

# Action saved us, Mayaguez captain says

Associated Press

SINGAPORE — The captain of the Mayaguez said in an emotional news conference yesterday that he bargained for his crew's freedom by promising their Cambodian captors he would call for the end of U.S. air strikes and Marine landings.

Capt. Charles Miller, 62, of Fountain Valley (Orange County), also said he and his crew members were gassed and hit by shrapnel from rounds fired by U.S. planes trying to prevent the Cambodians from taking them to the mainland in a Thai fishing boat, seized like the Mayaguez and used as a shore boat by the Cambodians.

But he said without the Marine and Air Force actions "I don't think this crew would be standing before you today."

He said the Cambodians, whom one crew member described as being between 12 and 26 years old, never mistreated him or his crew, but they feared imprisonment or even death at the hands of their captors.

Miller said he kept his part of the bargain with the Cambodians after finally

getting back to a Navy rescue ship by telling naval authorities in Washington of his promise.

But U.S. attacks continued for the rest of the day and part of the next night as American forces tried to extricate the Marines who had landed on Koh Tang island in search of the crewmen.

"We were told an attack had just commenced," said Miller, after he and his crew came aboard the destroyer USS Wilson about 4 a.m. Thursday.

Miller's voice cracked and his eyes reddened and moistened with tears when he spoke of the U.S. Marines who died during the rescue attempt.

"People were being killed to save me," he said. "Without our Air Force, without our Marines, I don't think this crew would be standing before you today."

"So, we're all happy to be here, folks. You don't know how happy."

He said he planned to give the "well paid bonus" he expected for his adventure to

the families of the Marines killed in the rescue.

The gassing and strafing occurred Wednesday as  
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American jets tried vainly to turn back the fishing boat that was taking the captain and crew to the Cambodian mainland.

The noxious gas burned all the crewmen and shrapnel wounded three men, the captain said of an ordeal that lasted almost four hours before the craft arrived at the Cambodian shore.

"They were trying to get them to turn around so we would not be taken ashore to be killed or sent to prison in Phnom Penh," said Miller.

"I don't blame the planes for whatever they did on the strafing.

"You have to give our pilots a lot of credit," said Miller. "They can hit the eye of a needle. They did everything possible to get them to turn around.

"If we were strafed and bombed once, we were strafed and bombed a hundred times. It was clear they saw that we were in the boat. Two jets flew 70 feet above us.

"They teargassed us. The first gassing wasn't too bad. The Thais turned back once, but the Cambodian guards put guns to their heads.

"The second time they dropped tear or nausea gas. Everybody vomited. Our skin was burning. A couple

of men were struck by shrapnel.

"The third engineer (Alfred Rappenecker, 64, of Palo Alto) passed out for 20 minutes. He had a bad heart. We didn't even realize his condition for the first ten minutes because we were pretty bad ourselves. We thought he was dead."

Miller said his own men were too sickened by the gas to consider taking over the vessel, and they were taken to a naval station near Compung Son and interrogated.

Despite fears of death and or imprisonment, the captain told the news conference an hour after the Mayaguez docked here that his men had not been mistreated during their almost three days as captives.

Miller said the Cambodians at the compound where they were interrogated served them chicken legs, rice, greens and hot tea, making sure the Americans finished their food before sitting down to eat their own meal.

The rest of the time, however, they were fed only the sparse rations the Thai fishermen, five in number could spare.

He also insisted he did not violate Cambodian territorial waters with his 10,485-ton container freighter which listed Wilmington, Del., as its home port.

According to Miller, the seizure started at 11:21 a.m. Cambodian time May 12

when a gunboat fired a rocket over the Mayaguez' bow.

"I was on the high seas," said Miller. "I was 6½ miles off the Poulo Wai island and 60 miles off the coast of Cambodia.

"This is not only Sea-Land's route," he said of the American firm which operated the Mayaguez. "This is the trade route for all ships from Hong Kong and Saigon.

"We can't say technically I was in territorial waters. Legally, no, I wasn't in territorial waters. The Khmer Rouge never claimed the island (Poulo Wai) as their territory."

Sea-Land said the Mayaguez carried no arms or secrets, as claimed by Cambodia and was not designed to be a spy ship. Newsmen were permitted aboard aboard the vessel in Singapore, although none of the 77 containers was opened for them. They did discover casings for Chinese-made cartridges left on the deck by Cambodians who fired at U.S. planes from the ship, crew members said.

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