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The *Mayaguez* Incident

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

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

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

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

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

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

On the morning of May 15, 175 Marines of a planned 600-man force were flown by helicopters of the 3d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group and the 21st Special Operations Squadron from U Tapao to Kho Tang, expecting only light resistance. They were met by a force of 150-200 heavily armed Khmer Rouge troops, who shot down three of the first eight helicopters and damaged two others. About 100 Marines were

put ashore, but it soon became evident that substantial reinforcements on the ground would be needed. The assault force was supported by Air Force A-7s, F-4s, OV-10s, and AC-130s, but the attack was not going well.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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