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# Marines

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# Ship; Fate of 39-Man Crew Is Unclear

By Michael Getler and Carroll Kilpatrick  
Washington Post Staff Writers

The White House announced last night that the United States had recaptured the U.S. merchant ship *Mayaguez* and had landed Marines on Koh Tang Island off Cambodia.

At least one Marine helicopter was shot down over the island, it was learned, and another was reportedly down in the water. A third appeared to be going down at sea, it was reported.

There was no immediate word on the fate of the 39-man crew of the *Mayaguez*.

The Marines landed on the island from a small number of helicopters flown from the U.S. air base in Utapao, Thailand. Other Marines landed aboard the U.S. destroyer escort *Holt* from helicopters and the ship pulled alongside the *Mayaguez*. Marines then boarded the ship, reportedly capturing some Cambodian prisoners.

The White House announcement said aircraft from the carrier *Coral Sea* have undertaken "associated military operations in the area in order to protect and support the operations and to regain . . . members of the crew."

It also was announced that the United States, after hearing a radio report from Phnom Penh that it would release the ship, sent the following urgent message to the Cambodian government:

"As you know, we have seized the ship. As soon as you issue a statement that you are prepared to release the crew members you hold, unconditionally and immediately, we will promptly cease military operations."

The Marine operation came hours after U.S. Air Force warplanes destroyed three Cambodian patrol boats.

American A-7 jets and AC-130 gunships operating from bases in Thailand strafed the patrol boats after there



were "indications that the Cambodians appeared to be attempting to move captive American crewmen from the ship and the island to the mainland," the Pentagon said.

The Mayaguez crewmen are known to have been taken off their ship to the island soon after their capture and the Marines will be seeking to rescue any still on the island.

If there are still Cambodian defenders on the tiny island, some of the crewmen could suffer at their captors' hands as the Marines move in.

Despite the attempts to move crew members to the Cambodian mainland, 34 miles away, Defense Department sources said late yesterday, as the Marine attack was getting underway, that they "thought" most of the crewmen were still on the island, but they were not certain.

Defense Department spokesman Joseph Laitin acknowledged that one of the roughly seven or eight Cambodian

patrol boats in the area succeeded in getting to Kompong Som on the mainland. Senior officials also said this boat appeared to carry about 40 passengers and that U.S. pilots thought they saw some "Caucasian faces" aboard and may have chosen not to fire on that boat when those faces were sighted.

Thus, there was still the possibility that at least some of the crewmen may now be held hostage on the Cambodian mainland.

If that is the case, additional attempts to rescue them would become progressively more difficult, requiring still more military force.

Senior administration officials hinted privately yesterday that if the crewmen are killed or held hostage by the

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new Communist government of Cambodia, then "punitive" military actions may be undertaken against Cambodia.

Though officials concede that from a military standpoint there are very few significant targets in a rural country like Cambodia—even more so after the new Communist rulers have dispersed the urban population into the countryside—plans for either bombing of airfields or mining of ports have been considered, it was learned.

In moving the Marines directly from Thailand onto the USS Holt and the island, the United States may well have complied with a demand by the nervous government of Thailand to get the Marines out of the country fast. On the other hand, by moving the Marines virtually into direct combat from those bases, the United States appeared to be disregarding a Thai demand that it not use Marines from its bases to take back the captured ship by force.

A Thai Foreign Ministry official called the earlier sinking of gunboats an act of "madness—taken with no thought for the consequences to Thailand," the Associated Press reported.

Earlier yesterday, it had been anticipated that the United States would wait until early this morning, Washington time, before taking action.

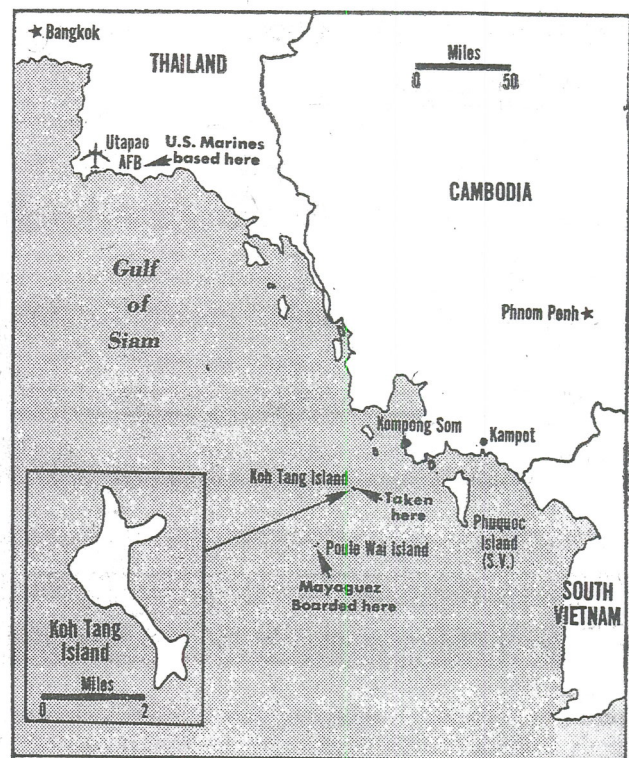
It was in the early morning hours that the attack aircraft carrier USS Coral Sea was expected to arrive in the area to serve as a possible landing platform for the Marines making the long helicopter flight from Thailand.

The White House, however, apparently made the decision not to wait. President Ford met with congressional leaders yesterday evening to brief them on the Marine operation.

Meanwhile, the United States, which had virtually no forces except airplanes in the vicinity of the Cambodian coast when the incident took place last Monday, is now building up a sizable force.

Aside from the Coral Sea, destroyers and some 1,100 Marines, another attack carrier, the Hancock, was steaming toward the area and a helicopter carrier, the Okinawa, with more Marines aboard, was also heading for the Gulf of Siam. The Okinawa and the Hancock were thought to still be about a day's sailing time away.

In addition, there were indications that Air Force tankers for mid-air refueling were being moved from their regular bases and that some other warplanes at bases in Japan and on Guam were at least being placed in a



By Joseph P. Mastrangelo—The Washington Post

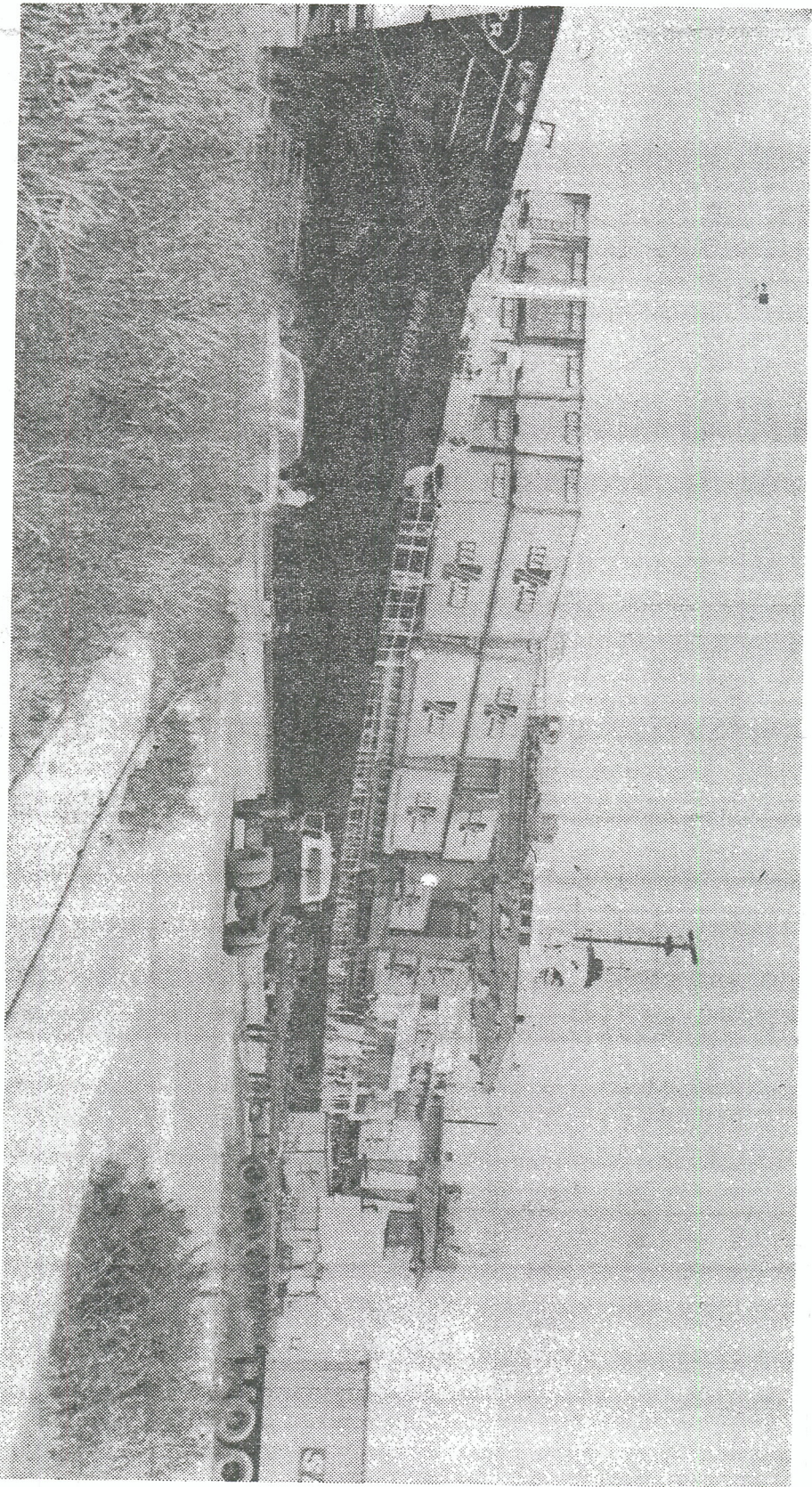
Area where Mayaguez was captured by Cambodians.

higher state of readiness.

In describing the attack on the patrol boats, the Pentagon first said that in addition to the three boats reportedly destroyed, four others were damaged and immobilized. Later, however, Laitin said there wasn't enough information to verify that four had been damaged.

The entire outbreak of firing at the patrol boats—which began late Tuesday night Washington time, Wednesday





The American container ship Mayaguez, seized Monday by Cambodia, is shown docked in New Orleans in a 1971 photograph.

Associated Press



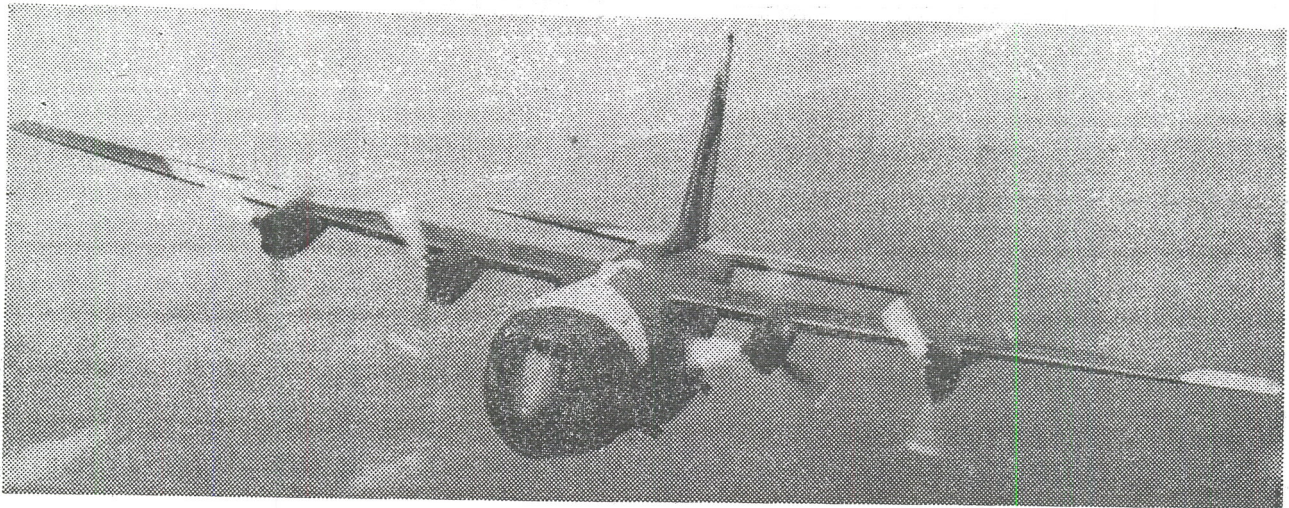
morning Cambodian time, is still somewhat confusing. Pentagon sources say apparently some of the vessels were coming out from Kompong Som, others were heading into the port, and one or two others may have been hiding in coves.

Laitin said that U.S. planes, prior to their attack on the boats, had been receiving small-arms fire from the Cambodian boats. Laitin said that after giving warning (presumably by shots across the bow) the U.S. planes attacked in an effort to block the movement of the captive crewmen to the mainland.

Yet, the vessel which may have had crewmen aboard wasn't stopped. Some Pentagon sources said they were confident that there were no Americans on the ships that were destroyed. Others said they were not completely confident.

Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger told reporters earlier yesterday that "there's a good chance" the crew was either still on the island or the ship.

White House press secretary Ron Nessen told reporters: "I strongly urge you not to assume there were any Ameri-



## Gunship

This Air Force AC-130 gunship, a converted transport, can fire thousands of rounds of machine gun and cannon fire with great accuracy while circling area.

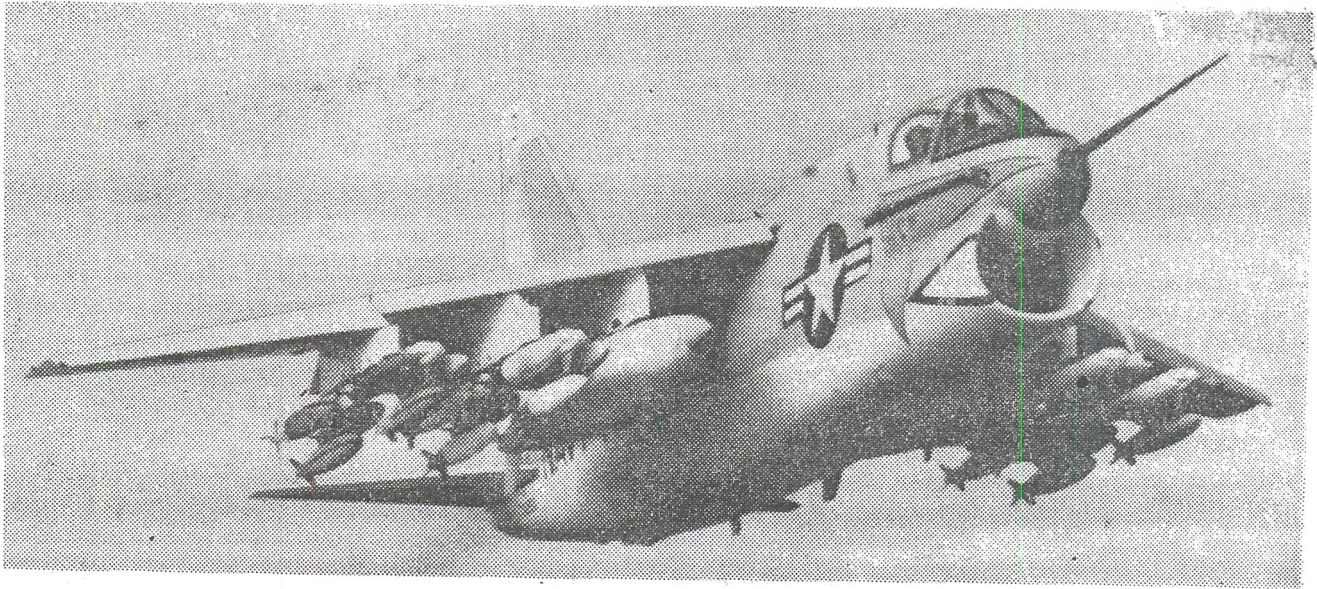
Associated Press

can crewmen" aboard the destroyed Cambodian patrol boats"

Asked at that time if the Americans were safe, Nessen

said: "I'm not able to say. I wouldn't leap to the conclusion," adding that "any Americans are ashore," meaning on the mainland.





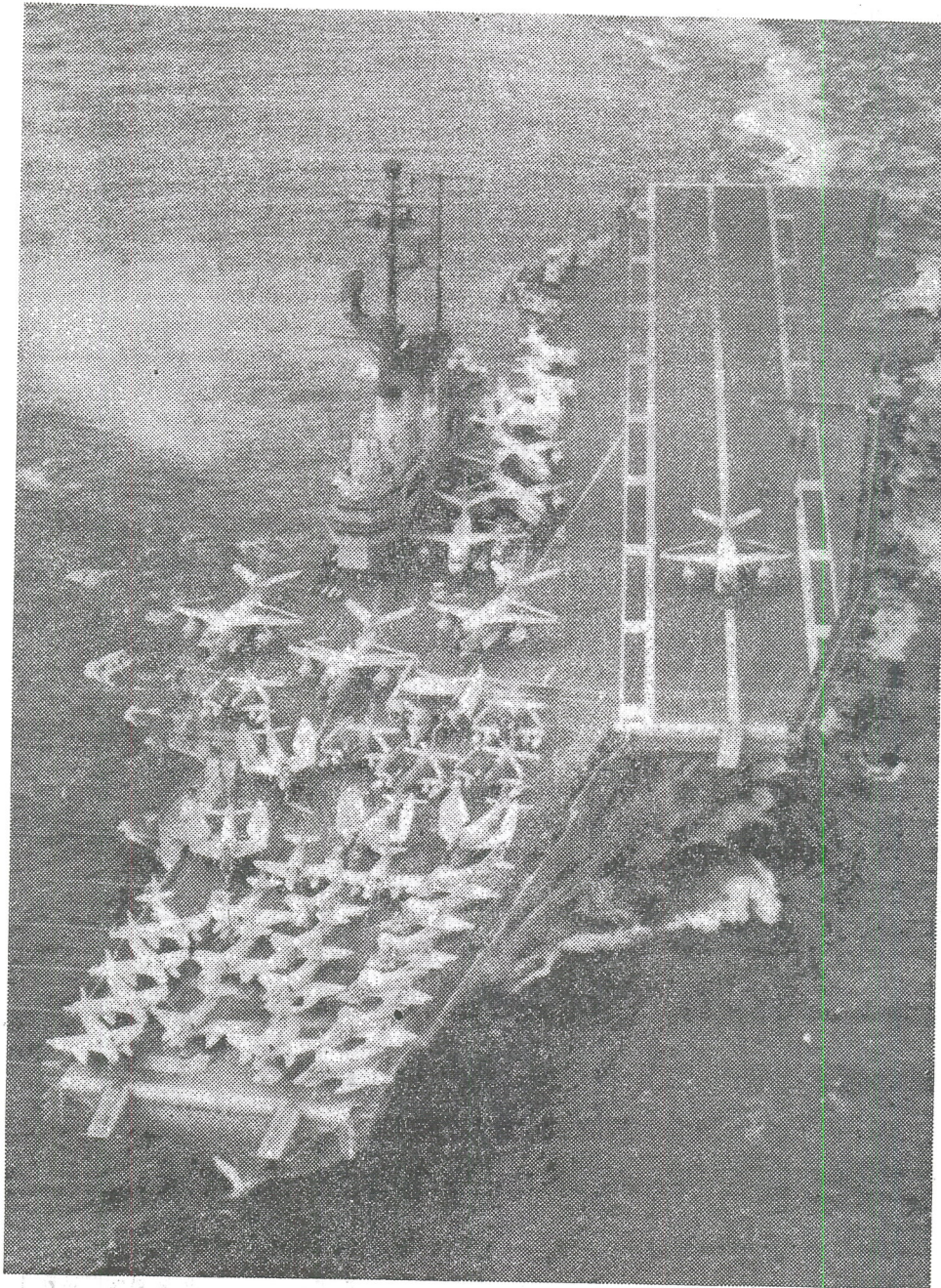
## ***A-7 Corsair***

Navy jet fighter-bomber is armed with 20-mm. cannon that is especially effective

against small boats and can also carry a big load of rockets and bombs.

Associated Press





Associated Press

The USS Coral Sea—in 1968 photo—which is headed for Gulf of Thailand.