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ASSAULT ON KOH TANG (U)



NA F-105 2015-01-10
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OFFICE OF THE
COMMANDER IN CHIEF
PACIFIC AIR FORCES

25 Jun 75

TO: GENERAL CARLTON

Dear P.K.,

Had it not been for the determination and courage of our chopper crews in the assault landings at Koh Tang, the Mayaguez incident could have been a minus instead of a plus.

We have put the story together in the attached booklet. I think you will find it fascinating reading, particularly about the great job of the Jollys.

L. W.
LOUIS L. WILSON, JR.
General, USAF

(DJ)

Jan

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ABSTRACT (U)

(S) The U.S. military operation to recover the SS Mayaguez and its crew consisted of a number of related actions including the seizure of the Mayaguez, air strikes against military targets in the vicinity of Kompong Som and Ream, and insertion of USMC forces at Koh Tang island to search for the crew of the Mayaguez. This paper primarily addresses the major action--operations relating to the insertion and recovery of U.S. Marines at Koh Tang island.

(U) Many USAF, USN, and USMC units played a role in the assault on Koh Tang. Strikes by USAF aircraft, support by USAF FACs, naval gunfire, and recovery attempts by USN vessels were all important and deserve recognition. Yet, more than anything else, the insertion and extraction of U.S. Marines was made possible by the persistent efforts of USAF CH-53 and HH-53 helicopter crews. This paper focuses on the role of the helicopters which, despite heavy enemy fire and difficult conditions, were able to insert and recover some 230 U.S. Marines at Koh Tang.

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ASSAULT ON KOH TANG (U)

Background

(S) On 12 May 1975, Khmer Communist (KC) forces seized the Mayaguez in international waters approximately 8 nautical miles (NM) from Poulo Wai island. The island, which is 60 NM from Kompong Som, is claimed by both the KC and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam. Subsequently, the Mayaguez was moved to Koh Tang island, at which time the crew was removed and taken ashore.

(S) After diplomatic efforts to recover the ship and its crew had proven fruitless, President Ford directed their recovery by decisive military action. On the morning of 15 May (local time), Marines were flown to the USS Holt to subsequently board and retake the Mayaguez, other Marines were heli-lifted to Koh Tang island to search for and recover the crew, and strikes were directed against military targets in the Kompong Som area, and at Ream airfield.

(S) Seizure of the Mayaguez by the boarding party from the USS Holt was successful and without incident, as the ship had been abandoned. The primary objective of the operation, recovery of the Mayaguez crew, was attained rapidly--approximately three hours after U.S. military force was applied, the KC surrendered the complete crew of the Mayaguez. (It was later learned the crew had been moved from the Koh Tang vicinity to Kompong Som on the 13th, and then to an island off Kompong Som where they were held until their release.)

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(S) Yet, following the recovery of the ship and crew, the operation continued at Koh Tang where Marines were pinned down on the northern tip of the island. Strikes by USAF aircraft, support by USAF Forward Air Controllers (FACs) and the Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center (ABCCC), gunfire from USN ships, and recovery attempts by USN vessels all played a major role. The crucial element, however, was the participation of USAF CH-53 and HH-53 helicopters and crews. Although encountering heavy enemy fire and sustaining extensive damage, they inserted badly needed reinforcements on the island and then, during the extraction phase, persisted into the hours of darkness until the last Marines were out.

Phase I--Insertion (2300-0300 Zulu/0600-1000 Local)

(S) During the first phase of the operation, a total of 11 helicopters (six HH-53 "Jolly Green" and five CH-53 "Knife" aircraft*) were to carry U.S. Marines from U-Tapao Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB) to two beaches on Koh Tang island, and to the USS Holt. At approximately 2300Z 14 May (0600, 15 May, local), Jolly Green (JG) 11, 12, and 13 arrived at the USS Holt and began offloading a total of 57 Marines,** while the insertion of other Marines on Koh Tang began.

*The differences between the HH-53 and CH-53 are as follows: the HH-53 is air refuelable, has 450-gallon foam-filled tip tanks, a tail minigun with armor plating, and two "waist" miniguns. The CH-53 is not air refuelable, has 650-gallon non-foam-filled tip tanks and two miniguns, but no tail gun.

**The helicopters also delivered 11 other personnel: 6 civilian military sealift volunteers, 2 USAF EOD, 2 USN, and 1 U.S. Army linguist.

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(S) Koh Tang island is shown in Figure 1. The two landing areas,* on the eastern and western sides at the northern neck of the island, are shown in Figure 2. The western beach was divided into two landing zones (LZs), and the eastern beach, the larger of the two beaches, was divided into six LZs. A maximum of eight simultaneous insertions were thus theoretically possible, if required. The plan, however, was for helicopters to insert in pairs, separated by intervals of several minutes. No landing zone preparation by air strikes or naval gunfire occurred for fear of injury to Mayaguez personnel who could conceivably be in the landing zone vicinity.**

(S) Eight helicopters in four pairs approached Koh Tang at dawn, carrying Marine ground security forces totaling some 170 men. Knife (K) 21 and K 22 were to insert their Marines on the western beach, while K-23

*The Ground commander had reconnoitered Koh Tang in an Army U-21 the day prior to the operation and personally selected the LZs. They represented the nearest access to a group of structures in a cleared area, considered a likely detaining place for the Mayaguez crew.

**Heavy enemy resistance of the type encountered was not expected by planners of the operation. Available intelligence estimates varied from as low as 20 to as high as 150 enemy military personnel on the island of Koh Tang. The most recent intelligence, supported by USAF tactical photo reconnaissance of Koh Tang the day prior to the assault, indicated the presence of about 100 military personnel on the island, but the concentration of enemy forces and weapons at the LZs was greater than expected. Helicopter crews and FACs participating in the operation estimated enemy strength at about 300-400 men, judging from the volume of fire and intensity of resistance encountered. Marine personnel estimated enemy forces were two and one-half to three times greater than predicted. (However, considering the concentration of enemy forces at the neck of the island near the LZs, the fortified positions from which they operated, and the excellent field of fire which they enjoyed, it is possible that substantially less than 300-400 enemy soldiers were involved.)

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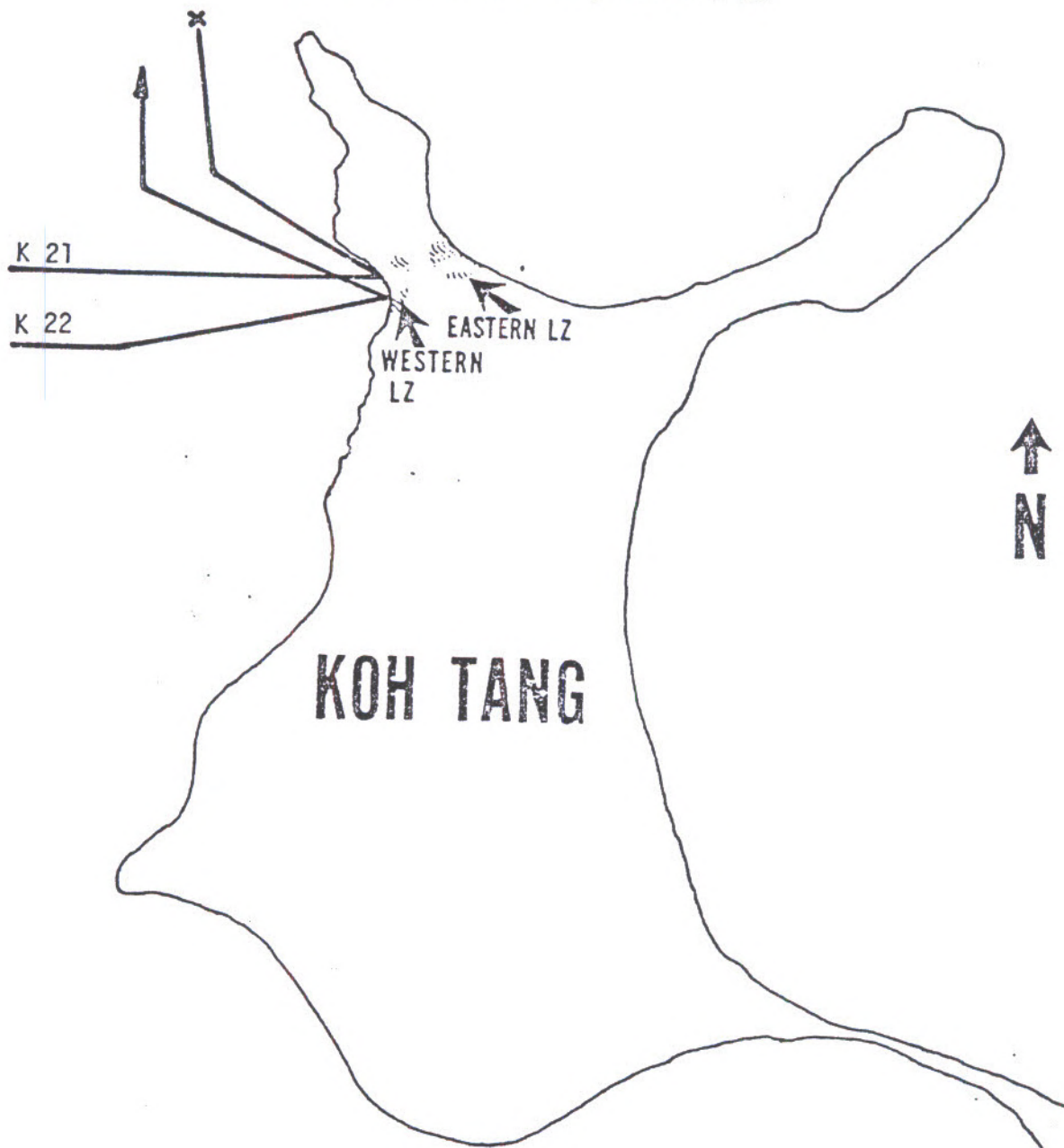
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FIGURE 3

MARINES INSERTED BY WAVE I - (20, Western LZ)

- K 21 - Inserts 20. One engine shot out in LZ. Ditched one mile from LZ (1 USAF KIA).
- K 22 - Major battle damage during second approach to LZ. Forced down 85 NM from U-Tapao on Thai coast. No Marines inserted.

TOTAL ON ISLAND: 20, Western LZ



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and K 31 were to be the first into the eastern beach. The third wave, K 32 and JG 41, and the fourth wave, JG 42 and JG 43, were to follow up with insertions on the eastern beach. All helicopters were then to return to U-Tapao for a second load of Marines. Planners envisioned insertion of a total of approximately 450-600 U.S. Marines on Koh Tang. ⁵

Wave One--Western Beach (See Figure 3)

(S) As K 21 approached the western beach with K 22 in trail, no enemy fire was encountered. Then, as K 21 began unloading its 20 Marines, the enemy opened up on both helicopters with small arms, rockets, and mortars. It was too late to withdraw and assess the enemy resistance--some Marines were already on the beach and making for the treeline. Knife 22 pulled back from the heavy fire, but, observing that K 21 was in trouble, went back in to lay down suppressive fire against enemy positions. In the meantime, when its last Marines had been off-loaded, K 21 made a single-engine take-off. The aircraft, which had only enough power to keep from sinking in the water and had damage to its transmission, made it about one mile away from the landing zone before ditching in the ocean. (One of the aircraft from the second wave, K 32, diverted to assist K 21 and recover the crew members.*) Knife 22 followed K 21, but seeing that K 32 was rendering assistance, headed back for the western beach. About 150 yards off shore, K 22 again encountered

*Initially, K 32 was too heavy to pick up the men from the water and had to dump fuel to lighten the aircraft. Three crew members were recovered, but the fourth crew member drowned. Information on all USAF personnel killed or wounded during the operation is provided in Attachment 3.

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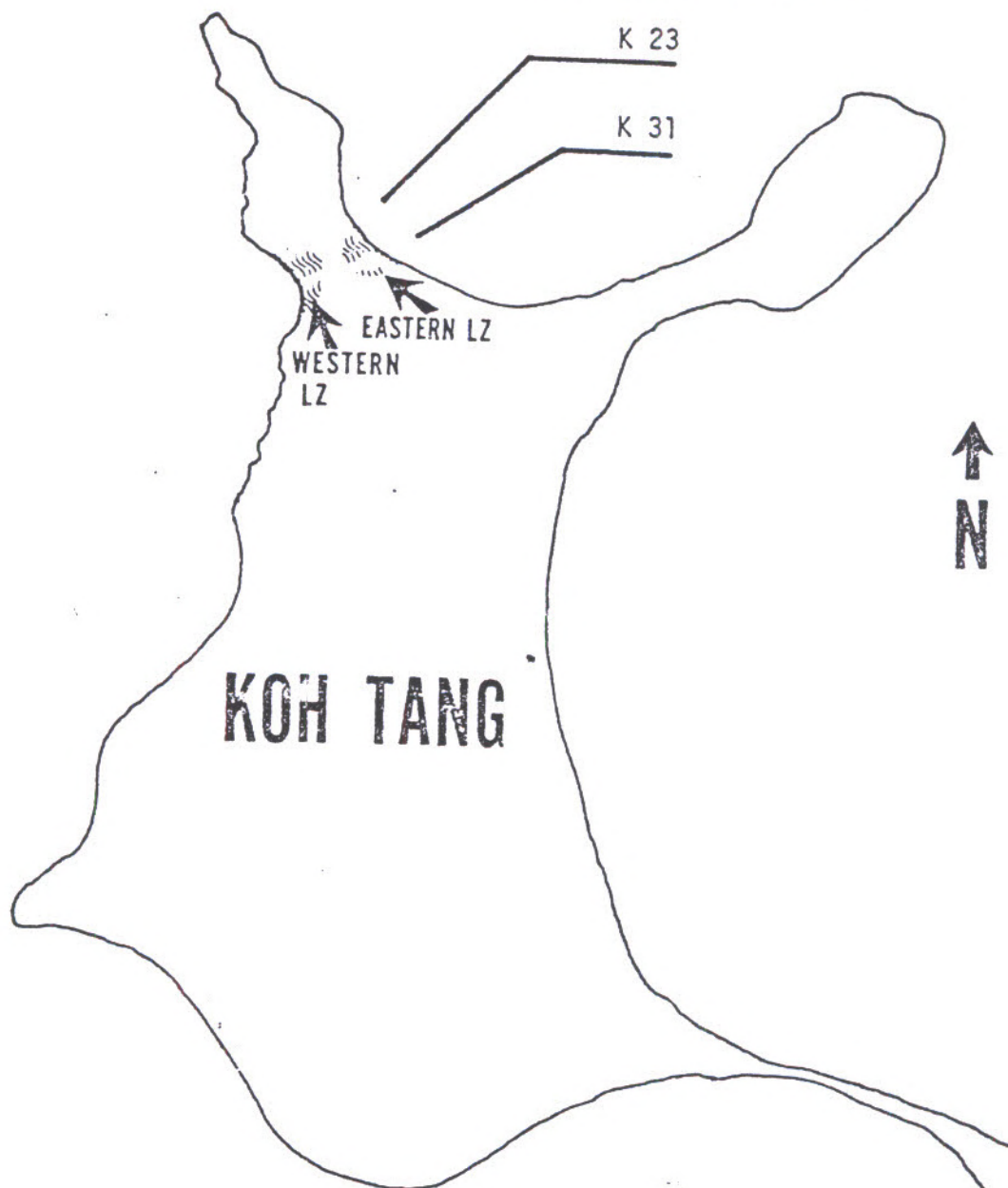
FIGURE 4

MARINES INSERTED BY WAVE II - (20 + 5 USAF Crew, Eastern LZ)

K 23 - Shot down in LZ. Crew (5) and 20 Marines make tree line.

K 31 - Shot down in LZ. 13 survivors picked up by USS Wilson. 13 KIA (1 USAF). No insertions.

TOTAL ON ISLAND: 20, Western LZ
20 + 5 USAF Crew, Eastern LZ



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heavy fire and began losing fuel rapidly. Knife 22 was severely damaged* and, unable to unload its Marines, aborted and headed for Thailand. The aircraft was escorted by JG 11 and JG 12, both of which had already delivered Marines to the USS Holt. Knife 22 later reached the Thai coast where it was forced down due to power loss in one engine and fuel exhaustion.⁶

Wave Two--Eastern Beach (See Figure 4)

(S) While K 21 and K 22 were encountering heavy fire on the western beach, the second helicopter wave (K 23 and K 31) approached the eastern beach. As K 23 reached the landing zone, with K 31 in trail, heavy enemy fire severely damaged K 23's rotor system. Knife 23 then attempted to exit with its Marines and picked up to a hover, at which time K 31 was seen bursting into flames. Knife 23 lost an engine and began vibrating severely. As it settled down, the tail section separated from the aircraft, which then impacted on the beach. The crew and Marines aboard (5 USAF** and 20 USMC) survived and established a position near the tree line. One of the crew, the co-pilot, called in air strikes throughout the day using a survival radio, serving as the only direct link between the Marines on the eastern beach and air support.⁷

*Specific battle damage sustained by individual aircraft during each mission is listed in the damage column, Attachment 1.

**The fifth crewman was a photographer. Three of the crew remained in the aircraft for 15 minutes (to shut the aircraft down, try to make radio contact, and assess the situation) before joining the rest in the rocks near the tree line.

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(S) Just before K 23 was hit and crashed, K 31 (loaded with 20 Marines, 2 USN Corpsmen, and 4 USAF crewmembers) received heavy fire. Approaching the landing zone, in trail of K 23, the aircraft took numerous hits (possibly from mortar rounds, rifle grenades, or rockets), immediately causing K 31 to burst into flames.* Eight personnel, including the co-pilot, perished inside the aircraft, and five more died in the water near the K 31 wreckage--a total of 13 dead.** The surviving 10 Marines, and three crewmen, swam to SEA*** where they were picked up by USN vessels.⁸ Figure 5 shows the wreckage of K 23 and K 31.

*Despite a direct hit which had blown the front of the cockpit away, the wounded pilot managed to settle the flaming aircraft in the water.

**Eighteen personnel were able to abandon the aircraft. Three Marines, apparently dazed, burned, and disoriented from the crash, were shot and killed in the water while attempting to gain their bearings or to reach safety in the tree line, and a fourth drowned. A fifth Marine, wounded and stunned, was seen wading towards the wreckage of K 23 where he apparently stayed for several hours, after which he was not seen again and was believed dead. Total dead in the crash included 1 USAF (co-pilot), 2 USN (corpsmen), and 10 USMC.

***Knife 31 came down directly in front of a prepared enemy position, making it impossible for the survivors to reach the beach. Thus, most headed to sea to get out of range of enemy fire. One of the Marine survivors was a FAC. He swam out on his back, and directed air strikes using a survival radio obtained from a USAF crewmember. Another survivor, one of K 31's flight mechanics, reported that after exiting the aircraft he realized that he did not have his rifle. He reentered the burning aircraft through the door which was just behind the cockpit at the front of the passenger section (the door was just under the waterline). He could see Marines running around in the flames, trying to punch out windows and to avoid the fire. The tail ramp was in flames and impassable. He shouted to them to come out the passenger door at the front, and he believes that two or three more Marines got out the door. At least one also did get out through one of the punched out windows. Once outside, the flight mechanic fired his rifle and pistol until out of ammunition, and then began to head out to sea with a
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(S) Minutes after K 31 and K 23 were shot down, radio contact was established with the Marine FAC from K 31 (who was swimming out to sea), and also with the survivors of K 23 (through the co-pilot) who were on the northern tip of the eastern beach near the tree line. On the basis of the information provided by these personnel, the general locations of all known friendly and enemy forces were established, and A-7s were cleared by ABCCC to make strafing runs. The first strafing run was made about 20 minutes after K 23 and K 31 had been shot down, and numerous such runs continued during the following hours. Three factors dictated extreme caution in the delivery of ordnance and limited initial strikes to 20mm cannon fire; (1) uncertainty as to the exact location of all friendlies on the eastern beach (i.e., some of the personnel from K 31 could have made it to the tree line without radios), (2) the close proximity of the enemy to the friendly positions (on occasions, reported to be only 20 meters), and (3) the presence of friendly forces on the western beach (the width of the island at that point was less than 400 meters from beach to beach, and friendly forces on the western side were an unspecified distance inland).

(Continued)

Marine who was without a life preserver unit (LPU)--the Marines did not have LPUs on because of their load which had prevented wearing the LPU during the insertion. Although under fire from the shore line, they stopped and went back to assist a second Marine who was attempting to swim toward them but was badly burned and was having difficulty. The three of them, using only the single LPU on the flight mechanic, made it beyond the range of ground fire and were later recovered by the USN.

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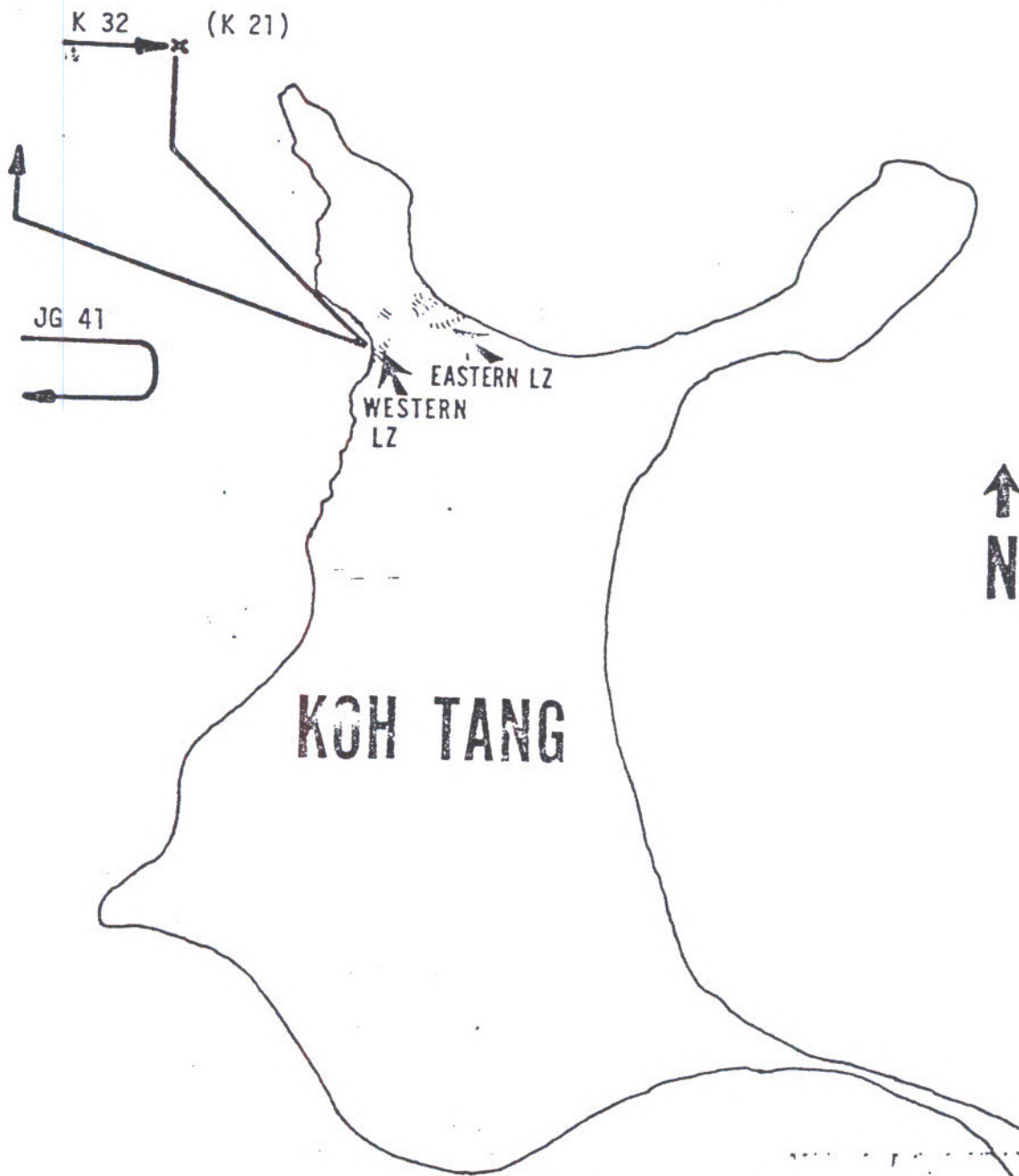
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FIGURE 6

MARINES INSERTED BY WAVE III - (13, Western LZ)

- K 32 - Picks up crew of Knife 21. Inserts 13. RTB U-Tapao with major battle damage and 1 USAF/1 USMC WIA (USMC WIA did not off-load and is not part of the 13 inserted).
JG 41 - Low on fuel, proceeds to tanker. Later inserts after Wave IV.

TOTAL ON ISLAND: 33, Western LZ
20 + 5 USAF Crew, Eastern LZ



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Wave Three--Western Beach (See Figure 6)

(S) Knife 32 and JG 41 comprised the third wave of helicopters to Koh Tang. Shortly after K 31 crashed and exploded, K 32 diverted and recovered the crew of K 21. While this was occurring, JG 41, low on fuel, departed to air refuel at the HC-130 tanker. Knife 32 then headed back for Koh Tang and was directed to the western beach by the Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center. At approximately 2340Z (0640 local), K 32 reached the landing zone, and as the aircraft was hovering, the enemy opened fire. One crewman and one passenger were injured during the insertion, but badly needed reinforcements had been provided.* Knife 32 made it back to U-Tapao, but because of severe damage was not¹⁰ relaunched during the operation.

(S) As of 2340Z (0640 local), a total of five insertion attempts had been made: only three teams, totaling 54 men, had been inserted; 14 personnel had been killed in action (13 from K 31 and 1 from K 21); three helicopters had been shot down, the fourth was down on the Thai coast as a result of battle damage, and the fifth was severely damaged. Three insertions (by JG 42 and JG 43, and by JG 41 which was returning from the tanker) remained scheduled during the first phase.

*Despite the heavy ground fire, numerous hits, and a direct hit by a rocket, and in disregard of the earlier helicopter losses, K 32 continued the insertion and off-loaded 13 Marines (a 14th Marine was wounded on the aircraft and did not disembark, and a 15th passenger, an interpreter, also remained on the aircraft).

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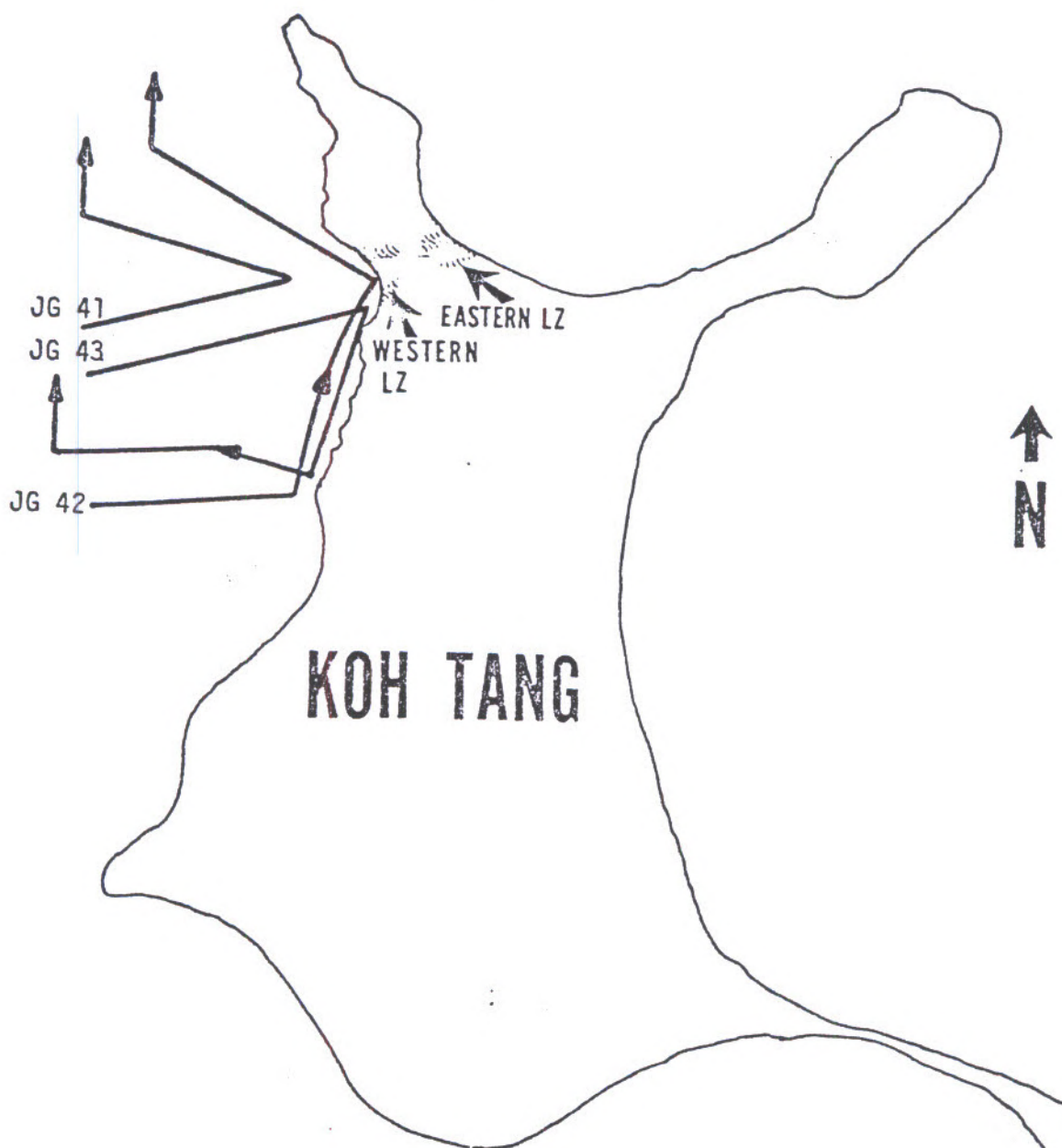
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FIGURE 7

MARINES INSERTED BY WAVE IV (78, Western LZ)

- JG 42 - Inserts 27. RTB U-Tapao. Major battle damage.
- JG 43 - Inserts 29. South of LZ. RTB U-Tapao. No battle damage.
- JG 41 - Returns from refueling. Multiple insertion attempts unsuccessful. Refuels again. Later inserts 22 of 27 Marines (included in total below). RTB U-Tapao. Major battle damage.

TOTAL ON ISLAND: 111, Western LZ
20 + 5 USAF Crew, Eastern LZ



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Wave Four--Western Beach (See Figure 7)

(S) Minutes after K 32 departed, as wave four (JG 42 and JG 43) was approaching the western beach, JG 41 (back from the tanker) made another insertion attempt but was driven back. Jolly 43 then went into the assigned LZ on the western beach, while JG 42 attempted insertion south of the LZ. Both aircraft encountered heavy fire, which forced them to abort their first run. Jolly Green 43 pulled back from the beach and headed south, inserting 29 Marines at the first location available, an extremely small patch of sand and rocks approximately 1,000 meters south of the assigned LZ.* Jolly Green 42, on the other hand, aborted his attempts south of the LZ and flew north into the scheduled LZ. Jolly 42 was able to off-load his 27 Marines, but encountered intense small arms and mortar fire which caused major damage.** Jolly 43 then escorted JG 42 back to U-Tapao, where JG 42 remained for the duration of the operation. Jolly Green 41 made two more insertion runs during the next hour but was driven back by enemy fire each time, and finally departed for a second air refueling. By this time, 109 U.S. Marines and 5 USAF crewmembers were on the island of Koh Tang.
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*The Marine ground commander, call sign Bingo Shoes 6, and his Command Post, call sign Bingo Shoes 3, were among this group of Marines.

**The two insertions had occurred simultaneously, at about 0020Z (0720L).

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First Rescue Attempt--Eastern Beach

(S) At approximately 0115Z (0815L), while insertion attempts on the western beach by JG 41 were proving futile, JG 13,* with support from four A-7s (an A-7 FAC and three others), attempted to evacuate the survivors of K 23 from the eastern beach. Low passes by the A-7s failed to draw enemy fire, so enemy positions could not be pinpointed and struck. Nevertheless, in view of the precarious positions of the K 23 survivors, a rescue attempt was made.** Enemy fire was directed against JG 13 all the way into the landing zone, which was near the K 23 survivors, about 30-40 meters NNW of the wreckage of K 23. (The friendly position had been pinpointed by smoke.)¹²

(S) Jolly Green 13 had visual contact with the survivors of K 23, who were pinned down by enemy fire and unable to reach the aircraft. On the beach for less than one minute, the helicopter took numerous hits causing battle damage, a fire in a case of flares, and another fire in the left auxiliary fuel tank. Jolly Green 13 had remained in its exposed position, despite damaging enemy fire, until no possibility for recovery remained. With the survivors of K 23 unable to board and the aircraft on fire, JG 13 departed. While one crewmember continued to return enemy fire, another jettisoned the burning flare box. Minutes later the fire in the left

*After delivering its Marines to the USS Holt, JG 13 had refueled in flight and remained in the Koh Tang area as a SAR aircraft.

**The crew of JG 13 willingly made this attempt in full awareness of the fact that accurate and intense fire had already destroyed three helicopters and caused major damage to three others.

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auxiliary tank blew out. Jolly Green 13 recovered at Rayong, Thailand,¹³ but was unable to relaunch in support of the operation.*

Completion of Delayed Insertion

(S) At about 0145Z (0845L), after the abortive rescue attempt on the eastern beach, JG 41 returned from his second air refueling for another insertion attempt on the western beach. Jolly Green 41 held off the western beach while an A-7 FAC on-station attempted to establish friendly positions so that close air support would be possible. As a result of the fluid and confusing battlefield situation, and the lack of marking smoke at the main Marine position, the A-7s were unable to pinpoint the locations of friendly units and therefore unable to suppress enemy fire. Even the Marines on the ground were unaware of their exact relative positions. The advantage of hindsight, however, allows the construction of the following scenario.

(S) With the departure of JGs 42 and 43 at approximately 0020Z (0720L), a total of 114 U.S. personnel were on the island of Koh Tang. A group of

*After JG 13 departed, the A-7s rocketed and strafed enemy positions which had fired on the helicopter, including a number of buildings in a clearing just inland from the middle of the eastern beach. One of the four A-7s escorted JG 13 out of the area, but the other three remained at Koh Tang and continued the strikes. The A-7 FAC then directed a flight of F-4s against the buildings in the clearing and against other enemy positions hindering the rescue of the K 23 survivors. Low on fuel, the A-7 FAC had to depart for the tanker before his replacement had cycled back, so the Spectre gunship, which had been on-station for some time, became the on-scene FAC during the interim. Spectre delivered accurate 20mm, 40mm, and 105mm fire against remaining structure and the surrounding area. As a result of the A-7, F-4, and Spectre strikes in the clearing area, three structure were confirmed destroyed or damaged.¹⁴

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25 was stranded on the eastern beach, 60 Marines were in the vicinity of the western beach (this group had no marking smoke), and 29 Marines were approximately 1,000 meters* south of the western LZ. Fortified enemy positions, including bunkers, huts, and entrenched enemy forces, lay between the two Marine groups on the western side and prevented link-up. These same enemy positions were also in a position to direct accurate fire against the western LZ, hindering helicopter insertions.

† (S) Numerous attempts were made by A-7 FACs, and then by an AC-130 Spectre gunship, to pinpoint friendly positions.** The Spectre was finally able to locate all friendly positions. The gunship then repeatedly struck enemy gun positions which were preventing the link-up

*When the group south of the western LZ (exact distance from LZ not known with certainty--1,000 meters is the estimate given by the Marine Commander) came up on the radio, unaware of the number of Marines on the west beach, they requested that a small element be sent south to bring them up to the LZ. This small element from the western beach, however, immediately encountered heavy enemy resistance including automatic weapons fire and claymore mines. One Marine was killed and a number seriously wounded in the attempt. Meanwhile, the southern group of Marines began slowly working their way north along the coastline.

**In the absence of marking smoke, the A-7 aircraft tried to ascertain positions by flying low over the beach area and obtaining corrections from the ground commander. This proved unsuccessful due to (1) the fluid battlefield situation, (2) the uncertainty of the ground personnel concerning the exact location of their forces, (3) the difficulty inherent in estimating positions by such a technique, and (4) confusion resulting from similar call signs used by the different Marine groups. An AC-130 gunship, call sign Spectre 61, was then directed to attempt to pinpoint friendly and enemy positions while JG 41 held off the island. Using marking smoke (from the ground forces) to establish the southern Marine position, and firing rounds into the ocean near the western beach to provide a reference for ascertaining their northern position, the Spectre was finally able to pin down the locations of friendly and enemy forces. 15

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of the two ground units and were directing heavy automatic weapons fire against JG 41. These strikes at times came well within 50 meters from friendly positions, yet the careful, deliberate delivery of ordnance by the gunship prevented any short rounds.

(S) At approximately 0300Z (1000L) JG 41 began a fourth run-in, this time with simultaneous suppressive fire from the Spectre. Despite the support, enemy fire continued to come from the area between the two Marine groups. These positions had just been struck, and were still under fire when JG 41 was attempting the insertion. Jolly Green 41 broke off the insertion attempt, and the Spectre again layed down more fire directly on the enemy positions.* With both the Spectre gunship and JG 41 running low on fuel, a fifth insertion attempt was made, again with simultaneous Spectre support. This time, enemy fire from between the Marine positions was light, and JG 41 was able to insert 22 of its 27 personnel before accurate mortar fire forced it to abort the insertion.** Jolly Green 41 returned to U-Tapao with major

*At that time, the southern Marine group identified fortified enemy structures in the area into which Spectre was directing its 20mm and 40mm fire. Spectre then acquired the huts and bunkers on its sensors and scored numerous direct hits on the complex with 40mm and 105mm ordnance, destroying the enemy structures.

**The mortar fire forced JG 41 to lift off from the beach, but another insertion attempt was made. As JG 41 hovered, preparing to touch down on the beach to insert its last five Marines, a near miss by a mortar round inflicted damage. Jolly Green 41 pulled back and another mortar round impacted where the aircraft had just been hovering. (The mortar position could not be located at that time and would pose a threat to subsequent helicopter operations on the western beach.)

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battle damage, precluding its further employment during the operation. The Spectre gunship, low on fuel, also departed the island at that time.¹⁷

Insertion Recap

(S) About four hours after it had begun, the insertion phase was over. A total of 57 Marines had been off-loaded to the Holt without incident, and 131 Marines* had been inserted on Koh Tang (82 on the western beach, 29 to the south of the western beach, and 20 on the eastern beach). Losses and damage, however, were heavy. Fifteen U.S. personnel were KIA. Further, of the nine helicopters participating at Koh Tang, three had been shot down and five had sustained major battle damage precluding their further employment in the operation. The ninth aircraft, JG 43, had returned to U-Tapao with JG 11 and JG 12 (which had off-loaded at the Holt) to prepare for the insertion of more Marines during the next phase. Air support during the insertion phase had initially been precluded by the possible presence of the Mayaguez crew, and later hampered by the confines of the battle area together with difficulties in pinpointing friendly and enemy positions.**

*Does not include any personnel from K 31 since all survivors swam out to sea, and did not reach the beach, per se.

**The neck of the island was only 400 meters wide, and there were three isolated groups of Marines within the neck area whose positions were uncertain. Additionally, some enemy positions were extremely close to friendly positions, as near as 10-20 meters, and the enemy in those positions would hold their fire until arrival of the helicopters.

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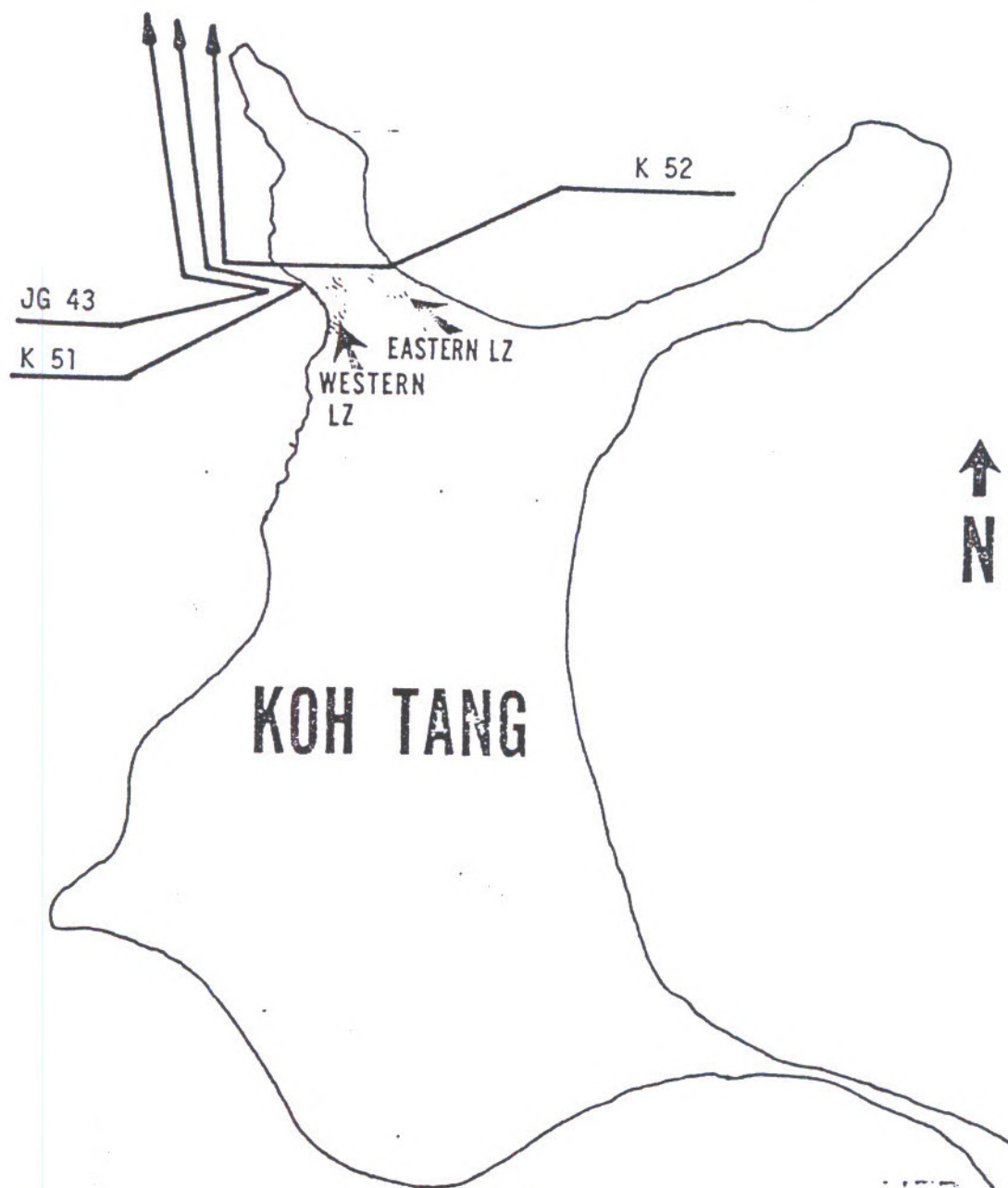
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FIGURE 8

MARINES REINFORCEMENTS--WAVE I (47, Western LZ)

- K 52 - Attempts insertion Eastern LZ. Received heavy ground fire and RTB without inserting. Major battle damage. Forced down 85 miles from U-Tapao on Thai coast.
- K 51 - Inserts 19. RTB U-Tapao with five USMC WIA. Minor battle damage.
- JG 43 - Inserts 28. No battle damage. Air refuels. Remains in area.

TOTAL ON ISLAND: 153, Western LZ (5 USMC WIA extracted)
20 + 5 USAF Crew, Eastern LZ



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Recovery of Mayaguez Crew

(S) Meanwhile, at about 0200Z (0900 local), some three hours after the first Marines were on the beach at Koh Tang, a boat flying a white flag was seen approaching the area from the direction of the Cambodian mainland. Approximately one hour later, the boat had been intercepted, and the passengers, the entire crew of the Mayaguez, were aboard the USS Wilson.¹⁸ With the recovery of the Mayaguez crew, the focus of the operation shifted toward extraction. Yet, before extraction could be completed, reinforcements were needed to stabilize the situation on the island. The Marines there were under heavy fire, and were split into three forces (two on the west side and one on the east) which were unable to link up. Further, evacuation of the small force on the eastern beach was proving extremely difficult. By this time, only 3 of the 11 helicopters originally participating in the operation were flyable (JG 11, JG 12, and JG 43). Two additional helicopters, K 51 and K 52, became available and were pressed into service to help fill the gap while intense repair efforts¹⁹ were underway to return damaged aircraft to service.

Phase II--Reinforcement (0430-0530Z/1130-1230 Local)

Wave One (See Figure 8)

(S) The reinforcement of Koh Tang was attempted by five helicopters (K 51, K 52, JG 11, JG 12, and JG 43*), all of which arrived at the island

*At this time, JG 43 began using JG 42's call sign. (Jolly Green 42 had been JG 43's lead element, and JG 43 had sometimes been referred to as JG 42-1.) Jolly Green 42 was actually nonoperational at U-Tapao. For the purpose of the report, therefore, the JG 43 call sign is used hereafter.

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approximately simultaneously at 0445Z (1145L). Knife 52, K 51, and JG 43 conducted the first wave of insertions, and JG 11 and JG 12 the second wave. Knife 52 was low on fuel and therefore made the first insertion attempt. The helicopter approached the eastern beach but took hits, prompting the pilot to abort the run and fly straight over the island from east to west. Knife 51 and JG 43 then proceeded to the western beach for their insertion attempts. Knife 51 inserted 19 Marines, evacuated 5 wounded Marines, and was followed by JG 43, which inserted 28 Marines. Both insertions were successfully completed despite mortar, small arms, and automatic weapons fire, some of which was said to be coming from as close as 50 meters away.*²⁰

(S) Knife 51 then escorted K 52, which had been unable to insert its Marines and was streaming fuel from the left auxiliary tank, toward Thailand. (Knife 52 was forced down on the Thai coast and could not participate further in the operation, but K 51 delivered its wounded to U-Tapao and relaunched.) Jolly 43²¹ departed to air refuel, after which it assumed a SAR role in the area.

*The area just south and inland of the western beach was still not secure. By this time, the southern group of Marines had fought their way along the shoreline to within yards of the LZ. Link-up of the friendly forces occurred approximately at the time the helicopter reinforcements were taking place, but enemy forces remained just inland from the shoreline in the trees. (In the process of reaching the LZ area, the southern group of Marines had to pass through one enemy position after another. In the process, they captured one 60mm mortar (saw another but did not capture it), one 57mm recoilless rifle, and numerous M-16s and AK-47 rifles).

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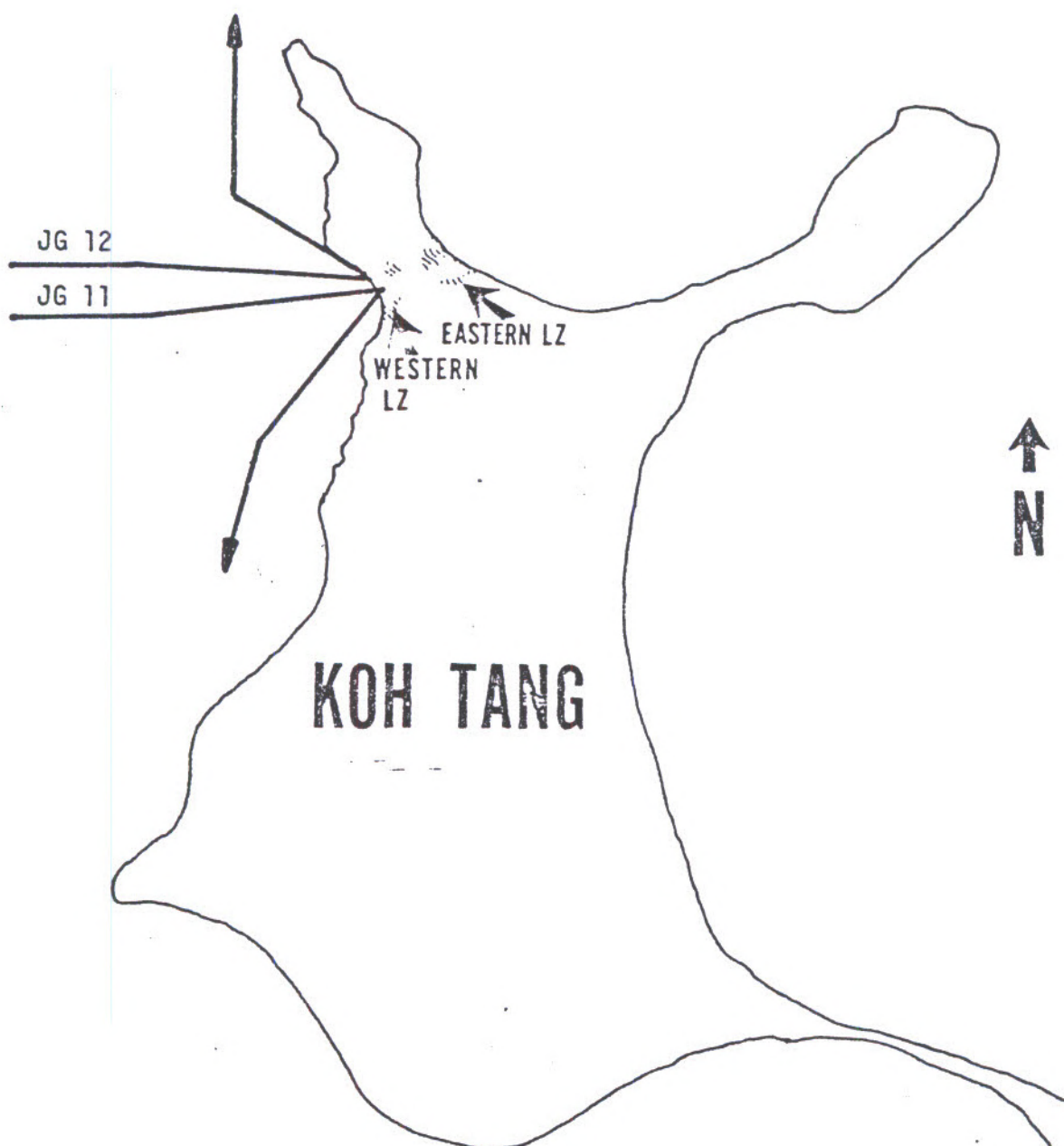
FIGURE 9

MARINES REINFORCEMENTS - WAVE II (53, Western LZ)

JG 11 - Inserts 27. RTB USS Coral Sea. No battle damage.

JG 12 - Inserts 26. RTB U-Tapao with four USMC WIA. No battle damage.

TOTAL ON ISLAND: 202, Western LZ (total of 9 USMC WIA extracted)
20 + 5 USAF Crew, Eastern LZ



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Wave Two (See Figure 9)

(S) Jollys 11 and 12 then attempted, and completed, the last reinforcement of Marines at Koh Tang. Jolly Green 11 offloaded 27 Marines and remained just offshore providing suppressive fire for JG 12, which was engaged in offloading its 26 Marines and taking wounded on board. Both helicopters received fire, and some hits were taken. Jolly Green 12 headed for U-Tapao with its evacuees* while JG 11 joined JG 42 to refuel²² and assume SAR duties.

Reinforcement Recap

(S) By just after noontime, the two reinforcement waves had completed their insertions and delivered a total of 100 Marines. All of the reinforcements were inserted into the western beach, as attempts to reach the eastern beach were unsuccessful. By early afternoon, continuing enemy resistance prevented the link-up of the two Marine ground forces (now totaling 222** men) at the eastern and western beaches, and another rescue attempt was made at the eastern beach.

Second Rescue Attempt--Eastern Beach

(S) At approximately 0730Z (1430 local), JG 43, supported by JG 11, attempted an extraction of the force isolated on the eastern beach.

*On the way to U-Tapao, JG 12 linked up with and escorted K 51 and K52, both of which had sustained battle damage shortly after JG 12 departed Koh Tang. Knife 52 was forced down on the Thai coast in the vicinity of K 22 (downed there during the insertion phase). Jolly Green 12 picked up the Marines from K 52 and returned them to U-Tapao, refueled, and relaunched.

**A total of 231 had been inserted, but nine had been evacuated.

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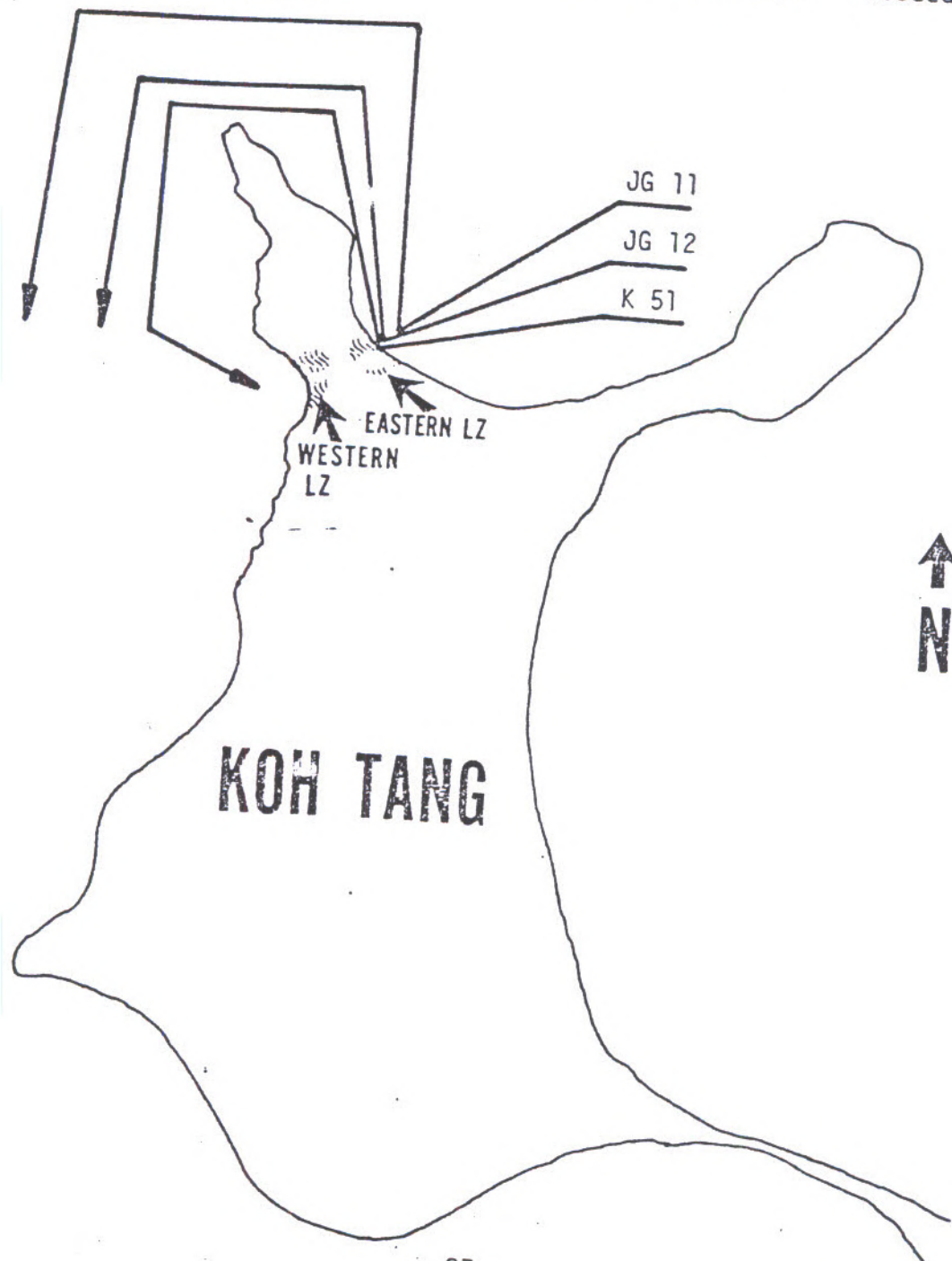
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FIGURE 10

MARINES EXTRACTED BY WAVE I - (20 + 5 USAF Crew, Eastern LZ),

- JG 11 - Extracts 20 + 5 USAF Crew (K 23). RTB USS Coral Sea. Minor battle damage.
- JG 12 - Attempts pick up of 1 Marine thought to be in K 23. RTB USS Coral Sea. Major battle damage. No extractions. One USAF WIA.
- K 51 - Supports extraction attempt. No battle damage. Proceeds to western beach.



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TACAIR delivered CS gas to suppress resistance but the gas was off somewhat and the wind blew it out over the water. Jolly Green 43 approached the beach, hovering well to the south of the survivors' position.* Heavy ground fire was encountered, wounding one crewmember, disabling one of JG 43's engines, and forcing termination of the extraction effort. Jolly Green 43 made a single-engine landing on the Coral Sea, escorted there by JG 11.²³

* (S) Thus, by late afternoon, JG 11, JG 12, and K 51 were the only helicopters still operational. A fourth helicopter, JG 44, had been out-of-commission at NKP but became operational and joined the operation. Extraction of ground forces before the arrival of darkness was critical, and with only four** operational helicopters available, the extraction phase began.

Phase III--Extraction (1100-1330Z/1800-2030 Local)

(S) The extraction phase consisted primarily of two separate activities; the effort to rescue the force stranded on the eastern beach, and once that was accomplished, the extraction of the main Marine force from the western beach.

Wave One--Eastern Beach (See Figure 10)

(S) By late afternoon, ground fire had not abated, and increasing TACAIR support was being provided. Two OV-10 "Nail" FACs (in a high-low formation)

*During the excitement, instructions for the ground personnel to prepare and pop their smoke had apparently been overlooked, and JG 43 could not locate them on the run-in.

**Shortly thereafter, JG 43 joined the extraction effort after undergoing repairs at the Coral Sea.

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had arrived on station, and had directed naval gunfire against a beached enemy patrol boat* threatening rescue attempts on the eastern beach. Shortly thereafter, the low Nail had pinpointed friendly positions in the neck area separating the two beaches, and began directing F-4s and A-7s against structures still intact in the cleared area adjacent to the eastern beach, as well as other enemy positions in proximity to the K 23 survivors and the LZ. Despite the close proximity of friendly and enemy forces, and the difficult confines of the battle area, effective close air support was provided.²⁴

(S) The FACs also requested that a small, armed boat (Black Velvet 1) from the USS Wilson approach the eastern beach. Its purpose was to provide suppressive fire, but more importantly, to provide a means of recovering personnel should one of the rescue helicopters be shot down²⁵ in the water near the beach.

(S) Then, just after 1100Z (1800 local), a concentrated air effort was initiated to extract the 20 Marines and 5 Air Force crewmembers from the eastern beach. During the extraction attempt, supporting fire for JG 11 was provided by both JG 12 and K 51, and by Black Velvet 1. Additionally, the Nail FAC marked and strafed enemy positions. Notwithstanding this cover, JG 11 received intense ground fire from all quadrants and from

*The boat had earlier been strafed by A-7s, but it was still intact. As naval gunfire zeroed in on the boat, enemy personnel scrambled to the deck to escape, but an instant later direct artillery hits completely destroyed the boat, killing the enemy and producing a number of secondary explosions.

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as near as 50 meters as it landed on the beach near the tree line.* As soon as all personnel from the beach were on board,** the Jolly lifted off and proceeded toward the Coral Sea with battle damage.²⁶

(S) The helicopters then pulled back and the Nail directed fire by one A-7 and by a Spectre gunship to further soften the area. This was in preparation for a rescue attempt for the Marine who had previously been seen on the wreckage of K 23. Jolly Green 12 and 51 then moved in. The Jolly hovered over the wreckage of K 23 and dropped his penetrator, while K 51 hovered a few yards north, providing suppressive fire.*** After hovering for two minutes, it was determined that no survivors were on board. Enemy fire was heavy throughout the attempt, wounding one crewmember and causing severe damage to JG 12 which, after landing on the Coral Sea, was unable to fly again during the operation.***²⁷

*The Marines made an orderly withdrawal, stopping to fire their weapons every few feet. They were pursued by enemy forces, who attained hand grenade range on several occasions, but were cut down by minigun and rifle fire. A USAF photographer, who was on board JG 11 to film the extraction, helped direct fire against enemy soldiers who were attempting to throw hand grenades at the aircraft.

**One Marine was hanging outside the aircraft on a "gun tub" (armor plating surrounding the aft gun), and was pulled into the aircraft by a pararescueman at an altitude of 200 feet.

***Besides employing their miniguns, the crew of K 51 knocked out the rear windows in the helicopters and fired their rifles through the windows. Additionally, when the minigun was out of ammunition, the aircraft was turned around so the other minigun was brought to bear on the enemy. The FAC, after warning that enemy soldiers were rushing the beach, reported that he saw K 51 cut down six enemy with its fire.

****The Marine who had earlier been seen on K 23 was listed as killed in action.

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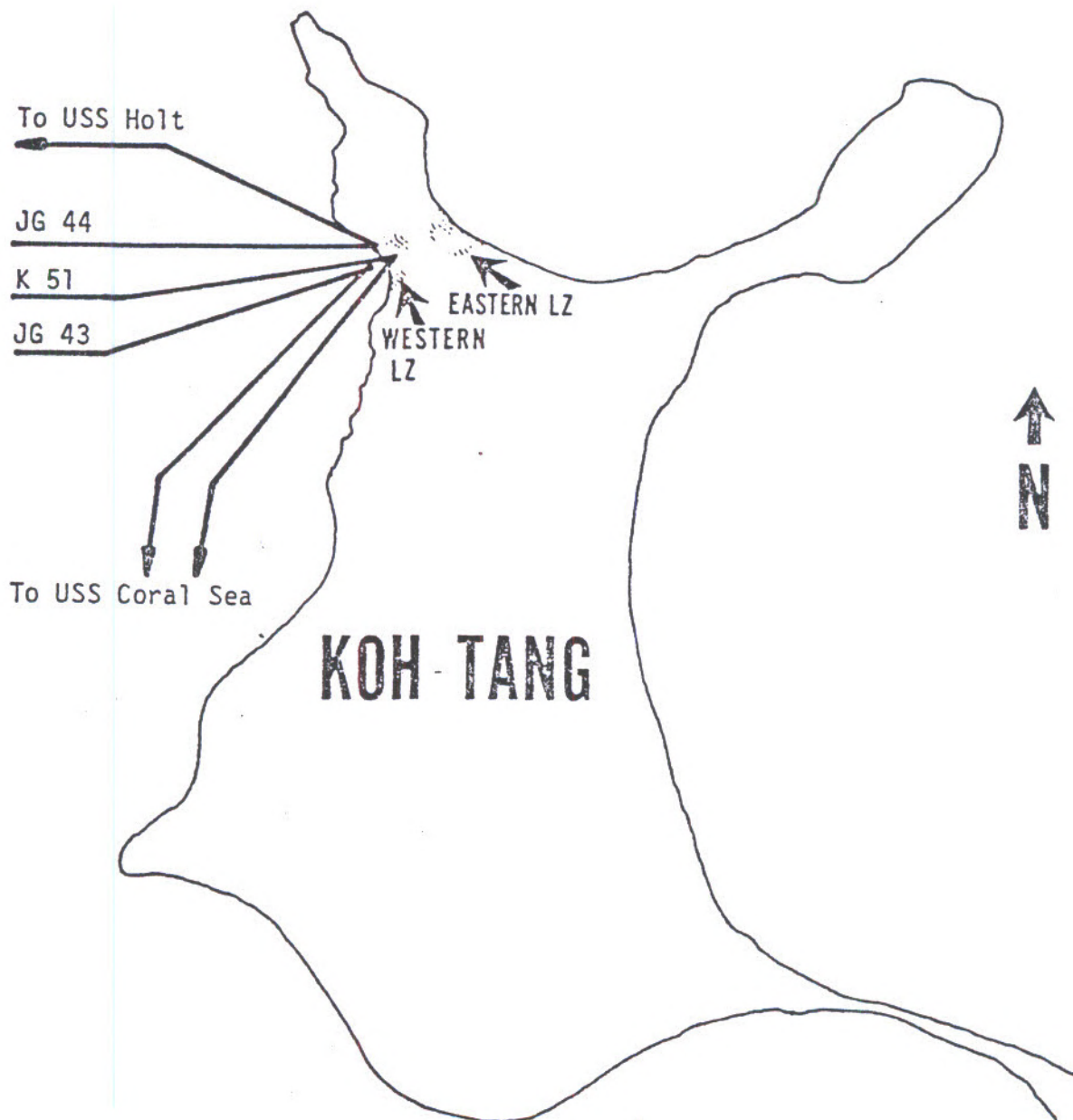
FIGURE 11

MARINES EXTRACTED BY WAVE II - (129, Western LZ)

K 51 - Extracts 41. RTB USS Coral Sea. No battle damage.

JG 43 - Extracts 54. RTB USS Coral Sea. No battle damage.

JG 44 - Extracts 34. Offloaded at USS Holt. No battle damage.



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Wave Two--Western Beach (See Figure 11)

(S) Once the pocket of men had been rescued from the eastern beach, all efforts shifted to the immediate evacuation of the western beach. The Nail FAC directed Black Velvet 1 (the small boat from the Wilson) to the western side of the island to provide a back-up rescue capability and to provide some suppressive fire to the north of friendly positions. Knife 51, JG 43, and JG 44 then sequenced into the LZ, constituting the second extraction wave (but the first wave on the western beach).²⁸

(S) Darkness had already arrived but Knife 51, with just enough fuel to make an extraction attempt and offload its Marines at the Coral Sea (K 51 had just participated in the rescue operations on the eastern beach), proceeded into the western beach at 1150Z (1850L). Heavy enemy fire was encountered, including mortar-launched flares* while on the beach and a near miss by a rocket during lift-off, but K 51 successfully evacuated 41 Marines. Knife 51 headed to the Coral Sea to offload, inspect for damage, and refuel. During the extraction, and throughout the extractions which followed, an intense firefight was underway on the ground, as Marines provided suppressive fire, and enemy forces directed fire at the Marines³⁰ and the LZ area. Muzzle flashes dotted the western side of the island.

*To silence the enemy mortar position which had become active during K 51's extraction, the Nail FAC marked the target with smoke and called for TACAIR. By that time, however, it was too dark for TACAIR to acquire the smoke and the target could not be struck. (Time was viewed to be so critical that it was thought unwise to further delay the next extraction to coordinate strikes by a Spectre gunship or naval gunfire.)²⁹

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(S) Just after Knife 51 exited the landing zone, JG 43 flew in, to make another extraction. The Marines on the ground and Black Velvet 1 provided suppressive fire during the extraction. Jolly Green 43 lifted off with 31 54 Marines* and headed for the Coral Sea.

(S) Jolly Green 44, which had been waiting for JG 43 to complete his extraction, headed into the LZ. At this time, the Marines announced that all of their men were within 50 meters of the LZ, and the Nail FAC began strafing enemy positions. Jolly 44 departed with 34 Marines** having sustained no damage. To facilitate the rapid extraction of remaining ground forces, who were becoming increasingly vulnerable to ground attacks, JG 44 attempted to offload its Marines in the darkness at the USS Holt, which was positioned just off Koh Tang island.*** The landing was successful, thus enabling JG 44 to immediately return to the LZ for another load of Marines. 32

*The 54 Marines were more than double the normal combat loading configuration. Also, during the extraction, all guns aboard JG 43 were inoperative and enemy fire was returned with M-16 rifles.

**One of the Marines was dangling from JG 44's "gun tub" and was pulled into the aircraft after it had attained an altitude of 100 feet. (This was the second such incident. See footnote, p. 30.)

***The pilot of JG 44 made three passes at the Holt. Both of the helicopter's landing lights, as well as the low light level television system, were out. Further, there was no lighting on the ship's superstructure next to the landing pad. The only lighting consisted of red landing lights on the pad itself. On the third attempt, a slow approach was made, and the aircraft hovered over the landing pad with the tail and rear wheels hanging over the water. (The landing pad was designed for smaller helicopters. It was too small and was not stressed for the CH/HH-53 size helicopter. Offloading troops there was rated as a challenging task even during the day.) Due to the presence of obstacles (the ship's superstructure), JG 44 had to come in at an angle. Since the pilot was unable to see the superstructure, one of the flight mechanics talked the pilot in slowly until the main gear was just on the corner of the rectangular landing pad. The Marines offloaded through the front door (the ramp was hanging out over the water). It was estimated that there was only a two-foot clearance between the rotor and the superstructure.

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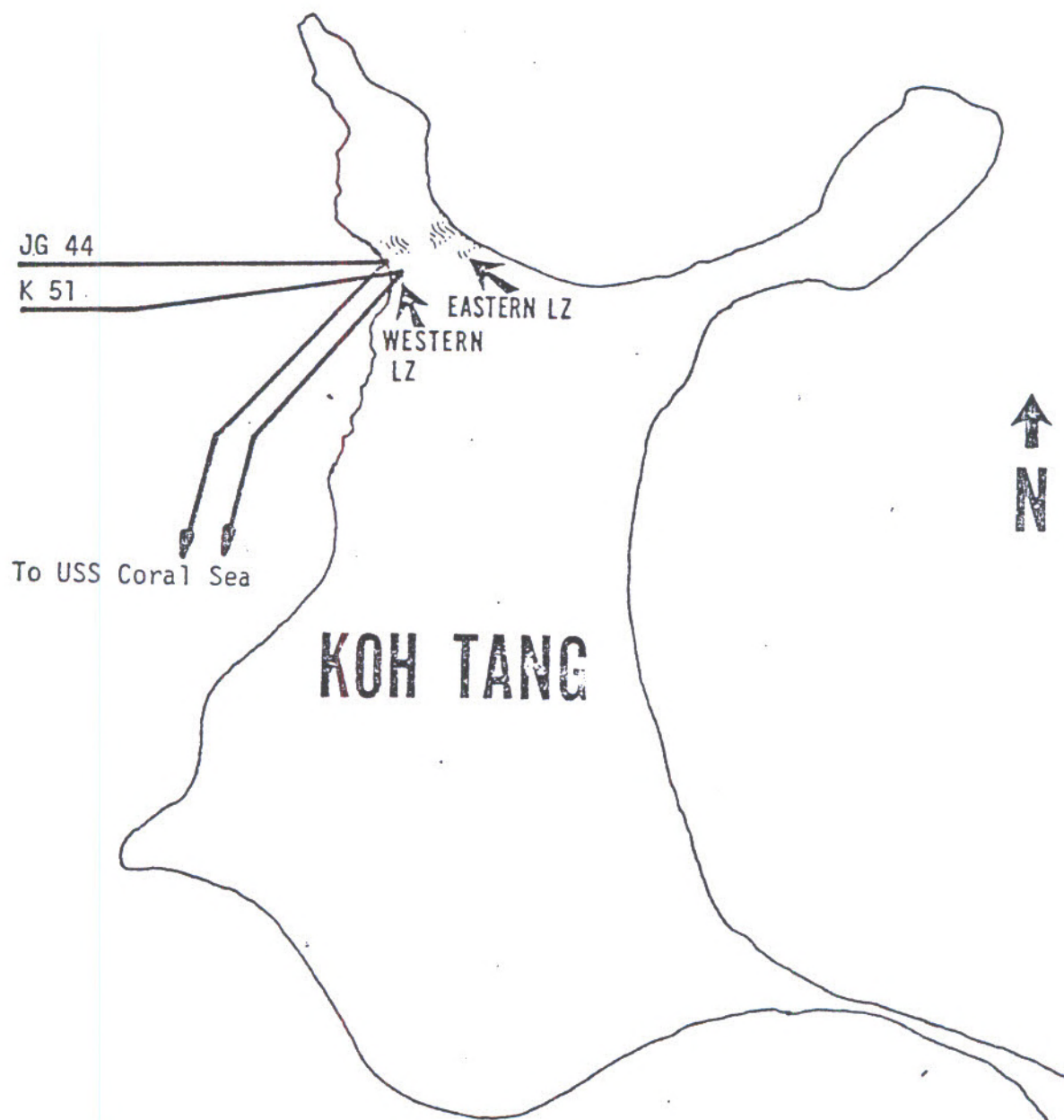
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FIGURE 12

MARINES EXTRACTED BY WAVE III - (69, Western LZ)

JG 44 - Extracts 40. RTB USS Coral Sea. No battle damage.

K 51 - Extracts 29. RTB USS Coral Sea. No battle damage.



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(S) During the first three extraction sorties at the western beach, a total of 129 Marines were evacuated, leaving some 73 men in the LZ area. Wave Three--Western Beach (See Figure 12)

(S) As the number of Marines remaining declined and darkness became total, the position of ground forces became precarious. Radio contact with the friendlies was lost, and no helicopters were immediately available to make pickups.* Finally, at approximately 1225Z (1925L), communication with the ground commander was reestablished, and he reported that he might be overrun within 15 minutes. Two minutes later, he reemphasized the urgency of immediate evacuation. Within five minutes, with continuous supporting fire the Spectre gunship, JG 44 had returned from the USS Holt and had landed in the LZ, assisted by a strobe light set up by the Marines. Jolly 44 loaded 40 Marines on board and headed for the Coral Sea, reporting that there was one load of Marines remaining on the beach.³³

(S) At that time, Knife 51 was returning to Koh Tang from the Coral Sea, using the Nail's landing lights to determine the landing zone

*Furthermore, the two on-station Nail FACs were running short of fuel, and were preparing to make their transition to two new Nails. Nail 68, unable to contact the ground forces by radio, made a low-level pass over the LZ with his lights on and verified the presence of friendly forces before departing. One of the new Nails arriving on scene (Nail 69) used the LLLTV equipment on the Spectre gunship to confirm the location of friendlies on the beach, just before the Spectre departed the area and new Spectre arrived on station. Within minutes the new Spectre had sighted his guns and were cleared to fire as close as 50 meters from the beach, as needed. Black Velvet 1 was also standing by to provide further suppressive fire or provide an emergency recovery platform.

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location.* Finally, after three unsuccessful approach attempts, assisted by the Marine strobe light and by his own landing lights, Knife 51 made it into the landing zone.³⁴

(S) Notwithstanding suppressive fire from the Spectre gunship, rockets from the Nail FAC, and suppressive fire from K 51's miniguns, some enemy fire was directed at the LZ area, although significantly less than earlier. After 27 Marines had boarded the aircraft, despite the darkness and the presence of hostile forces and fire, a pararescueman from K 51 left the aircraft and went to the tree line to search for any Marines who may have been left behind. At the tree line, the pararescueman found two Marines who were still in the area. All three returned to the aircraft which then, at approximately 1310Z (2010L), took off with the last 29 Marines extracted from Koh Tang.³⁵

(S) Within minutes, as it became apparent that everyone had indeed been evacuated from the island, further rescue operations were terminated.³⁶ A total of 218 Marines had been removed by four helicopters during the extraction phase. (A fifth helicopter, JG 12, also

*As Knife 51 approached in the darkness, Nail 69 circled over the western beach at a low altitude (about 1,000 feet), switching his landing lights on and off to guide Knife 51 to the LZ. Each time he did so he drew enemy fire, which the Spectre gunship then suppressed. In turn, Knife 51 switched his lights on and off to facilitate the approach. Flares were then dropped but they ignited at low altitude and burned in the water, further complicating visual acquisition of the landing zone. (It must be remembered that the western beach was relatively small and therefore difficult to locate, especially at night).

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participated in extraction operations at the eastern beach, but did not pick up any Marines).

Conclusion

(S) The insertion and subsequent evacuation of some 230 Marines, all by USAF helicopters,* had been completed in the face of severe enemy fire. Damage was inflicted on all but one of the helicopters participating in the operation. The efforts of USAF helicopter crews, with strong support from other USAF and USN units, had made it possible to extract the Marine force from a situation which might otherwise have ended much less favorably.

(S) Total U.S. casualties reported for the operation at Koh Tang** were 15 killed in action, 3 missing in action, and approximately 49 wounded by hostile action*** (USAF casualties were 2 killed and 6 wounded).
General George S. Brown, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, summed up the entire operation in the following manner:

*Includes nine wounded Marines evacuated earlier. (Thirteen additional personnel from K 31, which had crashed in shallow water off the eastern beach, were recovered by USN vessels. Since these personnel never reached the beach, per se, they are not included in the total shown above.) There is an apparent disparity between the total number of Marines inserted (231) and Marines extracted and Medevaced (227). Three Marines were MIA and one KIA was left on the island, which accounts for all.

**The night of the 13th, a helicopter carrying 19 Air Force Security police-ment to U-Tapao crashed near NKP with no survivors. The policemen were being brought to U-Tapao for possible deployment as landing parties in the rescue attempt for the Mayaguez crew. Four crewmembers also perished in the crash.

*Approximately 30 additional Marines were injured by non-hostile causes.

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(U) The success of the unique operation to recover the SS Mayaguez and her crew by the combined efforts of the Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps represents an outstanding display of the versatility, dedication and professional competence of all participants. It is not possible to praise too highly the bravery and determination exhibited by all concerned in the assault on Koh Tang island. The overall operation, fraught with unknowns from the outset and extremely difficult to execute under even the best conditions, was conducted by all airmen, sailors and Marines in the highest tradition of our armed forces. I want every individual who participated in this operation to receive my personal congratulations.

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