

WXPost

MAY 16 1975

Last Marines Lifted

By Michael Getler
Washington Post Staff Writer

Under cover of darkness and protective fire from U.S. ships and warplanes, Air Force helicopters lifted the last batch of Marines off Tang Island at 9:10 p.m. yesterday (9:10 a.m. Washington time) after the dramatic recapture of an American merchant ship and recovery of its crew.

The Marines, who had made a combat helicopter assault onto the tiny island 14 hours earlier to search for the crew, had met with stiff Cambodian

Communist resistance after moving several hundred yards inland from the shore and establishing a beachhead.

It was still unclear how costly the military operation was to the force of 185 Marines and the Air Force helicopter crews that took part. Preliminary, unofficial reports indicate that at least two servicemen were killed, another half-dozen are believed missing and about 25 were wounded.

Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger hailed the dramatic action yesterday not only in terms of the safe re-

covery of the 40-man crew of the SS Mayaguez but also as a blow to the "crude and illegal" use of force by the Cambodians and as a "much needed and timely reaffirmation of freedom of the seas."

The military phase of the operation appears to have been marked by unplanned developments:

- Though the primary objective of the U.S. assault Thursday morning, Cambodia time, was to rescue the crew of the Mayaguez, the crew was not on the island the Marines invaded.

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- The crew had been taken off the ship onto Tang Island Tuesday. During daylight Wednesday, they were moved again, first into the port of Kompong Som and then onto another island named Rong by a small Cambodian gunboat that narrowly missed being destroyed en route by U.S. warplanes.

The jets destroyed three other gunboats, but an American pilot swooping down on the smallest one—a 32-foot craft—spotted what he thought were "Caucasian faces" and let the ship through to Kompong Som.

- The Mayaguez crew, it was learned, was released by the Cambodians at about 8:20 Thursday morning Cambodia time, to make their way by small boat back to the Mayaguez. The Cambodians, U.S. officials believe, probably released the crew because they feared U.S. attacks on mainland targets. One hour and eleven minutes earlier, the first Marines had landed on Tang Island.

Some 2½ hours after the American crew left in a small Thai fishing boat to find the Mayaguez some 30 miles

away, the first of two waves of Navy jet fighter-bombers from the attack carrier Coral Sea bombed the Cambodian airfield at Ream near Kompong Som, according to Pentagon records.

Other American jets hit warehouses and railroad marshaling yards in Kompong Som port, oil refineries and oil storage facilities three miles north of the city and a naval barracks at Ream, it was learned.

The Mayaguez crew and five Thai See OPERATION, A10, Col. 1

OPERATION, From A1

fishermen, whose boat had been captured earlier by the Cambodians, were spotted in their small boat flying white flags by the U.S. destroyer Wilson at 10:45 a.m., according to the Pentagon.

They were picked up by the Wilson shortly after 11 a.m., so that the United States, it would appear, had the crew back safely about the same time that Kompong Som was bombed, according to the Pentagon.

The Mayaguez episode ended at 9:10 p.m. Cambodian time yesterday when the last batch of Marines were lifted off Tank Island onto the deck of the Coral Sea. (Washington time is 12 hours behind Cambodia.)

The incident, which was to trigger the first use of major U.S. combat forces in Southeast Asia in almost two years, began in late afternoon on May 12 in the Gulf of Siam.

A radio report from the Mayaguez, operated by Sea-Land Services, Inc., of Menlo Park, N.J., indicated the ship had been fired upon and boarded by the crew of a Cambodian gunboat. The White House later that day angrily denounced the seizure as an "act of piracy" and demanded immediate release of the ship.

The position of the vessel according to the White House, was roughly 60 miles off the Cambodian mainland. But the ship also appeared to be about

eight miles off the tiny rock island of Wai, that is claimed by both Cambodia and Vietnam.

There was some thought here that the Cambodians may have been trying to demonstrate that their territorial waters should be measured from the island, an idea the United States quickly rejected, claiming the ship was clearly on the high seas in commercial shipping lanes and in international waters.

The President's Monday demand for the ship's release drew no response, Schlesinger said yesterday. Subsequent diplomatic action also drew no response from the Cambodians, he said.

After a series of top-level National Security Council meetings, orders went out at 5:45 p.m. EDT Wednesday from the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington. The orders approved by Mr. Ford, set in motion a military effort to recapture the ship and crew that would end about 15½ hours later.

When the Mayaguez was seized, the United States was caught short of military power in the area. The huge U.S. Seventh Fleet that had just evacuated tens of thousands of Vietnamese refugees was steaming eastward toward home and away from the Gulf of Siam.

Only U.S. planes based in Thailand were able to get on the scene to see what was happening, and there was some delay in that which caused a

quick ruffling of feathers among the top military brass at the Pentagon.

By nightfall Wednesday in the Gulf, however, a U.S. military force had built up. Some 1,100 Marines had been airlifted from Okinawa and the Philippines to Thailand. A navy destroyer escort, the USS Holt, which was to play a crucial role, arrived in the area, and the aircraft carrier Coral Sea was only about six hours sailing time away.

Despite indications that some of the crew had already been taken off Tang Island, Pentagon officials still thought some and possibly most of the crew were there.

A two-pronged assault plan was developed.

A group of 40 Marines was taken by three helicopters on the long ride from Thailand to the small landing pad on the rear deck of the Holt.

With them were eight civilians, ship operators who could get the Mayaguez under way quickly if the crew wasn't found. Also with these Marines was a special bomb demolition squad to unhook any booby traps.

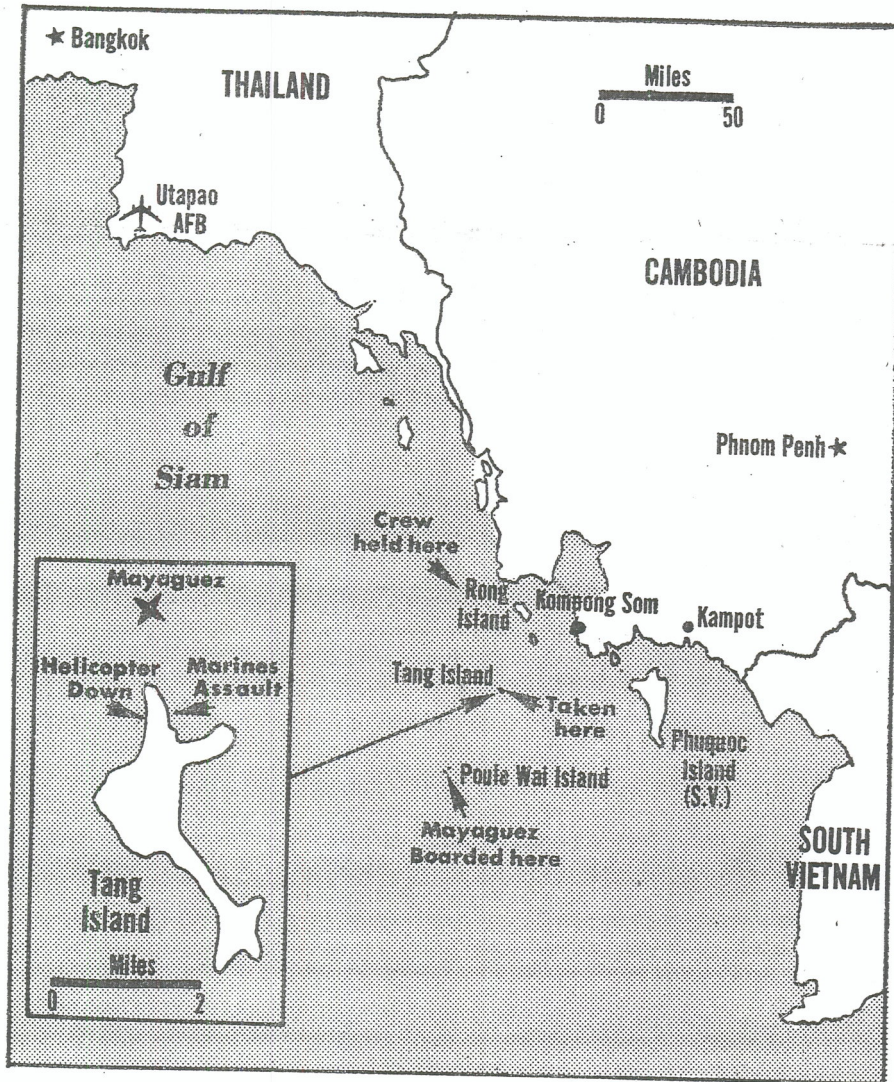
The Holt was steaming to pull alongside the Mayaguez so that the Marines could jump aboard the merchant ship, using tear gas as well as guns to flush out any Cambodians.

Originally, it was planned to wait for the Coral Sea to get closer so its big flight deck could be used for some of the Marine helicopters. But the White House decided not to wait and by the



Associated Press

A U.S. Navy CH-53 helicopter lies disabled on Tang after the island was assaulted by Marine rescue force.



By Joseph P. Mastrangelo—The Washington Post

Inset shows sites of Marine assault and helicopter downing.

time dawn broke over the Gulf, which was 6:30 p.m. Wednesday in Washington, the three helicopters were over the Holt. They had left Thailand about one hour and forty minutes earlier.

By 7:20 in the morning in the gulf, 11 other Air Force choppers loaded with about 135 Marines were approaching Tang Island for a landing.

An hour later the Holt came alongside the Mayaguez but the 40 Marines found an empty ship. The Marines coming onto Tang, however, found tough, though not steady, opposition.

The landing operation started off on a bad note. One of the first choppers was hit by ground fire and struggled to a crash landing just off shore with 26 men aboard. Many were wounded in the crash. But the Marines moved ashore with the wounded and held their position against small-arms fire from some of the Cambodian garrison on the island, which was eventually estimated at 200 to 300 men.

An Air Force crewman with his radio climbed on top of the downed craft which was sticking out of the water, and kept the stricken party, which was cut off from the rest of the force, in contact with aircraft circling above.

Almost 12 hours later, this group of Marines and airmen were the first ones to leave the island, lifted off just as darkness fell on May 15 and after ground fire had forced several rescue helicopters away from the scene.

Two more of the "Jolly Green Giant" choppers went down from ground fire and several others limped back to the Thai coast with battle damage after delivering their load of 20 or 35 Marines each.

Detailed accounts of the ground fighting on Tang Island—a three-mile long, flat strip shaped something like

a dumbbell—were generally not available at the Pentagon yesterday. Schlesinger described the resistance met by the Marines as “reasonably stiff throughout, but intermittent.”

Nonetheless, it seemed apparent that if the Mayaguez crew had been on Tang Island, the Marines would have had to fight their way inland to find them, taking higher casualties as a result.

The crew of the Mayaguez was picked up at sea less than four hours after the Marines landed on Tang, and much of the rest of the Marines’ 14 hours on the island was apparently spent in a beach enclave awaiting pick-up by helicopters.

As the daylight hours of May 15 in the Gulf dragged on, Pentagon officials acknowledged that a number of the rescue choppers were turned back by Cambodian ground fire.

By 7:13 p.m. as darkness roved in, the first rescue chopper got in, lifting out the 26 wounded troopers aboard the helicopter that had crashed.

Two hours later—which was 9:10 a.m. EDT in Washington yesterday—all the Marines were out, helped by occasional shelling from destroyers offshore and strafing by jets.

Other Marines and downed air crewmen were picked up by small boats launched by the destroyers.

Meanwhile, the mystery of what happened to the Mayaguez crew began to unfold in Washington yesterday, but there are still confusing explanations of why the Cambodians released them.

At a 3:30 a.m. press conference at the Pentagon yesterday, Schlesinger told reporters that the arrival of the Mayaguez crew alongside the destroyer Wilson was “as a result of what is presumed to be the decision of the Cam-

bodians to deliver them up in order to terminate the combat actions directed primarily at the mainland.”

However, by Pentagon records, it appeared that the crew was allowed to sail from Rong Island, where they were being held under Cambodian guard more than two hours before the first U.S. bombing raids on the mainland.

The fact that the Thai boat, which was crewed by five Thai fishermen captured earlier by the Cambodians, was sighted at 10:45 a.m. by the Wilson tends to confirm that the vessel must have left at least a few hours earlier from the island that was some 30 miles away.

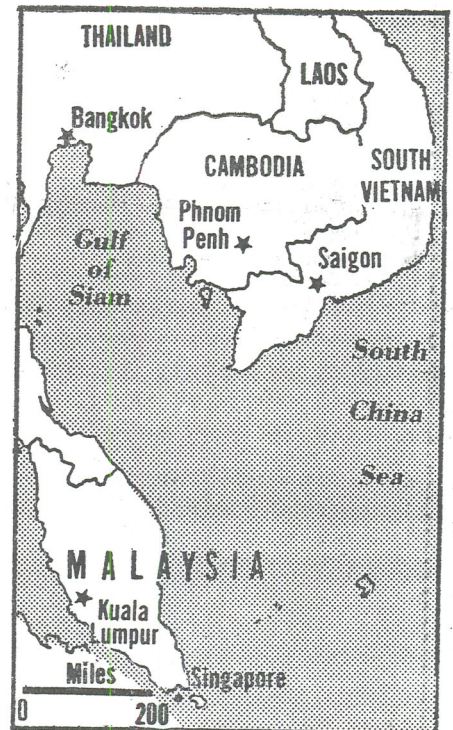
At another point, Schlesinger was asked if the Cambodians decided to give up the crew after the Marines had landed on Tang.

“Yes indeed,” answered Schlesinger, adding that “and at the point that the aircraft had been launched and were preparing to strike at the mainland.”

Schlesinger said some 17 Cambodian planes were damaged in the U.S. raid on Ream airfield, and both he and the President said the bombing attacks were necessary to insure that Cambodian forces from the mainland could not interfere with the Marine landing on Tang Island.

Some Pentagon officials believe the Cambodians anticipated that heavier attacks were coming their way soon after the Marines landed on the island.

The Mayaguez crew, sources say, was first taken in the gunboat to Kompong Som, where they apparently engaged in some negotiations with Cambodian authorities. They reportedly were held prisoner on the Thai fishing boat, along with the Thai fishermen, for a short while.



By Joseph P. Mastrangelo—The Washington Post

Area of Marine rescue action.

Then, they were reportedly sent in the Thai boat with the Thais to Rong Island, 13 miles west of the mainland port, from where they eventually were released.

When the Thai crew with their American passengers pulled up to the USS Wilson, the Americans got off. The Thais said they wanted to go home, too, and sailed away.