

NY Times

Leader of Marines In Rescue of Ship Calls Battle Heavy

MAY 20 1975

SUBIC BAY, the Phillippines, May 19 (Reuters) — United States Marines ran into more resistance than expected when they landed on Tang Island in the Gulf of Siam to help free the Mayagüez, the commander of the operation said here today.

"There was considerable exchange of hand grenades," said Lieut. Col. Randall Austin. "There was very heavy combat. It was a classic heliborne assault in which unfortunately we encountered heavy fire once on the ground."

At a news conference at the naval base here, he said that three of his men died and that some 71 of the 210-man marine force were wounded, many with minor injuries, and that 13 were missing after Thursday's dramatic rescue operation.

[In an interview in Washington during the weekend, Defense Secretary James L. Schlesinger put casualties for the whole air-sea operation to free the ship and crew at five dead, 16 missing and 70 to 80 wounded.]

Colonel Austin estimated that there were about 25 Cambodian casualties in a force of 150 on the island, but he said he had no exact count.

The commander said that he

did not want to play down the casualties but that he regarded the operation as a success. He said his marines landed from helicopters at various points on the five-mile-long island.

The engagements were so close, he said, that "there were many instances when in fact the enemy threw hand grenades and our forces picked them up and threw them back."

At the news conference were two marines injured when two helicopters crashed on the island. They were awarded purple heart medals by Maj. Gen. Kenneth Houghton, commander of the Third Marine Division, based in Okinawa, who said in answer to a question on the operation. "At the risk of sounding like a warmonger, I think it added an elixir to morale."

The Mayagüez was heading for Hong Kong today from Singapore, where it arrived on Saturday after being found at anchor and released from Tang Island by the raiding marines.

The crew members, who had been taken off the ship, were held by the Cambodians for three-and-a-half days before being released in a Thai fishing boat with five fishermen who had also been prisoners of the Cambodians.

Twenty of the crew have left the Mayagüez since the incident — the company that owns the ship, Sea-Land Service of Menlo Park, N. J., had offered to replace them. Others are to be relieved later. Charles T. Miller, captain of the Mayagüez, is staying on to take over the new crew and resume normal freight operations.