

## **MONOGRAPH 5**

### **Fourteen Hours at Koh Tang 29 December 1975**

Prepared for General Louis L. Wilson, Jr.,  
Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Air Forces  
By Captain Thomas D. Des Brisay

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Foreword

The 12 May 1975 seizure of the SS Mayaguez and her crew by Cambodian forces and the subsequent recovery of the ship and crew by US military forces commanded public attention in the United States with an intensity which, on the surface, may have seemed out of proportion to the minor nature of the military activities involved. At the heart of the matter, of course, was not the size of the military operation but the implications of the ship's seizure with respect to US credibility and self-respect, particularly in light of previous developments in Indochina. The brazen, unprovoked seizure of the ship shocked the American public and was widely viewed as an arrogant affront—an act founded upon the belief that the United States lacked the will or ability to act decisively in even a minor incident. The US response, culminating in the recovery of the ship and her crew, captured the imagination of the American people and was greeted in the US with nearly universal acceptance and even exuberance. The United States, as a nation, had reaffirmed its will to act decisively.

That, in brief, is the substance of the Mayaguez affair and probably reflects the extent of coverage this relatively minor action will command in the history books. There is another story to be told, however, which history will doubtless deem of lesser significance—the assault on Koh Tang Island. Activities there were certainly not a model of military strategy for future operations. Because of unforeseen circumstances the assault on Koh Tang may have had little influence on the release of the Mayaguez crew and was conducted under the most disadvantageous of circumstances. Yet military activities there reveal an underlying strength which, although less tangible than the dramatic recovery of the ship and crew, is indicative of the fiber of the United States military forces. The professionalism, perseverance, and courage of American fighting men at Koh Tang was exemplified by USAF helicopter crewmembers who, despite overwhelmingly unfavorable conditions, delivered, reinforced, and then extracted some 230 marines at the island. The strong performance of US personnel at Koh Tang bodes well for the continuing potency of US military forces.

General Louis L. Wilson, Jr.  
Commander-In-Chief, PACAF

## Preface

The US military operation to recover the SS Mayaguez and her crew consisted of a number of related actions including the reboarding of the Mayaguez, air strikes against military targets on the Cambodian mainland; and insertion of US Marine Corps forces on Koh Tang Island to search for the crew of the Mayaguez. This monograph examines the latter action—operations relating to the insertion and recovery of Marines at Koh Tang Island.

Many US Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps units played a role in the assault on Koh Tang. The actions of the marines, strikes by Pacific Air Forces (PACAF) aircraft, support by PACAF forward air controllers, naval gunfire, and recovery attempts by US Navy vessels were all important and deserve recognition. Yet more than anything else the insertion and extraction of some 230 US Marines was made possible by the persistent efforts of Air Force CH-53 and HH-53 helicopter crews. The focus of this report rests upon these men and their struggle against the difficult odds awaiting them at Koh Tang.

During the 14 hours Americans were on the beaches at Koh Tang, the incidents of bravery and stark drama were many. Regrettably, only a few of these could be included in a monograph such as this, whose purpose is to highlight rather than to provide a complete accounting. Yet even this modest coverage is enough to reflect an underlying dedication and professionalism which by itself, without any need for explanation or embellishment, is the real story which unfolded at Koh Tang Island.



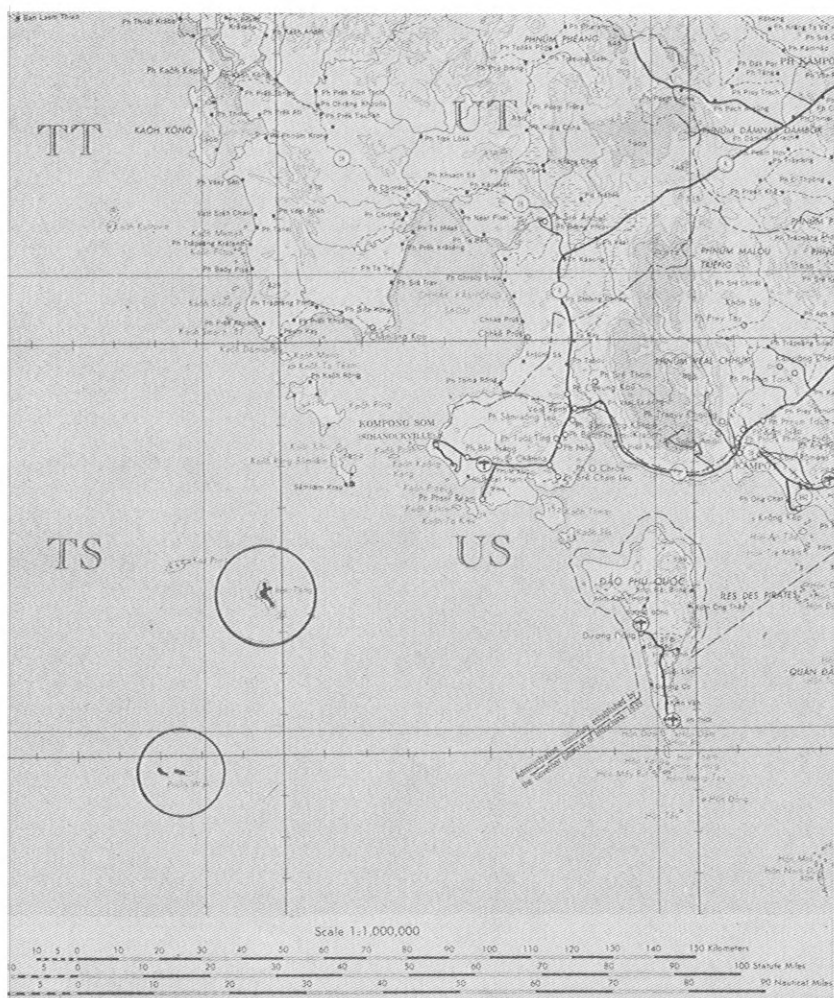
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Gulf of Thailand Map showing Koh Tang and Poulo Wai Islands

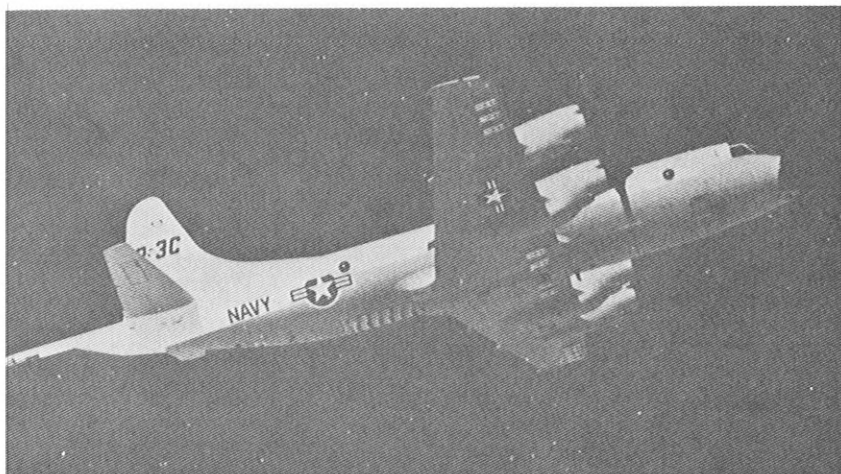
## Fourteen Hours at Koh Tang

On 12 May 1975, Khmer Communist gunboats seized the SS Mayaguez in international waters in the Gulf of Thailand. The ship was captured some 60 nautical miles southwest of Cambodia near the Poulo Wai Islands (see map).

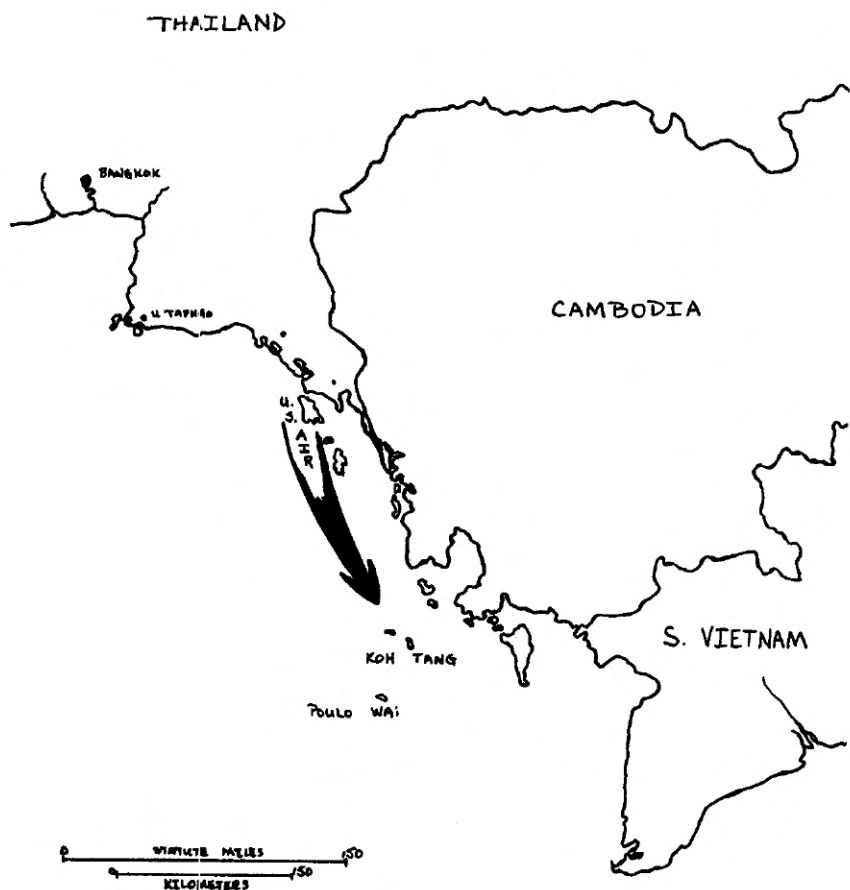
The initial US military response was limited to surveillance of the ship. In the early morning hours of 13 May, US Navy P-3 reconnaissance aircraft (see photo) spotted the vessel near Poulo Wai. Later in the morning the Mayaguez steamed to Koh Tang Island under the control of her captors.

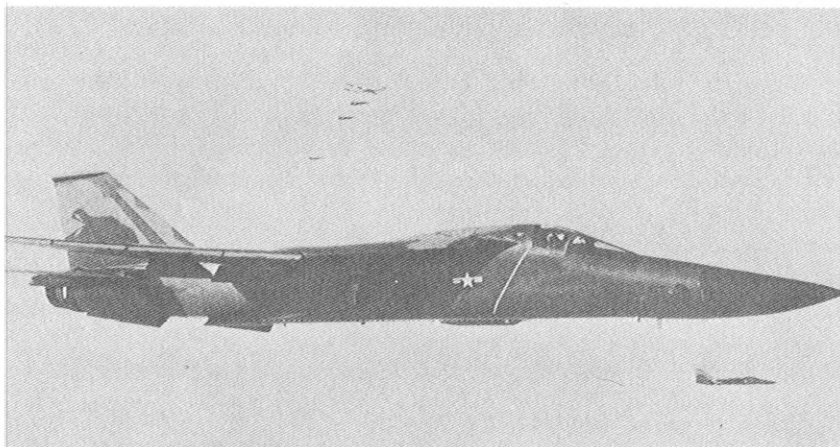
The first Air Force aircraft called in to locate and monitor the ship were two F-111s (see photo), diverted from a training mission around noontime on the 13th. The F-111s found the Mayaguez anchored about 1½ miles off the northeastern tip of Koh Tang Island. Thereafter USAF tactical aircraft monitored the Mayaguez during the day, and heavy reliance was placed on the unique surveillance capabilities of Air Force AC-130 gunships (see photo) during the hours of darkness.

When the first AC-130 arrived on the night of the 13th, Cambodian patrol boats were active in the area. Several of the gunboats were shuttling between the Mayaguez and a large cove at the northern tip of the island. The cove appeared to be the hub of activity on the island, and an encampment just inland from the cove was considered to be a likely detention place for the crew of the Mayaguez. Patrol boat activity continued during the night, and surveillance aircraft received antiaircraft fire both from the boats and the island. The hostile fire was not returned out of concern for possible injury to the Mayaguez crew. US aircraft were, however, directed to fire warning shots across the bow of any boat departing Koh Tang and heading for the Cambodian mainland.



U.S. Navy P-3 Reconnaissance Aircraft





**USAF F-111 Aircraft**



**USAF AC-130 gunship**

In the predawn hours of the 14th, one of the patrol boats broke away from Koh Tang Island. The on-station AC-130 gunship repeatedly fired warning shots across the boat's bow, finally prompting it to run aground on a small island south of Koh Tang. In the morning, tactical aircraft took over from the gunships and continued to contain the patrol boats in the vicinity of Koh Tang. A fishing boat, however, despite repeated warning shots and riot control gas delivered by USAF tactical aircraft, succeeded in reaching the mainland. It would be verified several days later, after interviews with the Mayaguez crew, that it was this fishing boat that carried them to the Cambodian mainland initially, and subsequently to Koah Rong Sam Loem, an island just off the mainland, where they were held until their release.

During the day of the 14th, tactical aircraft sunk, beached, or damaged a number of gunboats, three of them in or near the cove at the northeastern tip of



Gunboat underwater in the cove off the eastern beach at the northern tip of Koh Tang Island.



Koh Tang (see photos). On the night of the 14th, AC-130 gunships returned to the island and damaged or destroyed several more patrol boats.

Then as the night waned, after all other attempts to prompt the release of the crew had proven fruitless, US military forces were directed to seize the SS Mayaguez and to recover any crewmembers being held at Koh Tang Island.



Post-strike photograph of a boat sinking off the same cove. Minutes later it had disappeared in the deep water.

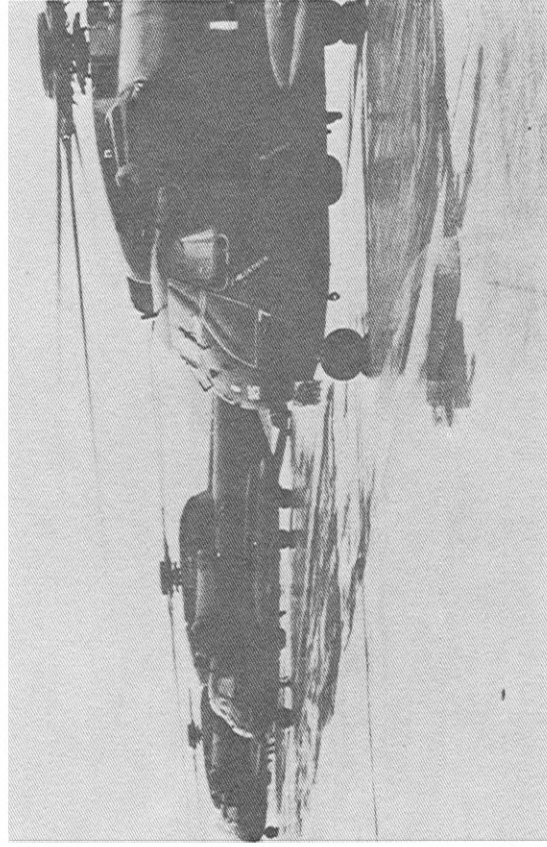


USAF "Jolly Green" HH-53 rescue helicopters

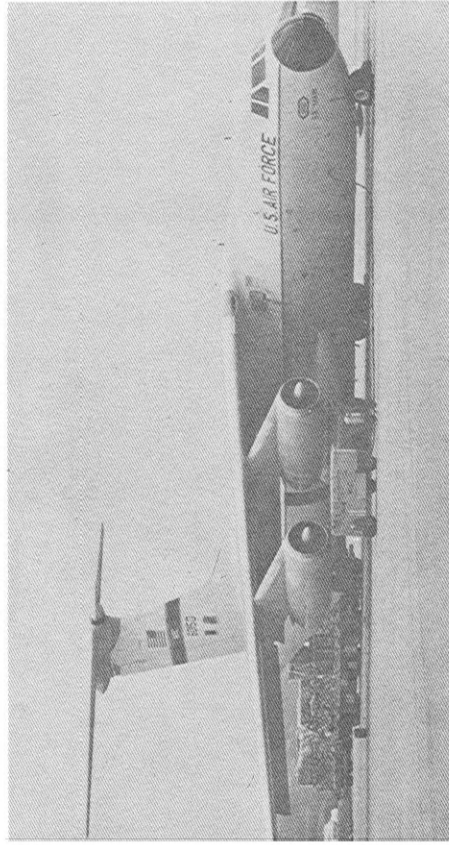
## The Initial Assault

In the predawn hours on 15 May 1975, six HH-53 "Jolly Green" and five CH-53 "Knife" USAF helicopters\* (see photo) unloaded US marine boarding parties and landing forces totaling some 230 men. (The marines had been rushed to their staging base by USAF C-141s (see photo). Three of the helicopters were to deliver their men to the USS Harold E Holt, a US Navy destroyer escort, for boarding and securing the SS Mayaguez and recovering any crewmembers still onboard. The other eight choppers were to offload their marines on two beaches at the northern end of Koh Tang (see photo) to secure the island and search for any Mayaguez crewmembers who might be held there.

\* The CH-53 and HH-53 are not ordinary helicopters. They have armor plating and are equipped with 7.62mm, rapid-firing miniguns, and thus are far more survivable than most choppers. Both aircraft have external fuel tanks which extend their range. Additionally, the HH-53 rescue helicopter is air refuelable.



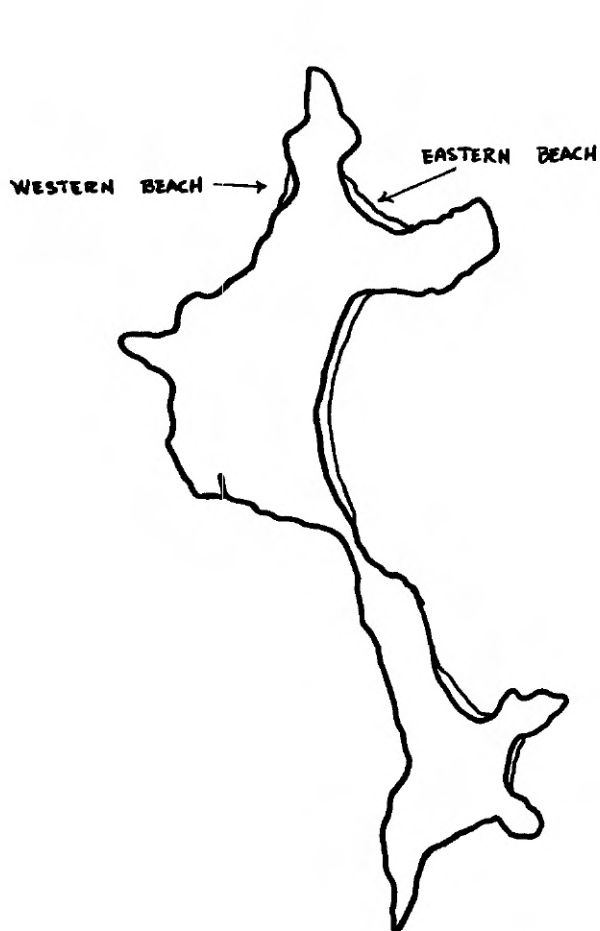
USAF "Knife" CH-53 Special Operations Helicopters



USAF C-141

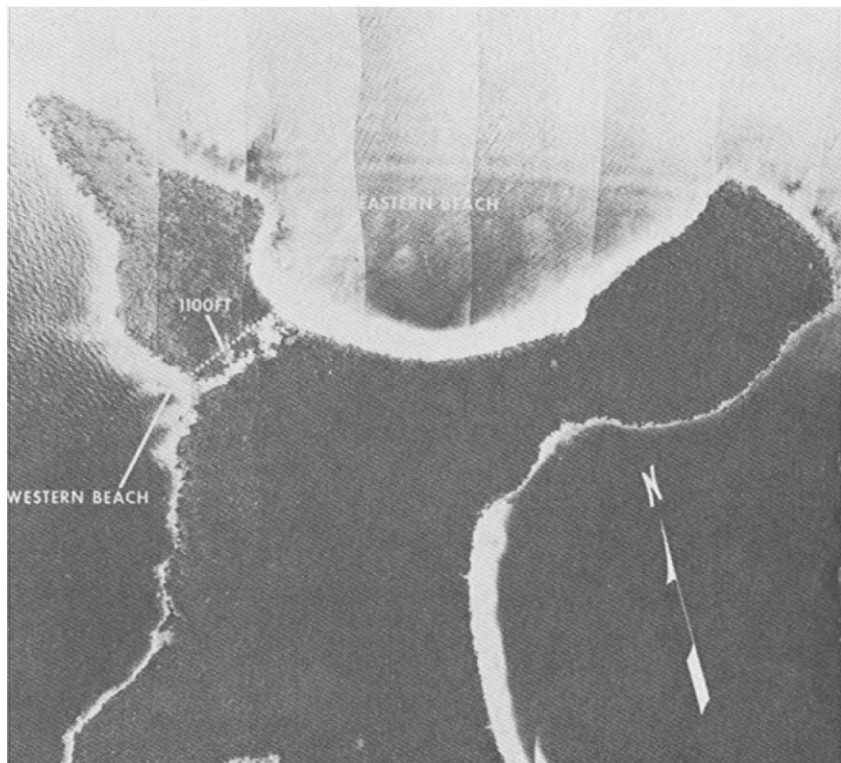


Koh Tang Island >>



How many were being held, or even if any were held there, was unknown—there had, however, been nighttime shuttle runs by Cambodian patrol boats between the Mayaguez and the large cove at the northern tip of the island, and gunship crews observed personnel movement on the beach during the shuttling activities. Although a group of personnel was spotted aboard a fishing boat heading for the mainland on the 14th, the strong possibility that at least some crewmembers were being held on the island could not be ignored. Thus the helicopters and marines headed for Koh Tang uncertain as to the presence, number, or whereabouts of Mayaguez crewmembers.

Also unknown was the degree of enemy resistance which would be encountered, but preflight briefings based on estimates of Khmer Communist strength at the small island indicated that resistance should be low. Preparation of the landing zones with air strikes was ruled out to preclude inadvertent injury to Mayaguez crewmembers who conceivably could be in the landing zone areas. Air cover would be available overhead, however, should enemy resistance be greater than expected. Once the eight helicopters had inserted their marines they, along with the choppers flying to the USS Holt, were to return to their staging base for a second wave of marines, and again for a third wave should the extra men be required. It was a difficult scenario, and one fraught with uncertainties. These were not the circumstances a military commander would



Northern Koh Tang Island

choose for such a rescue mission. There was no choice, however, but to press on under the given circumstances or forfeit the chance to recover any crewmembers who had been taken from the Mayaguez to Koh Tang Island.

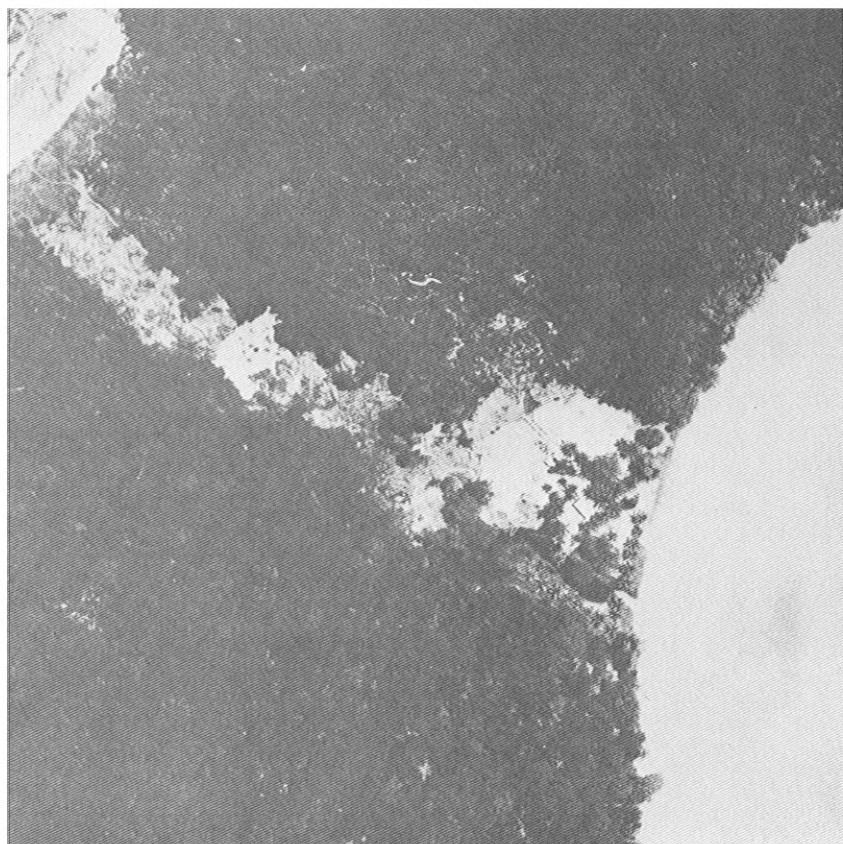
As four pairs of Jollys and Knives approached Koh Tang in the darkness, little did they realize that the Mayaguez crew had been moved to an island near the Cambodian mainland. Instead of the American sailors, the enemy would be waiting—and in unexpected strength. Fortified positions, hidden in the jungle, ringed the two beaches where the choppers would land. Enemy forces, well armed with automatic weapons, rocket launchers, and mortars, put up a resistance much greater than anticipated.



USAF helicopter approaches Koh Tang from north-northwest



At first light, simultaneous insertion of marines on both sides of the island neck began (see photo). Knife 21 and Knife 22 swung down to make their approach to the small beach on the western side of the island neck (see photo). Knife 21, piloted by Lt Col John Denham, led the flight toward the shoreline and attained a hover over the landing zone on the western beach. No fire was received on the run-in and there was no sign of activity or resistance in the beach area. Then as the helicopter touched down on the beach and the marines began streaming out the back ramp, the Cambodians opened up with small arms, rockets, and mortars. To Capt Terry Ohlemeier, pilot of Knife 22, the small arms and machine gun fire *"looked like a string of Christmas tree lights"* against the dark outline of the western side of the island. Lt Col Denham, all his marines offloaded, attempted to take off from the landing zone but enemy fire had severely damaged his aircraft and disabled one of his two engines. With his wingman laying down suppressive fire, Denham managed a single-engine takeoff and headed out to sea. His crew jettisoned everything they could, but the chopper skipped over the water, maintaining barely enough power to keep from sinking. . . and taking on a little more water each time it hit. It struggled

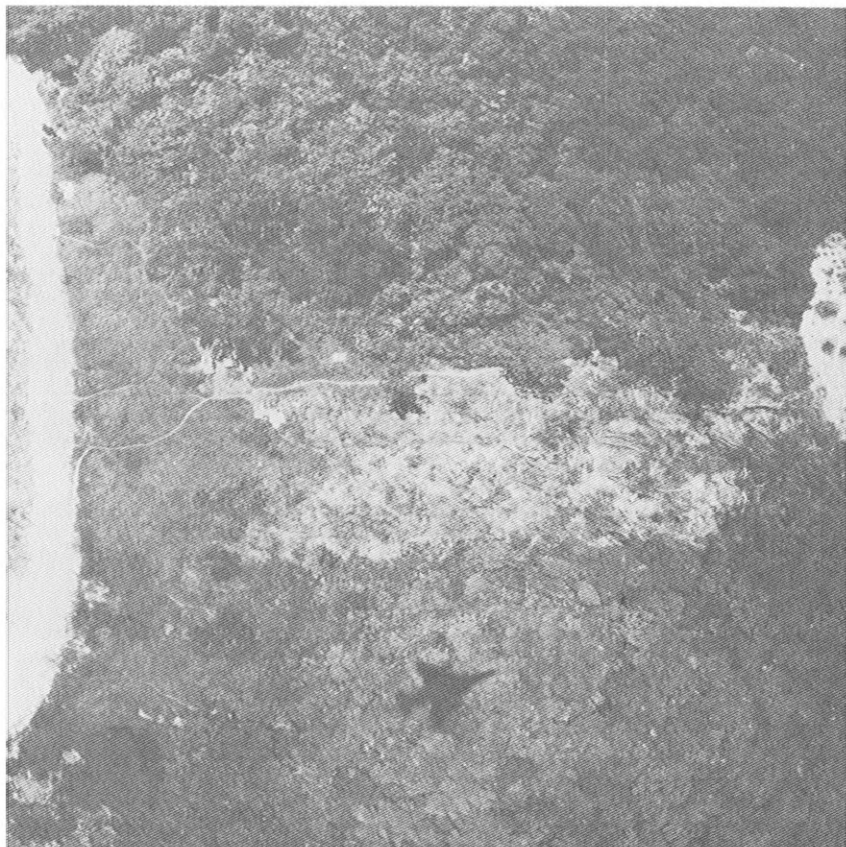


Island neck at the northern end of Koh Tang. Eastern beach is at the right, western beach is at the upper left.



nearly a mile from the landing zone before ditching in the ocean. As the crew abandoned the aircraft, SSgt Elwood Rumbaugh, the flight mechanic, pulled the copilot out of the sinking helicopter. When the copilot surfaced he had difficulty inflating his life jacket, and Denham went to assist him. Just moments later, with no call for help or indication of difficulty, SSgt Rumbaugh had disappeared; he was later officially declared killed in action.

Meanwhile a pair of fully-loaded helicopters approaching the island diverted to render assistance to Lt Col Denham and his crew, freeing Capt Ohlmeier to fly Knife 22 back into the western beach to deliver his marines. This time, however, fire was directed against the aircraft all the way into the beach,



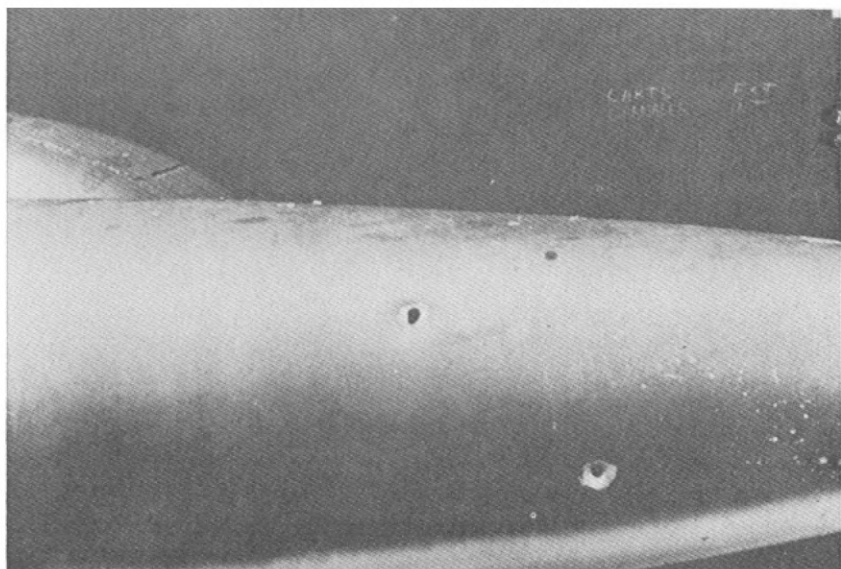
Western side of the island neck; beach is at the extreme left.

inflicting severe damage and causing an acute fuel leak. Ohlemeier, unable to insert the marines, headed back for the staging base. In the race against the fuel gauge the helicopter just made it to the mainland coast, where it was forced to make an emergency landing (see photo).

While Capt Ohlemeier had been engaged in the fruitless attempt to penetrate to the western beach, Knife 32, piloted by 1/Lt Michael Lackey, hovered near the crew of the ditched helicopter. (Jolly 41, having arrived on the scene



Knife 22 forced down on mainland coast



Holes in Knife 22's fuel tank



Aerial view of Koh Tang Island from the northwest. Smoke visible rising from the eastern beach.

with Knife 32, provided cover during the recovery.) Loaded with a full complement of marines and too heavy to pick up the survivors, Knife 32 began to dump fuel to lighten the aircraft. As fuel spewed from his aircraft Lackey could see a column of smoke rising from the vicinity of the eastern beach and he knew things were also going badly there (see photo). Minutes later Lt Col Denham and his two surviving crewmembers had been recovered, but the search for SSgt Rumbaugh had proven futile.

As Knife 32 then started away from the crash site and began to pick up speed, the three rescued crewmembers settled down to rest and contemplate their ordeal. Their rest was shortlived. Lt Lackey proceeded onward to the western landing zone to deliver critically needed marines. Denham and his two remaining crewmembers, just shot down and rescued, their hair and clothes soaked with jettisoned fuel, found themselves heading back to the landing zone for a second time. With heavy resistance being encountered at both beaches, reinforcements were more important than ever.

As the helicopter reached the western beach area and hovered over the landing zone, the enemy cut loose with automatic weapons, mortars, and rockets. One of the flight mechanics, SSgt Nick Morales, was immediately dropped by small arms fire as he manned one of the miniguns. Lt Lackey then touched down on the beach and the marines began to offload. Suddenly the chopper shuddered as a rocket tore a gaping hole in its side and exploded inside the passenger compartment. Incredibly, only one marine was wounded. Despite the intense enemy fire and the explosion, the dazed marines were able to deplane and Lackey managed to pull the helicopter out of the landing zone. With 75 holes in its fuselage, a leak in its hydraulic system, and extensive general

battle damage (see photo), Knife 32 withdrew as the crew immediately tended to the wounded. SSgt Morales, having sustained a collapsed lung and a severed main artery, was sinking fast. Lackey extracted every ounce of thrust from the crippled helicopter's engines and sped back to his staging base in a race against



Damage to Knife 32



Shrapnel holes in Knife 32's sponson (Located at extreme right of previous photo)

time which he and his crew barely won. As the chopper touched down in an emergency landing at the base, only minutes of fuel were left in its tanks. Morales, scarcely alive, had even less time to spare as medical personnel rushed him to the waiting ambulance. First aid by the crew and the rapid return to the base proved just enough to save his life.

Meanwhile the situation back at the island was grim. When Denham and Ohlemeier first ran into stiff enemy fire on the western beach, Knife 23 and Knife 31 (piloted by 1/Lt John Shramm and Maj Howard Corson, respectively) approached the large beach on the eastern side of the island neck. The Cambodians surrounding the eastern beach held their fire. Then as Lt Shramm hovered above the landing zone, with Maj Corson's aircraft in trail and to the left, the enemy barrage erupted. Shramm's helicopter immediately took punishing hits, the first of which damaged the rotor system. He then saw his wingman's aircraft explode in a ball of fire; an instant later his own chopper lost an engine, shuddered from a heavy impact, and began vibrating severely. Shramm ordered the rear ramp opened and wrestled the helicopter to the beach as the entire tail section was torn off. He and two other crewmembers remained on the aircraft to shut it down, to try to establish radio contact, and to assess the situation. The copilot and an Air Force photographer, together with all 20 marines, rushed ashore. Luckily, no one was killed in the helicopter or in the dash to the treeline. The enemy was probably devoting his primary attention to Maj Corson's aircraft, which was engulfed in flames.

Corson's helicopter had been hit with a fusillade of automatic weapons, heavy-calibre machine gun fire, and possibly rockets or rocket-propelled grenades, causing it to explode in flames. He attempted to pull back to deeper water but the badly damaged aircraft would not respond. While Corson struggled to control the helicopter, Sgt Randy Hoffmaster worked over the shoreline with his minigun, and 2/Lt Richard Vandegeer, the copilot, fired his rifle out of his window. Then a direct hit in the cockpit, probably by a mortar or grenade round, blew the windshield and instrument panel away and killed Lt Vandegeer. Maj Corson, seriously injured, somehow managed to maintain control enough to settle the craft down in the water. Dazed and wounded, he stared down and saw the ocean at his feet—nothing remained of the cockpit and the instrument panel which had been in front of him. For long moments he remained in his seat. . . . stunned. Shouts from a crewmember finally brought him to his senses. As he mechanically stepped forward into the waist-deep water, flames engulfed the cockpit. One of the marines who had already exited from the aircraft braved the flames and attempted to unharness the limp body of the copilot. His hands and arms badly burned and enemy rounds impacting in the water around the helicopter, the marine was finally forced to abandon the attempt.

During the time Corson was half-conscious and still strapped in his seat, a number of passengers and crewmembers, many of them suffering from burns, had been able to exit the helicopter. One of the crewmembers, SSgt Jon Harston, found himself in the water and under fire from the shoreline. Realizing he had no rifle he reentered the burning aircraft through the passenger



door, which was just under the waterline. As he emerged inside the aircraft he saw a number of men trapped, trying to punch out windows to escape the inferno. The rear ramp was engulfed in flames and impassable, leaving the door through which he had entered as the only usable exit. He shouted to the marines to come out the passenger door, which was partially hidden by the water. Several men then followed him through the passenger door, and one or two others escaped through the hatches. Once outside, Harston worked his way to the front of the aircraft to open the emergency window for the pilot and copilot. As he got there he realized that the whole front of the cockpit was gone, and that Corson and Vandegeer were still motionless in their seats. He shouted for them to get out, jarring Maj Corson to his senses. As Corson stepped through the gaping hole where the front of the cockpit had been, Harston turned his attention to the copilot in time to witness a marine's futile attempt to unstrap Vandegeer, who was slumped lifelessly in his seat. Seeing there was no hope of recovering the copilot's body from the flames, Harston then swam under water to the rear of the aircraft, coming up near Sgt Hoffmaster. Harston fired his rifle and pistol until out of ammunition. Grenades were exploding around the survivors and bullets were kicking up the water everywhere.

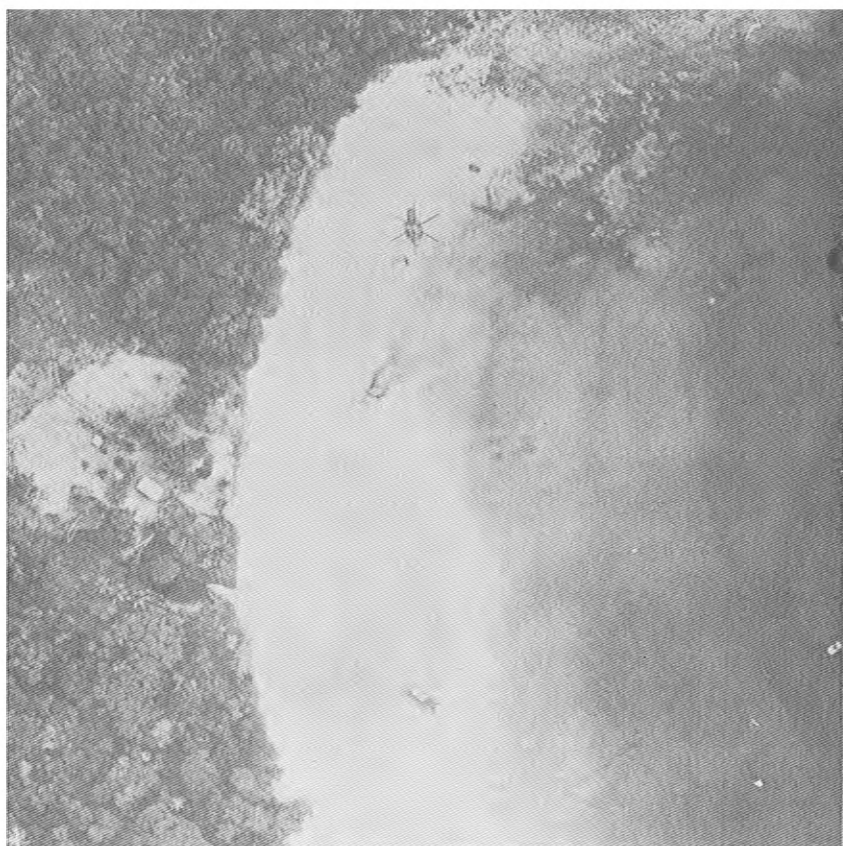
At this point Corson, Harston, and Hoffmaster, each of whom had life preservers, began to gather the survivors around them and started away from the shallow water in three groups. During the hectic withdrawal there were many incidents of drama and bravery within each group: Sgt Harston, for example, began to withdraw to deeper water with a wounded marine. As Harston inflated his life preserver, rifle fire shot out the right bladder. At this point the two saw another wounded marine who was trying to swim toward them, but was badly burned and unable to make much progress; so, although under fire from the shoreline, they swam back to assist the disabled marine. As the three finally headed to sea to get out of range, an enemy round struck Harston in the helmet. The impact of the bullet drove him underwater, but he managed to struggle back to the surface. The three of them paddled and swam together, helping each other to the safety of the sea.

Eighteen of the 26 Americans on board Knife 31 had survived the crash and managed to exit the helicopter, but many of them were burned and dazed; all were the target of intense enemy fire as they abandoned the helicopter and struggled in the water. Able-bodied marines and crewmembers had tried to assist the more seriously wounded and disoriented and help them swim to sea to escape the deadly enemy fire. Nevertheless, four men were shot and killed, or drowned, near the burning wreckage of Knife 31. A fifth, stunned and wounded, stumbled through the water for about 100 yards to the wreckage of Knife 23 and crawled onto the tail ramp of the aircraft; he would be the subject of a futile rescue attempt later in the day. His death brought to 13 the number of men perishing in the crash of Knife 31, including 10 marines, 2 Navy corpsmen, and the USAF copilot. All 13 survivors were later picked up at sea by US naval vessels.

While the men from Knife 31 struggled to escape from the vicinity of their helicopter, the three crewmembers remaining aboard Knife 23 made a dash for

the treeline to join the rest of the crew and passengers. The last of these three men, SSgt Ronald Gross, was dropped on the beach by enemy rifle fire. He got up to his feet but another bullet knocked him to the ground. Having sustained four gunshot wounds, Gross pulled himself up and again started to run for the treeline. This time it seemed his luck had run out—Gross took an enemy round in the head. He somehow managed to continue on, stumbling to the treeline where he collapsed among his companions. The last shot had shattered his helmet but had only grazed his head. Though seriously wounded, he would survive.

Minutes after the two choppers were shot down at the eastern beach (see photos), radio contact was established with Lt Terry Tonkin, a marine forward air controller (FAC) who had been aboard Maj Corson's aircraft. Lt Tonkin, swimming to sea on his back, used a USAF survival radio to call in airstrikes on enemy positions which had fired on the survivors of the Knife 31 crash. At the same time 1/Lt John Lucas, the copilot of Knife 23, called in on his survival

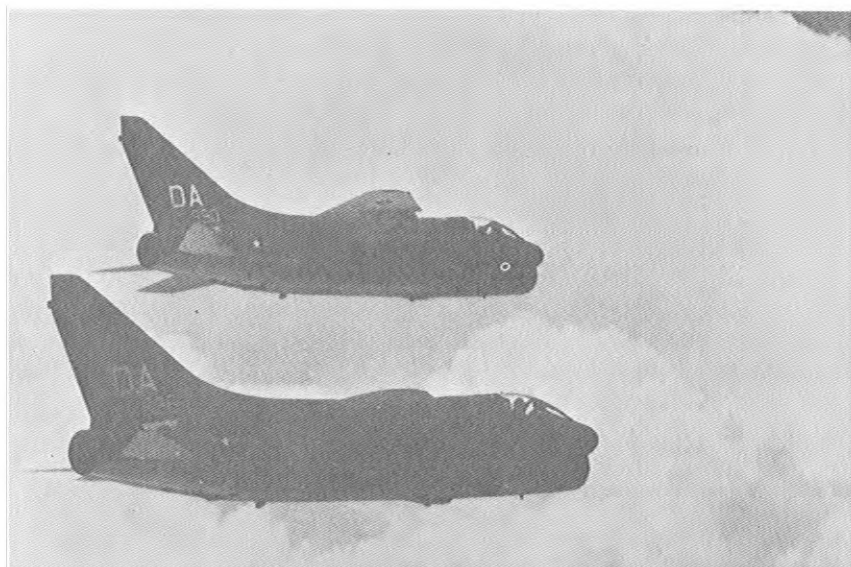


Wreckage of Knife 23 and Knife 31 (burning) on eastern beach; 1 boat beached (bottom) and 1 boat sunk in cove (extreme lower right); Cambodian encampment (middle left).



Close-up of Knife 23 and Knife 31 Wreckage





USAF A-7 Aircraft

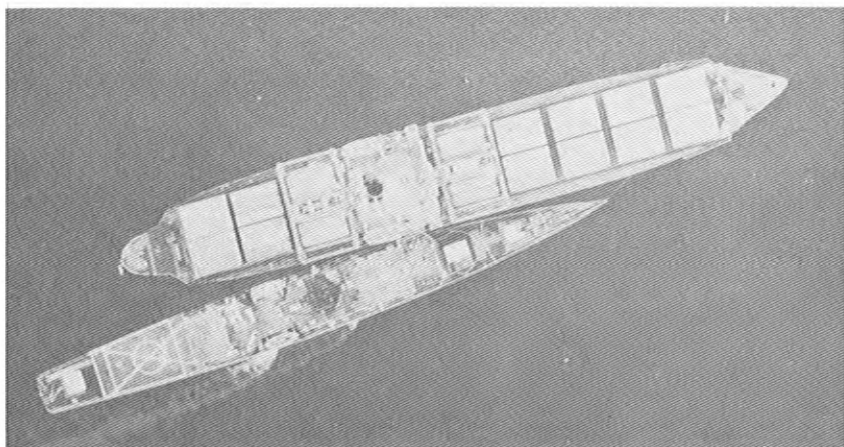


Armed A-7s on Taxiway

radio. He was with the other airmen and marines positioned near the treeline at the northern end of the eastern beach. With guidance from Tonkin and Lucas, the USAF A-7 FAC (see photos) began to direct strafing runs on enemy positions which were still firing against the marines pinned down on the eastern beach. Once Tonkin had swum away, Lucas served as the only direct link between the marines on the eastern beach and air support, for the marines' radios had been destroyed in the crash of Knife 31.

An hour after the assault began, only 54 Americans were on the eastern and western beaches at Koh Tang Island. Fourteen others were dead. Three of the five helicopters landing at the island had been shot down, a fourth was being forced down on the mainland as a result of battle damage, and the fifth was severely damaged. Only three more helicopter insertions were scheduled in the first assault wave.

During that initial hour, a simultaneous effort had been launched to recapture the Mayaguez and recover any crewmembers who might be on board. After three Jolly Greens had delivered a marine boarding party to the USS Holt without incident, the Holt pulled up to the Mayaguez and the boarding force seized the ship—it was abandoned. The Holt then began towing the Mayaguez from the island (see photos). With the assault on Koh Tang running into stiff resistance and the whereabouts of the Mayaguez crew unknown, hope of safely and rapidly recovering the crew seemed to be fading.



USS Holt alongside SS Mayaguez



Marine boarding party from the USS Holt seizes the SS Mayaguez

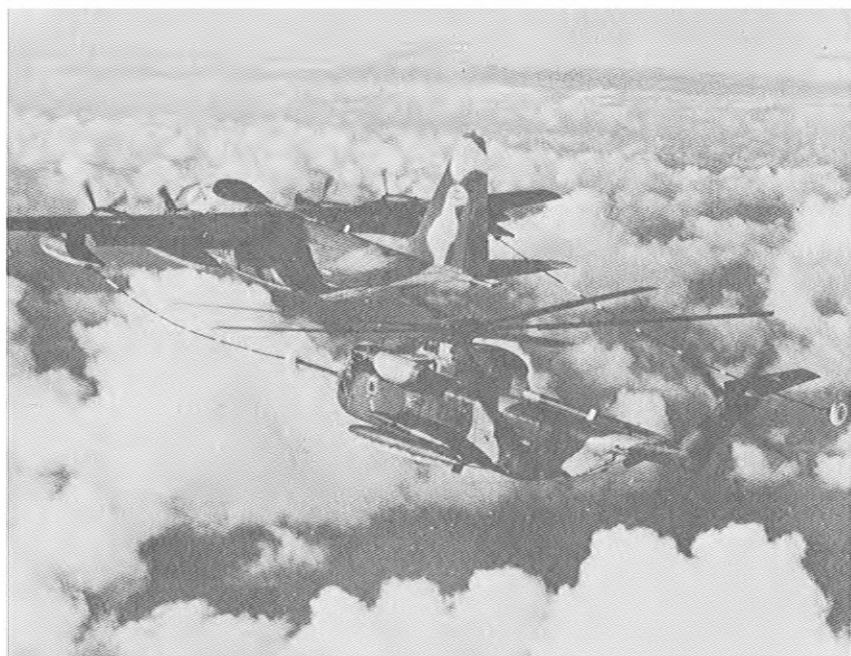


The boarding party found the Mayaguez deserted, but food hurriedly left behind by the captors was still warm



The USS Harold E. Holt tows the SS Mayaguez away from Koh Tang Island





HC - 130P refuels a Jolly Green

About one hour after the assault began, the last three helicopters carrying assault forces to Koh Tang prepared to deliver their marines. Considering the deadly intensity of enemy fire on the eastern beach, all three were directed to the narrow but apparently more survivable beach on the western side of the island neck. Lt Thomas Cooper, just back from air refueling at the HC-130 tanker (see photo), flew Jolly 41 into the western beach but was driven back by enemy fire after sustaining hits in the right fuel tank and ramp area. Minutes later two more Jollys attempted their insertions; Jolly Green 43 at the beach itself and Jolly 42 just south of the beach. Despite suppressive fire from their crews, both aircraft also encountered heavy resistance which forced them to abandon their first landing attempt. On the second try, the two aircraft reversed their strategies. This time Capt Roland Purser flew Jolly 43 south of the landing zone and inserted his marines at the first location available, an extremely small patch of rocks and sand some 500 to 1000 meters south of the beach. 1/Lt Philip Pacini, on the other hand, flew Jolly 42 north into the landing zone at the beach. Although the helicopter sustained extensive damage from small arms and mortar fire, the marines were successfully delivered. Jolly 42 withdrew and limped back to its staging base, escorted by Capt Purser in Jolly 43.

During the next hour, Lt Cooper made two more landing attempts with Jolly 41 at the western beach, but each time accurate automatic weapons and mortar fire prevented delivery of the troops. The marines on the beach attempted to



neutralize the enemy positions, but to no avail. Cooper returned to the tanker for a second air refueling. There were now 109 marines and 5 USAF crewmembers on Koh Tang.

## Rescue Attempt at the Eastern Beach

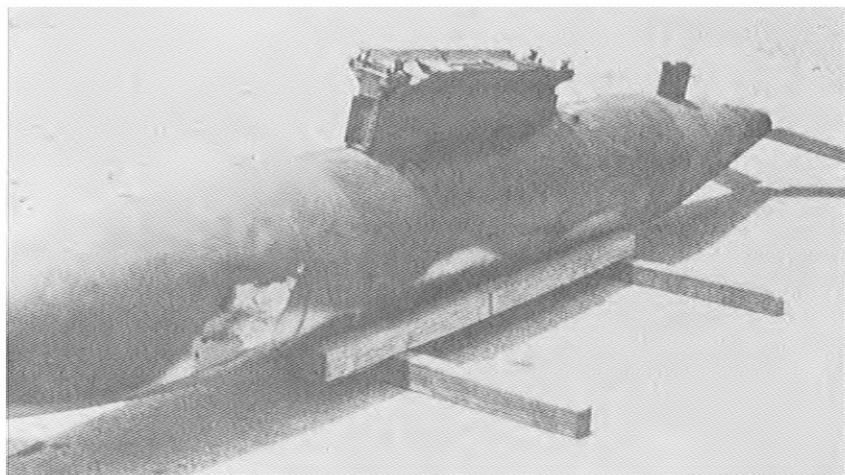
Following the offloading of marines at the USS Holt during the initial minutes of the operation, the three delivery helicopters had air refueled. Two of them returned to their staging base to take on the second wave of marines destined for Koh Tang. The third helicopter, Jolly Green 13, was assigned Search and Recovery (SAR) duty and orbited off Koh Tang while the A-7 FAC\* attempted to identify and destroy enemy positions. This was a time-consuming, difficult task. Time and again the A-7 flew low over the island neck, trying to draw enemy fire and thereby pinpoint the well-hidden enemy positions. The Cambodians refused to fire during these passes but came up again as soon as the A-7 finished each pass. Further complicating matters there were three factors which dictated extreme caution in the delivery of ordnance and limited initial strikes to 20 mm cannon fire: (1) uncertainty as to the exact location of all friendlies on the eastern beach (i.e., some of the personnel could conceivably have made it to the treeline without radios), (2) the close proximity of the enemy to friendly positions (as close as 20 meters), and (3) the presence of friendly forces on the western side of the island neck (the width of the neck was only 400 meters from beach to beach, and marines had pushed inland from the western beach for an unspecified distance.) Despite the difficult situation and the certainty of heavy enemy fire, the pilot and crew of Jolly 13 willingly flew into the eastern beach for a SAR attempt. They did this fully aware that the enemy could be using the 25 Americans on the eastern beach as bait to draw more helicopters into the crossfire.

Shortly after 8 am 1/Lt Charles Greer, pilot of Jolly 13, began his approach. Heavy ground fire was observed early in the run-in and continued all the way into the landing zone, which was a short distance north-northwest of the wreckage of Knife 23. Disregarding the thud of rounds smashing into his aircraft, Lt Greer touched down on the beach while his crew raked the shoreline with their miniguns. Cambodian positions, however, were numerous. The survivors, although in sight of the rescue helicopter, were pinned down by heavy fire. In what was a matter of seconds, but must have seemed much longer, Jolly 13 remained in its exposed position, absorbing punishing hits from heavy automatic weapons. Then two fires broke out—one in the Jolly's flare case and another in its auxiliary fuel tank. It looked as though the wreckage of a third helicopter would litter the eastern beach. With all hope of recovering the men at the treeline lost and his aircraft engulfed in flames, Greer

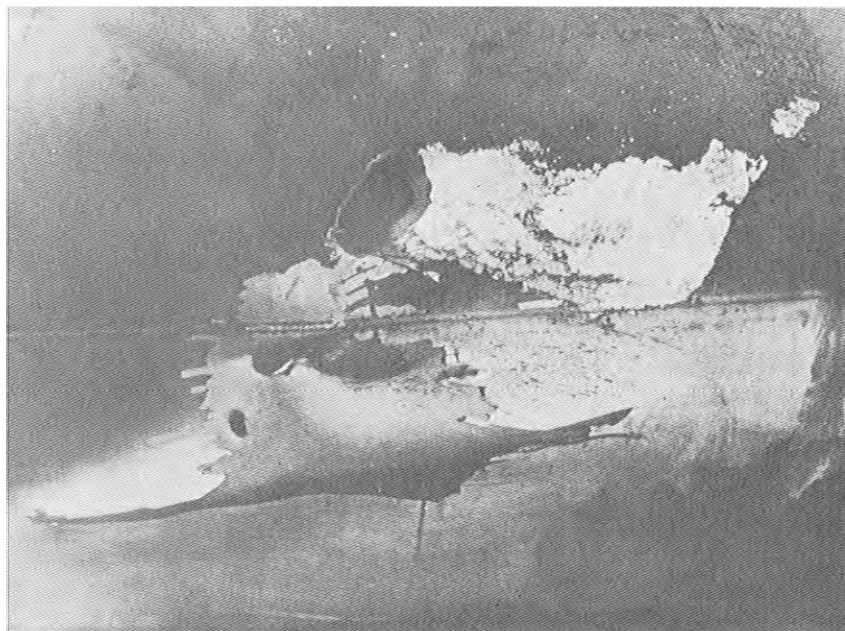
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\* USAF A-7 FAC/strike aircraft shuttled between the refueling tanker and the island to maintain continuous FAC coverage throughout most of the day. Except for several intervals during which AC-130 gunships assumed the FAC role, A-7s directed air support activities at the island for approximately a 10-hour period. They were relieved by OV-10 FACs at about 4 pm, local time.

pulled back from the landing zone. A quick-thinking crewmember jettisoned the burning flare box, while the rest of the crew disregarded the intense heat and continued to return enemy fire. Minutes later, as the helicopter picked up speed, the fire in the auxiliary fuel tank blew out. Greer nursed his chopper away from Koh Tang and limped back toward the mainland with 35 holes, severe rotor blade damage, and fuel, oil, and hydraulic leaks (see photos).

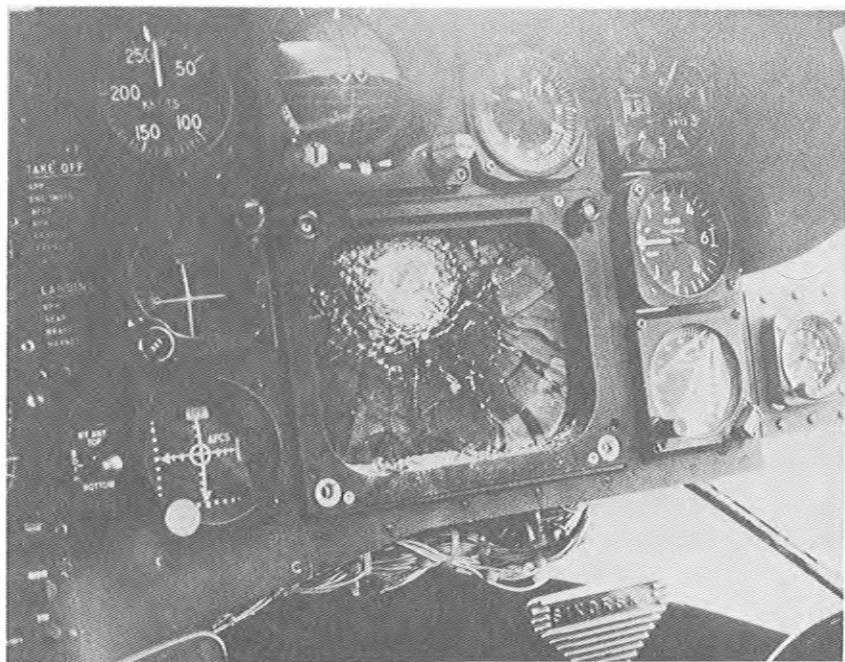


Hole in Jolly Green 13's fuel tank.



Close-up of severe damage to Jolly Green 13's fuel tank

After the departure of Jolly 13, A-7 aircraft rocketed and strafed enemy positions which had been active during the SAR, including a number of structures in the clearing just inland from the center of the eastern beach. Next, USAF F-4s (see photo) bombed the enemy emplacements, and still later a Spectre (AC-130) gunship fired on them again (see photo).



Jolly Green 13 pilot glanced down and saw an enemy round aimed at him, lodged in his shattered screen. The bullet had penetrated the windshield and instruments but spent itself just as it was about to break through.



USAF F-4





USAF F-4

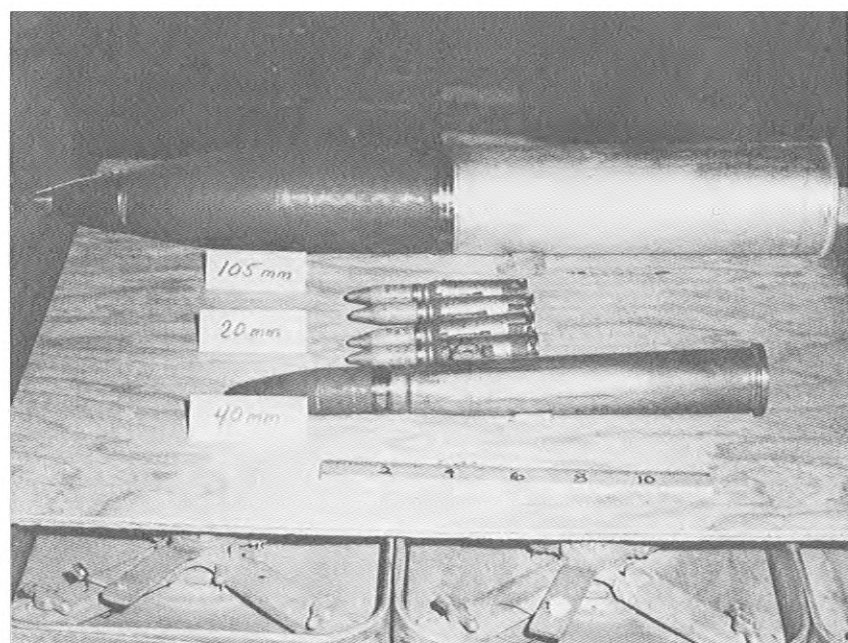
## Completion of First Assault Wave

As USAF aircraft pounded enemy positions on the eastern side of the island neck, Lt Cooper and his crew returned from the tanker for another delivery attempt at the western beach. He held Jolly 41 in an orbit off the island while the A-7 FAC tried to pinpoint combatant locations on the western side of the neck so that suppression of enemy fire would be possible. The fluid and confusing battlefield situation, however, together with the lack of marking smoke at the northern location, prevented the immediate application of air support.

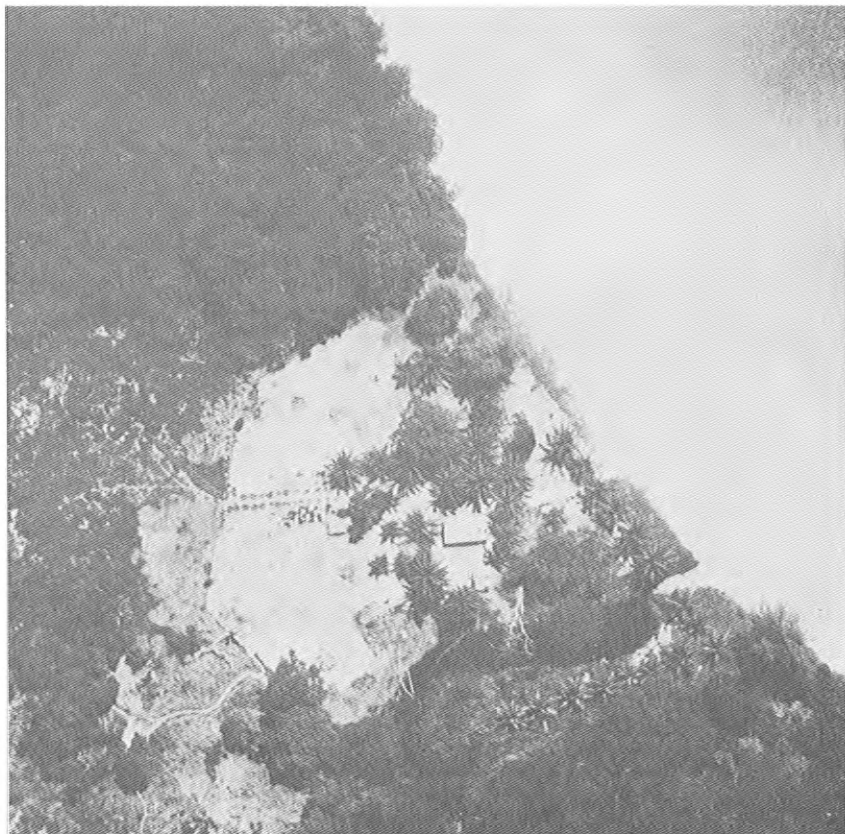
The marines on the western side of the island were in two groups: 60 were in the vicinity of the beach, and 29, including Lt Col Randall Austin, the commander of the ground forces, were in a separate enclave on the shoreline some 500 to 1000 meters south of the beach. An element from the beach had attempted to push south to reach the smaller group but had immediately encountered heavy enemy resistance, including automatic weapons fire and strategically emplaced claymore mines. One marine was killed and a number seriously wounded in the attempt. At that point the southern marine group began slowly working its way north along the shoreline. It soon became apparent that fortified positions, including bunkers, huts, and entrenched Cambodian forces, lay between the two marine groups and prevented linkup. These same fortifications were positioned to direct accurate fire against the western beach, hampering helicopter insertions.

Finally a Spectre gunship was able to locate all friendly forces and began to direct 20mm and 40mm fire against the enemy gun positions between the two marine units. These strikes at times came well within 50 meters of friendly forces, but the deliberate expenditure of ordnance prevented any accidents.

With the Spectre still putting down suppressive fire, Lt Cooper and his crew began another run-in to the western beach. Notwithstanding the air cover, Jolly Green 41 continued to receive accurate rounds from between the marine positions at the location being struck by the gunship, thus suggesting that enemy forces there were in covered fortifications. Cooper's aircraft, having



taken hits in the engine cowling and main rotor blades, was forced to terminate its hover and withdraw. The southern element of marines then notified Spectre that they had seen the fire emanating from a complex of huts and bunkers just north of their position. With corrective guidance from the marines, Spectre then laid down 105mm rounds, its heaviest ordnance (see photo), scoring direct hits and reducing the fortified complex to rubble.



Enemy encampment off the eastern beach at the northern end of Koh Tang Island

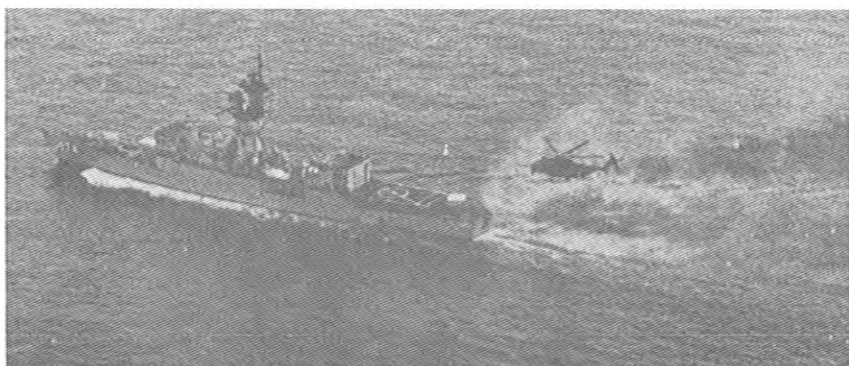


Post-strike photograph taken after A-7s, F-4s, and an AC-130 struck the enemy encampment.

With both the Spectre gunship and Jolly 41 low on fuel, Cooper flew into the western beach for the fifth time. Spectre continued to bombard the area between the marine positions, and enemy small arms and automatic weapons fire was light. As the marines poured out of the helicopter, however, a new threat emerged; mortar rounds began dropping into the landing zone. As the enemy mortar squad zeroed in, each round came closer to the mark—the sixth landed only 10 feet from the tail rotor. With all but five marines offloaded, Cooper temporarily aborted the insertion and lifted off from the beach. Moments later he came into a hover over the landing zone. As the helicopter touched down to deliver the remaining five marines a mortar round passed through the rotor



USS Holt and crew stand by as a Jolly Green approaches



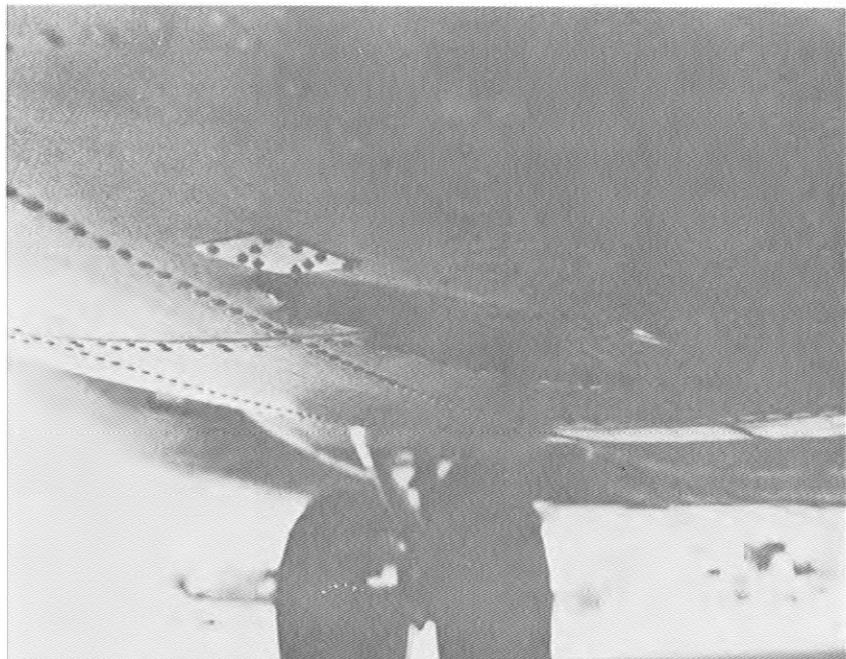
Jolly 11 watches as his wingman lands to deliver Marines

blades, landing within 20 feet of the personnel door and spraying shrapnel against the aircraft. Lt Cooper once again aborted the insertion. As the helicopter attained a hover and began to pull back, a mortar round exploded on the beach where the chopper had just been sitting, blowing a hole in the aircraft's belly (see photos) and causing shrapnel damage to the underside of the cargo ramp. Cooper, with five marines still onboard, withdrew to refuel and was directed back to his staging base to assess battle damage and, if possible, to onload more marines for another delivery to Koh Tang. The helicopter finally reached its staging base some 8 hours after it had departed. Extensive battle damage prevented it from relaunching during the remainder of the operation.

With the departure of Cooper and his crew, the initial insertion phase at Koh Tang was over. A total of 131 marines and 5 USAF crewmembers had been delivered to Koh Tang, but losses and damage were heavy. Fifteen Americans had been killed in action. Further, eight of the nine\* helicopters hitting the beaches at Koh Tang had either been shot down or damaged so severely they could no longer be employed in the operation. The ninth helicopter, Jolly 43, had returned to the staging base with Jolly 11 and Jolly 12 (both of which

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\* Eight helicopters flew directly to Koh Tang, one more first flew to the Holt and then conducted a SAR mission at the island, and two others flew to the Holt thence to their staging base for more marines. Thus, while a total of 11 helicopters participated in the assault phase, only nine of them touched down at Koh Tang Island itself.



Battle damage to underside of Jolly 41





Close-up of hole in Jolly 41 belly.



had delivered boarding parties to the USS Holt) to prepare for delivery of marine reinforcements to the island (see photos). These three aircraft were joined by two more helicopters, Knife 51 and Knife 52, which had been non-operational during the initial assault but had been subsequently repaired.



Marine reinforcements bound for Koh Tang board a CH-53 "Knife" helicopter



## Recovery of the Mayaguez Crew

Some three hours after the first marines were on the beach at Koh Tang, and while Lt Cooper was still involved in unsuccessful attempts to get into the western beach with the last load of marines in the assault phase, a Thai fishing boat (see photo) flying a white flag was seen approaching the island from the direction of the Cambodian mainland. Approximately 1 hour later the boat had been intercepted and the passengers, the entire Mayaguez crew, were safely aboard the USS Henry B. Wilson. The crew was soon transferred to the Mayaguez, which then steamed away from the Koh Tang area under its own power.

In retrospect, on the basis of interviews of the Mayaguez crew, it appears the Cambodians were considering release of the crew on the night of the 14th but at the last minute changed their minds. The crew was then told a decision would be reached by the morning of the 15th. The containment and destruction of Cambodian gunboats must surely have been a factor in the final decision to free the crew, but whether or not the assault on Koh Tang also helped prompt their release is subject to speculation. (It is true, however, that the crew did not actually depart their island of captivity until more than an hour after the assault had begun.) Whenever the decision was made to release the crew, however, it was not communicated to the United States; the fate of the crewmembers remained a mystery up to the moment they approached and were taken aboard the USS Wilson.

With the successful recovery of the crew, the focus of the operation shifted

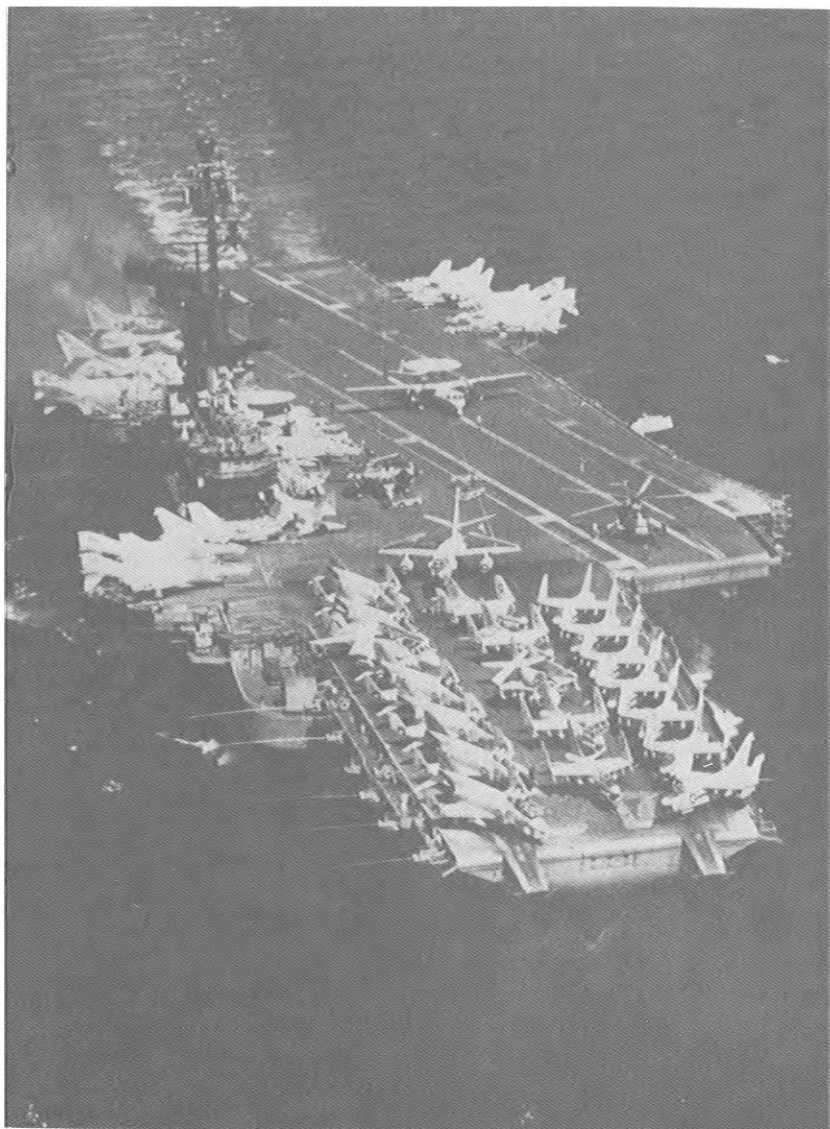


Thai fishing boat which carried the MAYAGUEZ crew to freedom later, ties up alongside the USS HOLT. It was this same boat that transported the crew from Koh Tang Island to Kaoh Rong Sam Loem Island on the 14th.



Overhead view of Thai fishing boat alongside the USS Holt.

to withdrawal of US forces from Koh Tang. Yet before the marines could be withdrawn reinforcements were mandatory to stabilize the situation on the island. The 131 marines and 5 USAF crewmembers on Koh Tang were under heavy fire and were split into three separate groups which were unable to link up—82 were on the western beach, 29 were located south of that beach, and the remaining 25 were isolated across the island neck at the eastern beach. Efforts to extract the latter group had thus far proven costly and futile. Only five helicopters remained to deliver reinforcements and to subsequently extract the entire American force from the beaches of Koh Tang. All five choppers were already loaded and enroute to the island. Along with the seemingly overwhelming difficulties facing the operation, however, were two positive factors. First, the naval aircraft carrier USS Coral Sea (see photo) was steaming for Koh Tang and by afternoon would be close enough to serve as nearby offloading platform once the decision to withdraw had been made. This would, in effect, multiply the extraction capabilities of the five participating helicopters. Second, with the entire crew of the Mayaguez recovered, air cover could be supplied at the island without fear for their safety.



USS Coral Sea

## **Reinforcement and Linkup of Marines on the Western Beach**

While the five helicopters were making for Koh Tang with reinforcements, Lt Col Austin's group of 29 men fought its way north along the shoreline but bogged down at a position within earshot of the western beach. The area just south of the beach and inland from the treeline was still infested with enemy

squads which were in a position to direct accurate fire against incoming helicopters.

Shortly before noon the delivery of marines began. Knife 52, low on fuel, made the first insertion attempt. Lt Robert Rakitis brazenly approached the eastern beach at high speed for a quick insertion. His aircraft immediately took hits, prompting him to abort the attempt and fly straight over the island neck from east to west. With holes in his fuel tanks and lacking a refueling capability, Lt Rakitis was forced to cease delivery attempts and return to the mainland. The remaining four helicopters made their run-ins to the western beach in two pairs.

1/Lt Richard Brims (Knife 51) and Capt Roland Purser (Jolly 43) punched into the western beach, their crews directing nearly continuous minigun fire at enemy gun flashes as close as 50 yards from the helicopter. Despite incoming mortar rounds and substantial small arms and automatic weapons fire, both helicopters were able to deliver their marines. Lt Brims, first into the landing zone, evacuated five wounded marines and withdrew with only minor damage to his helicopter. While his crew feverishly administered medical treatment, Brims departed for the staging base to deliver the critically injured. Capt Purser, having delivered his marines without any known battle damage, left for the HC-130 tanker and subsequently returned to the island for a SAR attempt on the eastern beach.

As soon as Brims and Purser had pulled out of the western beach the last pair of helicopters began their run-ins. 1/Lt Donald Backlund (Jolly 11), first into the narrow beach, jinked his aircraft around to put the tail ramp on the shore, a maneuver which all of the reinforcement helicopters had been forced to make because of the rocky, steeply sloping beach and the rising tide. Capt Paul Jacobs (Jolly 12) hovered offshore so his crew could provide suppression with their miniguns, but enemy ground fire could not be returned at that time due to the presence of marines in the line of fire. After Lt Backlund's full load of marines rushed ashore, he pulled back from the beach to provide cover for Capt Jacobs.

It was approximately at this time, while reinforcements were being off-loaded, that the southern group of marines finally reached the beach area and linked up with the main assault force. Having fought their way past one enemy position after another, they brought with them one captured 60mm mortar (they had seen another but did not capture it), one 57mm recoilless rifle, and numerous M-16 and AK-47 rifles.

As the last marines were offloading from Jolly 12, Capt Jacobs received a radio call from the ground commander requesting evacuation of more critically wounded men. Jacobs held his chopper on the exposed beach while the casualties were brought out and his crew took the injured on board. Meanwhile Backlund's crew suppressed intermittent small arms fire with their miniguns and automatic weapons. During the delivery of marines and evacuation of wounded, hits were taken by both aircraft but no substantive damage was apparent. Jacobs then sped back to the staging base with his crew administering emergency medical aid to the wounded. At the same time, Backlund and



crew departed the beach area to air refuel and join Capt Purser for SAR duties at the island.

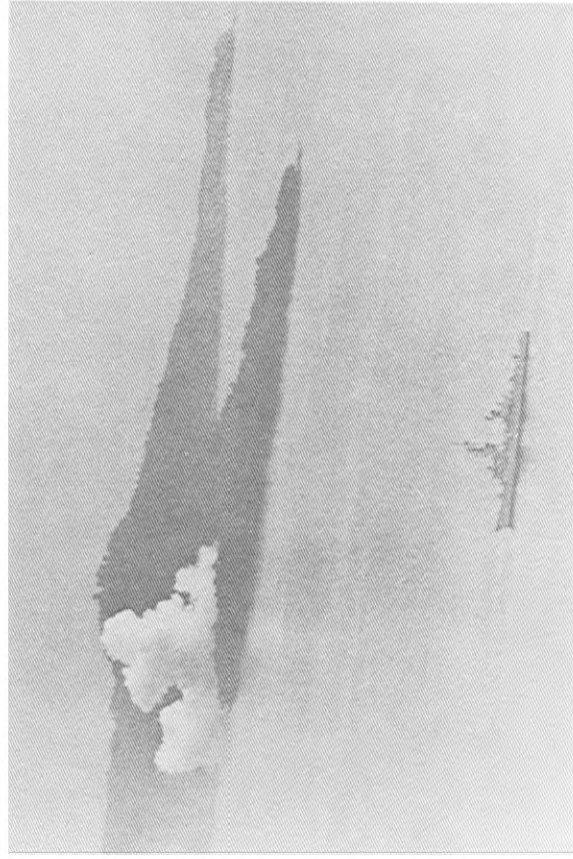
It was just after noon when the delivery of reinforcements was completed. Some 222 Americans were on Koh Tang Island, nearly all of them concentrated near the small beach on the western side of the island neck. Marines on the western side had linked up and were now strong enough to consolidate their position. Enemy forces, however, were still positioned in strength throughout the island neck area—it was clear that any attempt by the marines to push across the neck to the eastern beach would result in heavy casualties. Recovery of the men stranded on the eastern beach would have to be accomplished by helicopter. Only four operational helicopters were left. Two were racing to their staging base with wounded marines and the other two were making ready for a second recovery attempt on the eastern beach.

## **Second SAR Attempt—Eastern Beach**

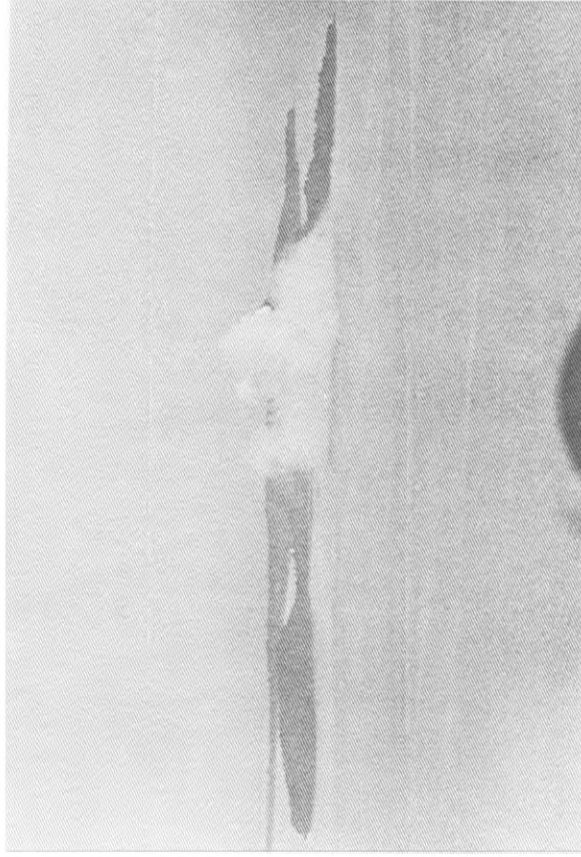
When Capt Purser (Jolly 43) and Lt Backlund (Jolly 11) returned to Koh Tang from refueling, USAF jets and naval artillery were working over the area surrounding the 25 men on the northern tip of the eastern beach. The helicopters orbited off the island, biding their time while the strikes continued. Finally, at about 2:30 in the afternoon, the SAR attempt was launched. Preceded by an A-7 dispensing riot control agent (see photo), Purser's chopper led the way into the landing zone. Backlund and his crew were right behind to provide suppressive minigun fire throughout the recovery. During the run-in Pur-



USAF crewmember suppresses enemy resistance with his aft minigun as Jolly Green 11 participates in the reinforcement of Marines at the western beach



Riot control agent dispensed by A-7s in an attempt to recover the Americans  
stranded on the eastern beach





ser and his men could see that the riot agent would be of no assistance—the wind had blown it over the water. To make matters worse one of the miniguns jammed, leaving the left side of the aircraft virtually defenseless. Aware of the increasingly precarious position of the men on the beach, however, Capt Purser and his crew were not about to abandon their run-in. As the rescue helicopter attained a hover over the beach, intense and accurate small arms, automatic weapons, and mortar fire shot out one of the aircraft's two engines and ruptured a fuel line; raw fuel began spraying into the cabin. Seeing his comrades in trouble, copilot 1/Lt Gary Weikel turned Jolly 11's white belly up to draw away enemy fire. Meanwhile, Sgt Thomas Bateson, manning Jolly 43's ramp minigun, was felled by mortar fragments, and the aircraft's only other operable minigun jammed. With his crew shutting down the disabled engine and struggling to stem the massive fuel leak, Capt Purser managed to nurse the aircraft out of the landing zone on one engine. He withdrew from the cove area under cover fire provided by Lt Backlund's crew. By this time the USS Coral Sea had approached to within some 70 miles of Koh Tang and Purser elected to recover there. Escorted by Lt Backlund, Purser made a single-engine landing on the Coral Sea. His flight mechanic, TSgt Billy Willingham, and Coral Sea maintenance personnel immediately initiated repairs. Capt Purser and his crew were anxious to return to the island and later would do just that.

Following the abortive rescue attempt, however, Jolly 11, Jolly 12, and Knife 51 were the only helicopters still operational. A fourth, Jolly 44, had been out of commission at its staging base but then became operational after undergoing intensive repair efforts. Extraction of ground forces before the arrival of darkness was viewed as critical, but the prerequisite to that, recovery



As Jolly Green 43 approaches the eastern beach, wind blows the cloud over the water

of the men trapped on the eastern beach, was proving impossible—only four Air Force helicopters were still on hand to conduct the operation.

## **Preparations for Another SAR Attempt**

By late afternoon ground fire on Koh Tang had not abated. Air Force aircraft continued to single out and destroy enemy positions but many well-hidden fortifications remained. One crucial position, however, had just been discovered during the last SAR attempt and would soon be removed—a seemingly deserted patrol boat run aground and abandoned on a reef in the water off the eastern beach (see photo). Following Capt Purser's departure from the landing zone, Lt Lucas radioed an urgent message to the A-7 FAC from the Americans dug in at the treeline on the eastern beach; fire had been seen coming from the deck of the patrol boat during the last SAR. Enemy soldiers, apparently hiding under the deck, would come up and fire their heavy automatic weapon only when the helicopters approached the beach. Everyone had focused attention on the heavy fire emanating along the length of, and inland from, the treeline. Activity on the boat in the cove had gone unnoticed, resulting in a deadly cross-fire which had been unopposed during previous recovery attempts. To remedy the situation A-7s rolled in and repeatedly strafed the grounded patrol boat. Although badly mauled and apparently deserted, the beached boat was still



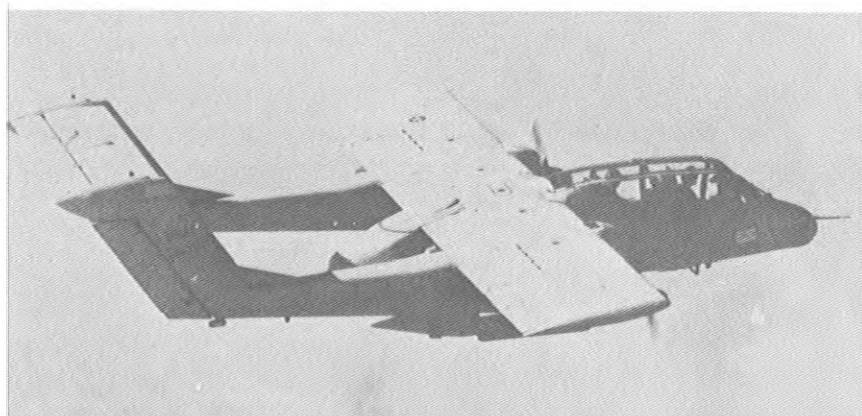
Pre-strike photograph of beached patrol boat.



Photo of beached patrol boat after being strafed by A-7s.

menacingly intact (see photo). The USS Wilson volunteered to destroy it with artillery fire.

At that time, about 4:00 in the afternoon, two OV-10 "Nail" FACs (see photo) arrived at the scene to relieve the A-7 FACs. The OV-10 and A-7 FACs agreed that the threat from the gunboat should be completely eliminated. As soon as the OV-10s assumed control the USS Wilson commenced shelling



USAF OV-10 aircraft



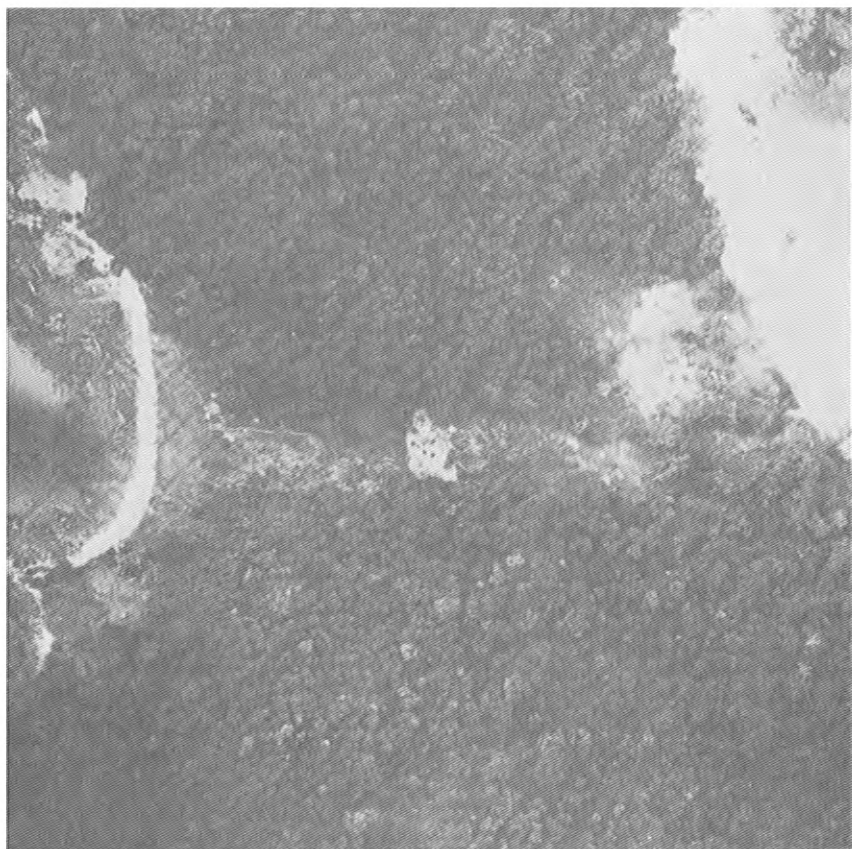
The USS Wilson directs fire against a Cambodian patrol boat aground on the eastern beach as a USAF Jolly Green helicopter looks on.

the beached gunboat (see photo). That ounce of prevention proved immensely wise—as gunners from the Wilson zeroed in on the boat a half dozen enemy soldiers scrambled to the deck to escape. In the next instant a direct hit obliterated the boat and its crew, touching off a series of secondary explosions and producing a towering column of dense smoke. A primary threat had been eliminated.

During the previous recovery attempt, heavy enemy fire had also been seen coming from the cleared encampment area inland from the middle of the eastern beach. Although the area had been bombed repeatedly, Maj Undorf, the low FAC\*, could still see structures there on his low, slow passes over the island neck. Several buildings had indeed been destroyed; others, partially obscured by vegetation, were still intact. Personnel movement was visible throughout the area. The buildings had to go, but first the forward positions of marines penetrating across the neck from the western beach would have to be fixed. Flying dangerously low over the island neck, the Nail FAC spotted personnel in foxholes and laid a marking rocket down as a point of reference to

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\* The Nails worked in pairs, one high (managing and briefing incoming strike aircraft) and one low (directing strikes and maintaining close surveillance of the battlefield). Maj Robert Undorf was the low Nail, Capt Richard Roehrkaase was the high Nail.



Marine forward elements from the western beach (at left) penetrated across the island neck as far as the clearing near the center of the photograph.

confirm their friendly status; they were the forward marine listening posts and were situated in a clearing almost halfway across the neck (see photo).

As the FAC prepared to coordinate strikes against enemy positions in and near the encampment area, the friendlies at the treeline reported they were taking small arms fire from north of their position. It was painfully evident that Cambodian forces still surrounded the contingent of marines and Air Force crewmembers—with darkness only two hours away, time was running out. Lt Backlund and his crew had now been orbiting off the island literally for hours and had witnessed repeated, futile attempts to suppress enemy fire and recover the friendly contingent on the eastern beach. They were still waiting for their chance to spearhead a rescue effort. Alarmed by the fact that daylight was nearly gone and disabused by the frustrating delays, Backlund radioed the FAC





USAF personnel hurriedly refuel a helicopter for a return trip to Koh Tang.

and in no uncertain terms summed up the urgency of the situation. It was time, he insisted, to get the action going; to put in some heavy, well-placed ordnance and root out an enemy who had been thwarting recovery attempts all day. The sun would soon be setting and they seemed no closer to getting the men out now than they had been hours earlier. Maj Undorf knew from the hard tone of the conversation that it was just such a pilot and crew that would be needed in the upcoming attempt to extract the men from the eastern beach.

In the next few minutes F-4s rocketed, bombed, and strafed well-concealed enemy huts in the encampment and the surrounding area. Undorf then methodically worked the F-4s north to positions inland from the friendlies at the treeline. Next he brought in A-7s who again worked over the same area.

When Maj Undorf flew down to take a look at the bombed area he saw enemy bodies and drew no gunfire. He then began preparations for the rescue attempt. Lt Backlund's chopper (Jolly 11) was to go in to the beach for the recovery. Capt Wall's crew\* (Jolly 12) would follow to provide suppressive fire and to examine the wreckage of Knife 23 for a marine seen there in the morning. Lt Brim's crew (Knife 51), back from delivering wounded to the staging base and refueling (see photo), also prepared to provide suppressive fire.

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\* Capt Barry Walls and his fresh crew replaced Capt Jacobs and his crew after they had delivered wounded to their staging base.

Black Velvet 1, a longboat from the USS Wilson, was to stand off from the beach to provide a backup rescue platform should one of the helicopters be shot down. It also served a secondary function, to draw and return fire (the boat was armed with two machine guns). The men on the beach were to mark their position with smoke to insure easy acquisition by the rescue helicopters, and A-7s were overhead to provide air cover. In the event of enemy fire the helicopters were instructed to pull back to allow further strikes, but everyone knew time was growing short. Dusk was already approaching.

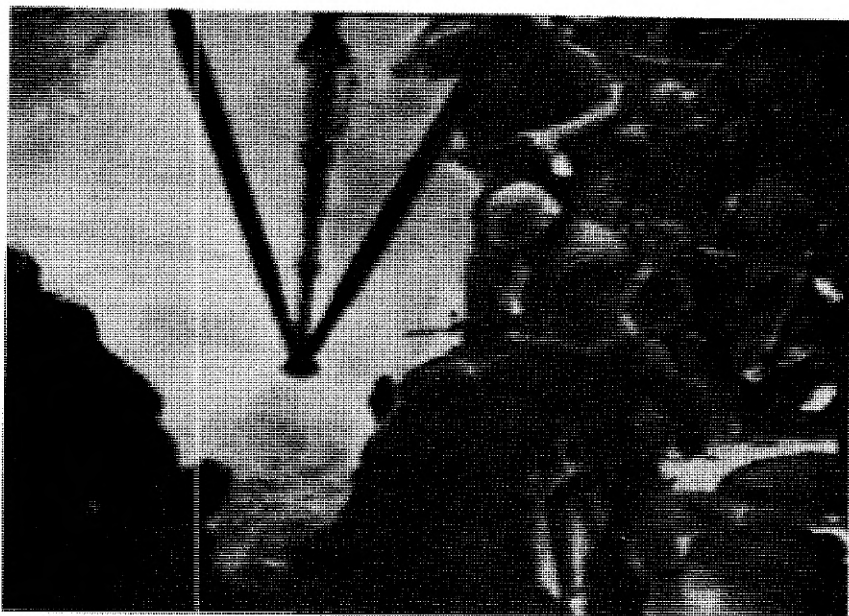
## **The Third SAR on the Eastern Beach**

Lt Backlund made a low-level, high-speed run-in to the beach, saw the survivors pop their marking smoke, and swung the helicopter's tail around toward the beach. The tide was in so he placed the ramp on the rocks and sand while the front of the aircraft hovered over the water. Although all three helicopters raked the shoreline with minigun and submachine gun fire, Jolly took ground fire from all quadrants, some from less than 50 meters away. As soon as the rescue helicopter touched down, the marines began an orderly withdrawal from the treeline, stopping every few feet to fire their weapons. Then when they were exposed on the rocky beach, a new enemy position opened up near the very treeline they had just left. The group spun around and dropped to the ground for a moment but decided it was time to make a break despite the accurate fire. They continued their orderly withdrawal, helping to suppress the position with their rifle fire. Despite the cumulative effects of daylong airstrikes and the fact that three helicopters were spewing minigun fire up and down the length of the treeline, enemy resistance was almost fanatical. At one point Cambodian soldiers, seeing the marines escaping from their grasp, stormed the helicopter and attained handgrenade range. Just as one of them started to throw his grenade the whole group was cut down by minigun and rifle fire. The grenade fell short of the mark and exploded without damage to the aircraft.

During the rescue Capt Walls and Lt Brims, their crews raising a wall of minigun fire, made repeated passes up and down the beach. Maj Undorf, flying low overhead, made a half dozen quick strafing passes as he spotted Cambodian positions firing on the marines and helicopters. Black Velvet 1 also returned enemy fire from its vantage point in the water northeast of the recovery location. The boat was forced to cease fire, however, when its machine gun rounds began ricocheting off the rocks north of the recovery location.

As the marines reached the ramp each one first turned to empty his magazine into the treeline before running up the ramp into the aircraft. Maintaining





In the failing light, the 25 US Marines and USAF crewmembers trapped all day on the eastern beach are rescued. Jolly Green 11 hovers over the rocky beach with its nose above the water and its tail ramp down in the rocks and surf.

their chopper's position on the rocky beach (see photo) and helping the marines to board was a real team effort for the crew of Jolly 11. While several crewmembers manned the miniguns two pararescuemen went down the exposed ramp to expedite loading and to assist the wounded—they fired their rifles with one hand and forcefully assisted the marines on board with the other. A USAF photographer on Jolly 11 acted as a "floater," providing cover fire with his automatic rifle whenever it was most needed. Only when the crew was sure that all 25 marines and airmen were aboard did they signal Lt Backlund to pull out. Then as Jolly 11 departed the beach and began to pick up speed, a heavy-calibre machine gun opened up. The huge waterspouts from the weapon were clearly visible to Maj Undorf, and the line they made in the water allowed him to immediately locate the source. He rolled in and strafed the position, silencing it and allowing the safe withdrawal of the helicopters. Backlund reported on the radio that all 25 men were on board, but many of them were wounded. His crew tending to the injured, he raced to the USS Coral Sea, which at this time was 10 minutes away. Capt Walls and Lt Brims remained at Koh Tang to initiate a recovery attempt for the possible survivor seen earlier in the day on the Knife 23 wreckage.

It was approximately at this time that a USAF C-130 cargo aircraft lumbered over the island and delivered a huge 15,000 pound bomb. The blockbuster, dropped to apply maximum psychological pressure against Cambodian

soldiers resisting the withdrawal operations, blasted an area the size of a football field out of the dense jungle.

In the meantime Undorf was already marking targets for an AC-130 gunship which had just arrived on the scene. The Spectre then attacked the area surrounding the friendlies' former location at the treeline. After extensive softening by the gunship, an A-7 came in and delivered its bombs. Capt Walls and Lt Brims prepared to reenter the eastern beach so their crews could inspect the wreckage of Knife 23 for a possible survivor.

Walls flew Jolly 12 up to the wreckage and established a hover, immediately coming under heavy fire from the full length of the treeline up and down the beach. Brims hovered Knife 51 just to the south and his gunners cut loose with a barrage of minigun fire. With every bit of firepower sorely needed, the rest of the crew knocked out the side windows in the left rear of the aircraft and fired their rifles through the openings.

Despite the suppressive fire from both Knife 51 and Jolly 12, strong resistance continued. Although there was no sign of any survivor, Walls maintained a hover and his crew dropped their forest penetrator next to the downed helicopter as impacting enemy rounds banged against their aircraft. When the ramp minigun jammed, the crew returned fire from that position with their rifles.

The hoist operator, Sgt Jesus Dejesus, lowered the penetrator next to the crew entrance door of the downed chopper and dragged it back and forth through the water adjacent to the helicopter. (At this point the tide was in and the chopper was awash.) While doing this Dejesus was shot in the leg, but he simply ignored the wound. He continued to operate the hoist and remained in an exposed position with his head outside the aircraft, looking for any sign of a survivor.

Meanwhile the "waist" minigun on the left side of Knife 51 had run out of ammunition. Lt Brims quickly wheeled the chopper around to bring the right gun to bear on the shoreline. Those crewmen not manning miniguns promptly punched out the three right windows and again commenced firing their rifles. At that point Maj Undorf, flying low over the eastern beach in his OV-10, spotted a half-dozen helmeted figures rushing through the bushes toward the treeline to the right of where Brim's crew was directing fire. If they reached the beach they would be within hand grenade range of both helicopters. Undorf warned the crew of Knife 51 to adjust its fire to the right, and they cut down the enemy squad just as it approached the treeline.

After hovering over the downed helicopter for approximately 2 minutes and determining there was no survivor onboard, a severely damaged Jolly 12 began to withdraw, followed by Knife 51. Capt Walls recovered Jolly 12 on the Coral Sea. His aircraft had been hit hard; damaged components included its tail rotor section, hydraulic lines, auxiliary fuel tanks, and rotor blades. Lt Brims' aircraft, however, had apparently sustained no serious damage and so he remained at the island to pick up marines from the western beach. Two other helicopters, Jolly 43 (its ruptured fuel line repaired on the Coral Sea with a length of rubber hose and some tape) and Jolly 44 (just entering the

fray after being brought out of maintenance and repaired at its staging base), were also nearing the island. Thus only three SAR helicopters were available for the extraction of some 200 marines.

## **Extraction of Marines from the Western Beach**

Darkness had now fallen at Koh Tang. It has been suggested by some that American forces waited for night before withdrawing from the island. In fact the withdrawal had been delayed by the evacuation of the eastern beach, which was not finally completed until dusk was fading into night. With only the three remaining helicopters and with darkness hampering the acquisition of the landing zone and complicating any further SAR attempts should another helicopter be shot down, friendly forces had to decide whether or not to start withdrawal. The sobering chance that only part of the marines could be extracted and that a reduced, badly outnumbered force might then have to remain on the island throughout the night had to be considered. Yet the prospects of even the entire marine force remaining on the island overnight, with little hope of reinforcement or resupply, strongly militated for immediate withdrawal. Maj Undorf and Lt Col Austin frankly assessed the situation over the radio. Austin insisted that there had to be enough helicopters to get all of the marines out, or all would have to stay on the island through the night. It would take multiple sorties by each helicopter, but if further helicopter losses could be avoided it could be done. The decision was made to withdraw.

Lt Brims, his chopper low on fuel after participating in the recovery of the Knife 23 survivors, was the first into the western beach. Capt Purser (Jolly 43 pilot) and Lt Robert Blough (Jolly 44 pilot) held a short distance off the beach waiting for their turns to go in. Black Velvet 1 trolled offshore to provide suppressive fire to the north of friendly positions and, more importantly, to serve as a backup rescue capability should the need arise.

Enemy fire, including mortar-launched flares, greeted Brims and his crew in the landing zone. A firefight ensued between the marines, throwing up a curtain of fire, and Cambodian forces, who were firing into the landing zone at both the marines and the helicopter. Crewmembers added their minigun and rifle fire to the melee. As Knife 51 lifted off, loaded to capacity with marines, an enemy rocket streaked toward the aircraft but missed. With his crew already treating the wounded, Brims withdrew and made for the Coral Sea to offload and refuel.

As Capt Purser and Lt Blough reached the beach area, Undorf marked the enemy mortar position with smoke and called in tactical aircraft to strike the site. By that time, however, it was too dark for the fast-moving jets to acquire the marking smoke. Nevertheless, time was considered so critical that the extraction was continued rather than being delayed to coordinate strikes by a Spectre gunship or naval artillery. Purser maneuvered Jolly 43 onto the beach and began unloading more marines. Unruffled by the fact that only one of their miniguns was still operational, the crew aggressively returned fire with their

automatic rifles. The longboat from the Wilson was still providing suppressive fire. As for the marines, the firefight continued along the entire beach perimeter—muzzle flashes dotted the western side of the island neck.

In the darkness there was a near collision between Purser's chopper, on the beach, and Blough's aircraft, approaching the beach from behind with its landing lights shot out. Purser's copilot, Lt Gradle, quickly switched on the aircraft's spotlight just in time to allow Blough to see them. It was apparent that both helicopters could not fit into the landing zone at the same time. Blough pulled back and waited for Jolly 43 to depart. Purser poured on the power and Jolly 43 lifted out of the landing zone with 54 marines on board, more than double the normal combat loading configuration. Having taken numerous hits, including a 7.62mm round in the main rotor spar, the heavily laden Jolly 43 made for the Coral Sea to offload and ascertain battle damage.

As Lt Blough approached the beach in the darkness for a second time, accurate and heavy ground fire forced him to abort the evacuation attempt. Minutes later the marines had cleared the helicopter back in. Jolly 44 inched back toward the beach, the pilot guided through the darkness by instructions from crewmembers hanging outside the helicopter's door. Finally Blough touched down on the beach and the crew began to load the marines. The aircraft again started to receive small arms and automatic weapons fire but could not return it for fear of hitting friendly forces. While Jolly 44 was on the beach, however, the marines radioed that all their men were now within 50 meters of the landing zone. Maj Undorf began to strafe enemy positions with his OV-10, and Black Velvet 1 directed machine gun fire against hostile positions south of the beach. Blough, his helicopter fully loaded, withdrew from the landing zone.

With the departure of Jolly 44, some 73 marines were still on the western beach. The most crucial phase of the withdrawal was at hand; all three available helicopters were loaded and leaving the Koh Tang area, and the marine force on the island was under fire and badly outnumbered. Just at that critical point radio contact was lost with the remaining marines on the beach. Considering the urgency of the situation and disregarding the fact that his aircraft had just taken numerous hits, Blough decided to divert with his load of marines to the USS Holt, which was just off-shore at Koh Tang. This would save valuable time, eliminating the 20-minute round trip required to offload at the Coral Sea—but the helicopters which had delivered marines to the Holt in the morning had rated it a challenging task even with a normally loaded aircraft and under daylight conditions. How would the heavily loaded Jolly, in the darkness and with its landing lights out, negotiate a touchdown on a landing pad designed for much smaller helicopters?

Lt Blough made three passes at the landing pad but his landing lights were out and there was no lighting on the ship's superstructure next to the small pad. The red landing lights on the pad itself were his only visual points of reference. Further, the landing had to be made at an angle to avoid the protruding superstructure. Blough had to rely on directions received from one of his flight mechanics, SSgt Robert Bounds, who leaned out of the aircraft and judged the distance of the rotor tips from the ship's superstructure. As the helicopter

hovered above the pad with its tail and rear wheels hanging over the water, Blough slowly inched it forward until the main gear was just on the corner of the rectangular landing pad. The marines offloaded through the front door—they had to; the tail ramp was still sitting out over the water! As the helicopter departed, Lt Blough realized that the landing and the directions he had received from his flight mechanic must have been pretty good—there had been only a two-foot clearance between the rotor blades and the ship's superstructure. Blough rushed back to the landing zone to take on another group of marines.

While Jolly 44 had been at the Holt, Maj Undorf, running out of fuel and greatly concerned over the loss of radio contact with the marines, flew his OV-10 low over the beach with its landing lights on to verify that the Americans were still there and had not been overrun. This done, he and the other OV-10 Nail FAC departed the area as the two newly arriving Nails took over control of the evacuation operation. The Spectre gunship also confirmed the location of friendlies on its sensors before it departed and was replaced by a new Spectre. Within 10 minutes the new gunship had sighted its guns and was cleared to fire at targets as near as 50 meters from the beach.

Radio contact was finally reestablished with the ground commander, and he reported he was in danger of being overrun. Two minutes later he reemphasized the urgency of immediate evacuation, proclaiming it was time to "*go for broke.*" Continuous, accurate fire was laid down by the Spectre, and within 5 minutes Jolly 44 was back to the landing zone. In the total blackness, acquisition of the beach was helped by a blinking strobe light just set up by the marines. The copilot, 1/Lt Henry Mason, negotiated the difficult approach and touchdown, assisted by a marine on the ground who turned his flashlight on and off. While Jolly 44 was in the landing zone taking on marines, the Spectre gunship pounded enemy positions. One such position was the mortar site which had been active during previous extractions—it was silent during this recovery. Then as Jolly 44 lifted off with a full load, automatic weapons fire scored hits before being silenced by minigun fire. As the straining chopper began to pick up speed and altitude, one of the helicopter's two pararescuemen, Airman 1st Class David Ash, pulled in a marine who was dangling from the rear gun mount near the ramp. At the same time the other pararescueman began emergency treatment of four wounded marines. Jolly 44, losing power due to salt water ingestion in the engines, was forced to recover on the Coral Sea. Twenty-nine marines were still under fire on the western beach and there were no helicopters immediately available to make the pickup. Airpower would have to keep the enemy at bay until Knife 51 could return to the Island from the Coral Sea.

While the Spectre gunship shelled enemy positions surrounding the friendly perimeter, especially the area at the southern end of the beach, Lt Brims raced to Koh Tang with Knife 51. There was not even the hint of a moon, and by this time it was pitch black. As Brims approached in the darkness, the newly arrived low-FAC, Capt Seth Wilson, circled 1000 feet above the landing zone and switched his landing lights on and off to guide the helicopter in. Each time he did this he drew enemy fire, which the Spectre gunship then suppressed.

Brims attempted three unsuccessful run-ins to the beach. Notwithstanding the use of the helicopter's running lights, the darkness, aggravated by smoke and haze from fires on the island, severely restricted visibility. Enemy ground fire and the deep water next to the beach at high tide further complicated the landing. On the fourth run-in the marines waved off the helicopter because they considered the beach unsafe, but Brims pressed into the landing zone. While the wounded were being taken on, the rest of the marines set up suppressive fire, the Nail FAC delivered his rockets, the Spectre gunship laid down a continuous barrage, and Knife 51 added the firepower of its miniguns. The visual effects of the battle were like a scene from a science fiction movie: the bright tracers from the miniguns created a pulsing corridor of fire which surged from the helicopter and burned itself out in the jungle. In the face of this pommeling, enemy effectiveness was substantially diminished. Even so, some hostile fire was still being received, and sniper fire was observed coming from the beach itself. When 27 marines had boarded the helicopter, TSgt Wayne Fisk, ignoring the darkness and the hostile fire, left the safety of the aircraft and ran across the beach to the treeline to search for any marines who may have been left behind. At the treeline Fisk met with two marines still laying down suppressive fire. All three returned safely to the helicopter which then took off with the last 29 marines extracted from Koh Tang.

Minutes after the helicopter was out of the landing zone, enemy tracers from an anti-aircraft artillery gun near the western beach lit up the sky. Then, when it became apparent there were no friendly forces in the vicinity of the western and eastern beaches, recovery operations were terminated. As US aircraft withdrew and began returning to their staging bases, a deathly stillness fell over Koh Tang. A fire in the levelled enemy encampment gave the eastern side of the island neck an unearthly glow, while on the western side of the neck all was dark save the intermittent blinking of the marine strobe light abandoned on the beach.

The delivery and subsequent withdrawal by helicopter of some 230 marines had been completed in the face of almost total uncertainty for planners and terribly unfavorable conditions for participating helicopters and marines. Yet the hazardous operation was undertaken unhesitatingly by all involved. It represented a chance for the recovery of the Mayaguez crew which could not be overlooked—and once the crew was recovered it became a life-and-death struggle to reinforce and subsequently withdraw those marines already committed to the operation on Koh Tang. Although damage was inflicted on all but one of the helicopters participating at Koh Tang, the efforts of USAF helicopter crews, with strong support from other Air Force and US Navy units, culminated in the extraction of the marine force from a situation which could otherwise have ended much less favorably.

Total US casualties during helicopter and ground operations at Koh Tang Island were 15 killed in action, 3 missing in action, and 50 wounded by hostile action. All 15 men killed were lost in the first 90 minutes of the operation. During the long day that followed, in the face of dangerously heavy resistance, the



reinforcement and withdrawal of marines was accomplished without further US fatalities. In addition, rapid helicopter evacuation of wounded saved other lives which might have been lost (see photos).



US casualties are rushed to waiting ambulances.





As Knife 51 touched down on the Coral Sea with the last load of marines from Koh Tang, a day of harsh challenges drew to a close. USAF FAC and strike aircraft headed back to their bases, while US marines on naval vessels and at their staging base relived their difficult day with both relief and a sense of satisfaction. After a grim start, the operation had ended on a positive note: the Mayaguez was steaming to port under the control of her crew, and some 230 marines had been recovered from the beaches at Koh Tang. The final outcome, however, had not been decided until the last minutes of the operation. At several points only three helicopters were left to recover the marines, and enemy resistance was still intense. A team effort by US forces at Koh Tang made the difference, yet the one sustaining element at the core of this effort was the persistence and determination of USAF helicopter crews—after 14 long hours at the beaches at Koh Tang, they finally prevailed.

## Appendix

### USAF Helicopter Crews Participating at Koh Tang

#### **Jolly Green 11**

1/Lt Backlund, Donald R.

1/Lt Weikel, Gary L.

SSgt Cash, Harry W.

MSgt Eldridge, John J.

Sgt Stanaland, Joseph S.

A1C Marx, Brad E

1/Lt Rand, Ronald T.

Aircraft Commander  
Copilot  
Flight Mechanic  
Pararescueman  
Pararescueman  
Pararescueman  
Cameraman

#### **Jolly Green 12(First Crew)**

Capt Jacobs, Paul L.

Capt Nickerson, Martin A.

SSgt Kaiser, Joseph L.

MSgt Gray, David L.

Sgt Cook, Burt W., Jr.

Aircraft Commander  
Copilot  
Flight Mechanic  
Pararescueman  
Pararescueman

#### **Jolly Green 12 (Second Crew)**

Capt Walls, Barry R.

Lt Comer, Richard L.

Sgt Dejesus, Jesus P. (Wounded in Action)

(SSgt Cash, Harry H. replaced Dejesus)

TSgt Patterson, David L.

Sgt Styer, Randy H.

A1C Rhinehart, Frederick

Aircraft Commander  
Copilot  
Flight Mechanic  
  
Pararescueman  
Pararescueman  
Pararescueman

#### **Jolly Green 13**

1/Lt Greer, Charles R.

1/Lt Brown, Charles D.

SSgt King, Milas L.

SSgt Froehlich, Karl J.

Sgt Lundrigan, Ronald A.

Sgt Lemminn, Stephen W.

Aircraft Commander  
Copilot  
Flight Mechanic  
Pararescueman  
Pararescueman  
Pararescueman

#### **Jolly Green 41**

1/Lt Cooper, Thomas D.

1/Lt Keith, David W.

TSgt Little, Rhornell

SSgt Donovan, Jeffirey

SSgt Beranek, Thomas E.

A1C Ferris, John E.

Aircraft Commander  
Copilot  
Flight Mechanic  
Flight Mechanic  
Pararescueman  
Pararescueman

**Jolly Green 42**

1/Lt Pacini, Philip M.  
 1/Lt Dube, Robert C.  
 TSgt Straughn, Andrew, Jr.  
 SSgt Jablonski, Martin M.  
 SSgt Brown, Michael A.  
 A1C Dunham, Lewis L., III  
 SSgt Cavazos, Martin

**Jolly Green 43**

Capt Purser, Roland W.  
 1/Lt Gradle, Robert P.  
 TSgt Willingham, Billy D.  
 TSgt Harding, Peter S.  
 Sgt Bateson, Thomas J. (Wounded in Action)  
 A1C McKiver, Dennis W.

**Jolly Green 44**

1/Lt Blough, Robert D.  
 1/Lt Mason, Henry M.  
 SSgt Bounds, Robert G.  
 SSgt Howell, Jimmy F.  
 Sgt Daly, Bruce M.  
 A1C Ash, David D.

**Knife 21**

Lt Col Denham, John H.  
 1/Lt Poulsen, Karl W.  
 TSgt Boissonnault, Robert A.  
 SSgt Rumbaugh, Elwood E. (Killed in Action)

**Knife 22**

Capt Ohlemeier, Terry D.  
 2/Lt Greer, David W.  
 SSgt Wilson, Michael C.  
 Sgt Paul, Norman A.

**Knife 23**

1/Lt Schramm, John H.  
 1/Lt Lucas, John P.  
 SSgt Gross, Ronald A. (Wounded in Action)  
 A1C Arrieta, Eduardo E.  
 SSgt Barschow, James M.

**Knife 31**

Maj Corson, Howard A., Jr. (Wounded in Action)  
 2/Lt Vandegeer, Richard (Killed in Action)  
 SSgt Harston, Jon D. (Wounded in Action)  
 Sgt Hoffmaster, Randy L.

**Knife 32**

1/Lt Lackey, Michael B.  
 2/Lt Wachs, Calvin O.

Aircraft Commander  
 Copilot  
 Flight Mechanic  
 Flight Mechanic  
 Pararescueman  
 Pararescueman  
 Cameraman

Aircraft Commander  
 Copilot  
 Flight Mechanic  
 Pararescueman  
 Pararescueman  
 Pararescueman

Aircraft Commander  
 Copilot  
 Flight Mechanic  
 Flight Mechanic  
 Pararescueman  
 Pararescueman

Aircraft Commander  
 Copilot  
 Flight Mechanic  
 Flight Mechanic

Aircraft Commander  
 Copilot  
 Flight Mechanic  
 Flight Mechanic

Aircraft Commander  
 Copilot  
 Flight Mechanic  
 Flight Mechanic  
 Cameraman

Aircraft Commander  
 Copilot  
 Flight Mechanic  
 Flight Mechanic

Aircraft Commander  
 Copilot

TSgt Olsen, Michael B.  
SSgt Morales, Nick (Wounded in Action)

**Knife 51**

1/Lt Brims, Richard C.  
2/Lt Danielson, Dennis L.  
SSgt Riley, Marion L.  
A1C Pack, Phillip A.  
TSgt Fisk, Wayne L.  
Sgt Cooper, Ronald A., Jr.

**Knife 52**

1/Lt Rakitis, Robert E.  
2/Lt Lykens, David J.  
SSgt McDowell, Donald R.  
TSgt Dunbar, William R.

Flight Mechanic  
Flight Mechanic

Aircraft Commander  
Copilot  
Flight Mechanic  
Flight Mechanic  
Pararescueman  
Pararescueman

Aircraft Commander  
Copilot  
Flight Mechanic  
Flight Mechanic