

Mayaguez Crew Tells of Ordeal During Rescue

Captain Says Jet Attacks Warranted

SINGAPORE, May 17 (AP)—The captain of the Mayaguez said today that three of his crew were wounded in strafing by U.S. jet fighters who were trying to stop a fishing boat from carrying them to the mainland.

But Capt. Charles T. Miller had no complaint about the military action. "People were being killed to save me," he said as his voiced cracked. "Without our Air Force, without our Marines, I don't think this crew would be standing before you today."

One Marine was killed in the rescue effort and 13 other servicemen are missing. They were aboard a helicopter that crashed at sea more than two miles from the nearest land.

Miller, 62, of Mountain Valley, Calif., also revealed that he intentionally dallied after his capture and complained of problems with the Mayaguez in order to keep the Cambodians from taking the vessel into a mainland port.

He revealed that the Cambodians told the crew one hour after the Marine assault on Tang Island had begun that they would be released.

One crew member said their captors were between 12 and 26 years old. Miller said they



United Press International

The Mayaguez' Capt. Miller points to capture site.

"never mistreated" him or his crew.

Gassing and strafing occurred Tuesday as American jets vainly tried to prevent a fishing boat from taking the captain and crew to the Cambodian mainland. The planes fired on the boat and dropped gas canisters.

The noxious gas burned all 40 men and shrapnel wounded three crewmen. The captain said the ordeal 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 (fishermen running the boat) 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 stuck by shrapnel.

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"The third engineer passed out for 20 minutes. He had a bad heart. We didn't even realize his condition for the first 10 minutes because we wert 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.

Miller said that on shore the Cambodians served them chicken legs, rice, greens and hot tea, making sure the Americans finished their food before sitting down to eat their own meal.

He said he planned to give the "well paid bonus" he expected for his adventure to the families of the serviceman killed in the rescue.

According to Miller, the Cambodians were willing almost 12 hours before the actual release to let him take his first engineer and seven crewmen back to the Mayaguez to start the radio to call Bangkok and ask for attack to cease. (According to the official Pentagon chronology, there had been no attacks at that time other than the bombing and strafing designed to stop the Cambodians from taking the crew to the mainland.)

He said he decided against going because in the dark U. S. planes might blow their small craft out of the water and kill them.

He said he didn't consider the Cambodian offer as a bargain "because they still had the rest of the men locked up . . . I got the agreement at 7:20 the next morning Cambodian time when the word came from Phnom Penh to release us to go back and notify Bangkok that air strikes over Cambodia be stopped."

(According to the Pentagon chronology, the first helicopter carrying Marines approached Tang Island just one hour earlier. But the chronology says the first attack on the mainland didn't come until 9:57 a.m. or 2½ hours later. A Pentagon spokesman reaffirmed today that there had been no earlier strikes on the mainland and said the Cambodians must have been thinking about the attacks on the ships.)

According to Miller, the seizure started at 11:21 p.m. Monday Cambodian time* when a gunboat fired a rocket over the Mayaguez' bow. Miller said seven men armed with rocket and grenade launchers and AK47 automatic weapons and a U.S. field pack radio boarded the Mayaguez from the gunboat and told the cap

* See SFEx 18 May 75, also AP, which gives the time as 11:21 a.m.

tian to follow their craft. The captain said they spoke no English.

Miller said he followed at half speed, hoping American armed forces would catch up and rescue the ship. He said the ship's radio sent out S.O.S. signals.

"I delayed," said Miller. "I did not want to get closer to Cambodian soil than I was. I told them I could not navi

gate. I said our radar was out."

He managed to avoid obeying oan order given in sign language to head for wharf No. 2 in Kompong Som on the coast. The vessel spent the first night of captivity at sea, and Miller said he spent a sleepless night on the bridge. The next day, a Cambodian ensign ordered the ship to Koh Tang island.

At 2 p.m. the crew was ordered into two fishing boats, including a Thai craft captured with a five-man crew some months ago.

They spent the night on the fishing boats. Tuesday vessels headed at dawn for Kompong Som in the same Thai fishing boat the men were released in Thursday.

"We were worried that if we

were not recognized by or onw planes, we would be blown out ofsthe water, Miller said of the trip to the Mayaguez offer their release. We took off our white shirts and white underwear, anything white. We put them up on bamboo as flags.

"A radar reconnaissance plane flew over ad wiggled its wings. We all knew we were identified."

Spectators noticed that a missing port anchor seemed to be the only thing out of order on the otherwise shipshape Mayaguez. Crew members were quick with the explanation.

"You gotta believe we were in a hurry to get out of there," said one. "When the time came to take a tow from a U.S. Navy ship, they cut the cable with an acetylene torch and left the hook on the bottom of the Gulf of Siam."

He also insisted he did not violate Cambodian territorial waters with his 10,485-ton container ship.

"I was in the high seas," said Miller. "I was 6½ miles off Poulo Wai island and 60 miles off the coast of Cambodia. . . This is the trade route for all ships from Hong Kong and Saigon."



Associated Press

Crewmen of Mayaguez line the ship's rail as it docks at Singapore after trip from captivity in Cambodia.

"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 as their territory." Newsman were permitted aboard the vessel in Singapore, although none of the 77 containers were opened for them. Casigs for Chinese made cartridges were left on the deck by Cambodians who fired at U.S. planes from the ship, crew members said.