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MARINES AND SHIP-RESCUE MISSION ENDS; TOLL INCLUDES ONE KNOWN DEAD

OPERATION HAILED

MAY 16 1975

Schlesinger Asserts
It Affirmed Freedom
of the High Seas

NYTimes

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 15 —

Under the cover of aerial and naval gunfire, 200 marines were lifted by helicopters today off an island in the Gulf of Siam, completing the military rescue of an American merchant ship and crew that had been seized by Cambodian forces.

There was no immediate information from the Defense Department on casualties suffered in the 14-hour operation.

The text of President's letter is printed on Page 15.

Pentagon officials said they appeared to be light despite the sometimes stiff resistance encountered on Tang Island.

Pentagon sources said one marine and one Air Force man had been killed and eight marines and six Air Force helicopter crewmen were missing. But a Defense Department spokesman said that thus far there had been only one verified casualty—a marine killed by small-arms fire on the island.

Support in Congress

In addition, an unspecified number of wounded were being treated aboard Navy ships.

President Ford's use of military power to rescue the merchant ship Mayagüez and its 39-man crew, which had been seized by Cambodian patrol craft on Monday, drew general praise from members of Congress. There was some criticism that Mr. Ford should have consulted more with Congress before ordering the operation.

Acting in compliance with a provision of the War Powers Resolution that requires the President to report to the Congress within 48 hours of the initial commitment of troops to hostilities, Mr. Ford sent a letter to representatives of Carl Albert, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and James O. Eastland, president pro tempore of the Senate, at about 2:30 A.M. today. Congressional leaders had received White House briefings earlier.

Schlesinger Lauds Move

Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger, at an early-morning news conference at the Pentagon, described the rescue as "an eminently successful operation incorporating the judicious and effective use of American force for purposes that were necessary for the well-being of this society."

In a statement, Mr. Schlesinger said the operation "represents a much needed and

timely reaffirmation of the freedom of the seas."

"Moreover, it represents a firm and measured response to the high-handed and crude use of force," he added. "To countenance such an act would mean the weakening of international order and civilized communication."

Privately, key Administration officials described the operation as a warning to North Korea and other Communist nations that the United States, in the wake of the Vietnam war, still stood ready to meet force with force to protect its interests.

The operation which included a strike by 25 Navy

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carrier planes against the Ream air base near Sihanoukville, was ordered by President Ford at about 5:30 P.M. yesterday after he had concluded that diplomatic efforts were futile.

The 200 marines were lifted by helicopter from the U Taphao air base in Thailand to secure Tang Island before boarding of the Mayagüez, anchored a mile offshore. When a platoon of marines an hour later boarded the ship from the destroyer Harold E. Holt, they found the ship deserted.



U.S. marines moving out on Tang Island after landing by copter yesterday to take the Mayagüez and crew

United Press International

Crew Returns to Ship

The Defense Department had assumed that some of the crew members might be held on the island. But all 39 seamen appeared last night in a small boat manned by five Thai fishermen who had come from the port of Sihanoukville, 30 miles away.

The crew members were taken aboard by the destroyer Henry B. Wilson and then transferred to their ship.

The Mayagüez, under its own power, set sail at 7:30 A.M., eastern daylight time for Singapore. Charles T. Miller, captain of the ship, sent a message to Mr. Ford that said:

"Dear Mr. President, the captain and officers and crew of the S.S. Mayagüez thank you and all the brave military forces who are fighting and dying to save our lives."

The marines ran into unexpectedly stiff opposition in its helicopter assault on Tang Island. Initial intelligence, according to military officials, was that only about 20 persons, mostly old, were on the island.

Instead, the marines encountered a Cambodian force estimated at 150 men. The presumption of Pentagon officials was that the Cambodian Government had moved in the forces in anticipation of an American military assault.

Recovery is Swift

The original plan had been to send in additional marines to occupy the entire island, which is three miles long and two miles wide. When the Mayagüez was recovered more quickly than expected, the 200 marines, who had advanced a few hundred yards into the island, stopped their advance and consolidated into a beachhead.

The withdrawal of the marines, which was completed at 9:10 A.M. Eastern daylight time, was delayed for several hours as the Cambodians drove off the helicopters trying to make their way to the island. Finally two Navy destroyers laid down protective fire and Navy attack planes conducted strafing runs to hold down the Cambodian troops.

The marines were flown to the carrier Coral Sea, lying 10 miles off the island, and then transferred by helicopter to U Taphao air base to rejoin 900 marines being held in reserve. Because of Thai objections, the Pentagon plans called for the entire Marine force,

flown in Monday from Okinawa, to be removed from Thailand.

In the initial assault on Tang Island, three Air Force helicopters were shot down and two others were damaged, but managed to make their way back to Thailand.

The loss or disabling of the five helicopters provided a serious handicap in the withdrawal. The Air Force had started with only 11 helicopters to support the operation. For the withdrawal it was left with six helicopters, each capable of carrying about 25 marines on the four-hour round trip to U Taphao.

Early in the morning, a debate went on in the Pentagon over whether to use the six helicopters to withdraw the marines in two stages. This would have meant that after the first flight, 100 marines would have been left on the island for four hours, facing a Cambodian force of 150 men.

It was decided to wait four hours until the Coral Sea, with three additional helicopters, reached the area. In addition, this meant that the marines could be quickly shuttled out to the carrier.

The vulnerability of the helicopter force was also cited by Pentagon officials as one reason for ordering the air strike against the Ream base, which had a few American-built T-28 jet trainers. Officials feared that the T-28's might be used to try to shoot down some of the helicopters.

In the air attack, planes from the Coral Sea destroyed 17 aircraft, bombed the runway, and destroyed a hangar, Pentagon officials reported.