietnam War. Knife 51 lifts off quickly as Fisk re-boards the aircraft, the ramp, still in the down position, drops even further. He falls on his back and begins sliding out of the aircraft. With much grabbing of arms, legs, clothing, and aircraft parts, he and the Marine passengers get him safely back inside the helicopter as everyone heads for more friendly territory. Five pararescuemen are awarded the Silver Star for Gallantry, while seventeen receive the Distinguished Flying Cross or the Air Medal for their efforts this day.

Source

26 June 1996: Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, Khobar Tower Barracks Complex. Members of the 4411th Rescue Squadron, a composite of the 41st and 71st Rescue Squadrons deployed to King Abdul Aziz Air Base, are housed in Building 131 of the