

Why was the 'special warning

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WASHINGTON — Why did U.S. planes bomb Cambodia 37 minutes after the crew of the merchant ship *Mayaguez* was safely aboard an American destroyer?

This question persists following the successful and dramatic recovery of the U.S. cargo ship and its 39 crewmen from brief Cambodian captivity.

There were other questions that could spark controversy after the elation fades:

Was the Marine landing on *Tang* Island, with a toll of possibly 14 Americans dead and 22 wounded, a necessity in view of advance indications that some and perhaps all of the crew had been taken to a different island?

Did the United States needlessly run roughshod over Thai government objections in using bases in Thailand for U.S. Air Force operations over *Koh Tang*, and to stage Marine landings on that Cambodian island and on the captured ship nearby?

In the tense hours before the rescue operation was launched at 2:15 p.m. PDT Wednesday, May 14, reporters had heard official talk about possible punitive strikes on Cambodian military targets.

So suspicions about the motive for U.S. bombing of oil storage facilities near the Cambodian port of *Kompong Som* were sharpened by the Pentagon's failure to disclose the strike until questioned about it, 14 hours after the operation ended.

"It might have been an oversight," Pentagon spokesman Joseph Laitin said when asked why he had not previously announced that raid by planes from the carrier *Coral Sea*.

The raid came at 8:50 p.m. PDT Wednesday, or 37 minutes after the master of the *Mayaguez* verified that his entire crew was aboard the destroyer *Wilson* off *Koh Tang*. The U.S. merchant seaman reached the *Wilson* in a boat after being released by the Cambodians.

The *Mayaguez* itself, empty of all life, had been retaken by a Marine boarding

Military replies to this and other thorny questions

party more than three hours earlier.

The bombing attack on petroleum stocks was the second strike on the Cambodian mainland.

Both Laitin and Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger had discussed the first bombing against the *Ream* airbase near *Kompong Som*, while briefing newsmen on what was then an incomplete operation. The first strike occurred at 8:57 p.m. PDT, or 16 minutes before the rescue of the crew was complete.

U.S. military officials agree that there was plenty of time for commanders to radio orders to Navy pilots to turn back without dropping their bombs in the second strike, the mission

against the petroleum storage facilities.

But, according to Pentagon officials, the order to stop all bombing did not go out from Washington until after midnight. By then, the oil storage had been struck.

Did the Ford administration take the opportunity to bloody Cambodia's nose a bit?

Not so, said Pentagon officials.

"The reasons for it were that there were almost 200 Marines on a nearby island under heavy attack by these people," Laitin said.

The last Marines did not get off the beach at *Koh Tang* until nearly 10 hours after the merchantman's crew had reached the destroyer. During most of that time, the Marines were reported under often heavy fire from Cambodian troops.

The point made by administration officials was that the aim in bombing mainland military targets, more than 30 miles from *Koh Tang*, was to prevent Cambodian planes and surface naval craft based there from interfering in U.S. operations on and around the is-

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land, including withdrawal of the U.S. Marine force.

Schlesinger reported that 17 Cambodian planes, including T28 bombers, were destroyed in the first strike on the Ream field. Since

most of Cambodia's small air force already had been flown to Thailand in April, pilots of the defeated regime, it did not seem likely there could be much left to worry about after the Ream attack.

so late?

Furthermore, Cambodia's tiny fleet of gunboats already had been battered with the loss of about five craft to U.S. air power in the Koh Tang area.

What, then, posed a threat

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to the security of U.S. forces to justify the second bombing strike at targets on the Cambodian mainland?

To that question there is still no clear answer from the Ford administration.