

Island Fight--

'Elixir for Morale'

Subic Bay, Philippines

Marine Major General Kenneth Houghton yesterday hailed the marine assault on Cambodia's Tang island as a boost to military morale. He said the operation was a success despite the heavy casualties.

"At the risk of sounding like a warmonger, I would describe it as an elixir for morale," said Houghton, commander of the Third Marine Division. "These young marines have been training and want to get out and do a job."

Lieutenant Colonel Randall Austin, 38, of Gleanside, Pa., a Vietnam veteran who commanded the 210-man Ninth Marine Landing Force, said the resistance his men encountered last Thursday was "greater than I personally expected."

He estimated the Cambodian force at 150 men, and said he had a "gut feeling" that at least 25 of them had been killed by Marines in close-quarter fighting.

"It certainly was very heavy combat, conventional fighting, close combat with

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several reports of the enemy throwing grenades and our men throwing them back," Austin said.

He called the operation a success despite heavy casualties and the fact the crew of the merchant ship Mayaguez was not held on Koh Tang and was released a few hours after the assault began.

"It was in fact a success—I like to think that in some way we contributed to the release of the crewmen," he said.

Some of the air attacks were directed by a forward observer from a helicopter that was shot down, Austin said. The observer, First Lieutenant Terry Tonkin, managed to call an attack while swimming in the sea.

"I was lying on my back directing air strikes," Austin said Tonkin related to him later.

Austin said three helicopters were shot down in the operation and a fourth was riddled with gunfire but was able to return to Utapao Air Base in Thailand.

The survivor of a helicopter that was hit and exploded into flames described the crash.

"We got hit while the bird was in the air—ten or 15 feet in the air," said Victor Salinas, 23, of Corpus Christi, Tex. "It was a big ball of fire. Most people started getting out.

"We had trouble breathing and seeing. It was black smoke inside. I was one of the last out. I punched through one of the windows and saw most of the Marines pulling out towards the sea. I thought the others (in the other helicopters) must be killed or missing."

The officers spoke at a news conference in Subic Bay Naval Base and afterwards Houghton pinned purple hearts on five wounded Marines.

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