

U.S. Toll --2 Dead, 14 Missing

Washington

U.S. helicopters flew through a torrent of small-arms fire yesterday and plucked nearly 200 Marines from Koh Tang island in the culmination of an assault that freed an American freighter and crew from Cambodian captors.

Pentagon officials said preliminary reports showed two American dead and 14 missing. Precise figures were unavailable on the wounded, but sources said several were seriously hurt and being treated aboard Navy ships.

A Marine and an Air Force man were killed, the sources said. Those unaccounted for were eight Marines and six Air Force helicopter crewmen.

No final casualty report is likely before today, the Pentagon said.

The Marines were lifted from Koh Tang to the aircraft carrier *Coral Sea*, which then stood ten miles away from the tiny, rocky island in the Gulf of Siam off Cambodia.

The disengagement under fire ended a three-day confrontation with the fledgling Khmer Rouge government.

Military officials said that "intermittent and heavy" fire of Communist troops kept the U.S. rescue force pinned for hours after the recovery of the freighter *Mayaguez* and her 39-man crew. Finally, under cover of dark and a protective barrage from U.S. planes and two destroyers, the helicopters lifted out the Marines.

The battle of Koh Tang, a

classic air-sea beach assault right out of the military textbooks, was frustrated only by two factors — the no-quarter resistance of Cambodian troops making the most of their small-arms firepower from jungle positions and the fact that the

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captives were not on the island.

The Cambodians knocked down three Air Force "jolly green giant" helicopters and damaged two others in the very first assault wave on the dumbbell shaped island early yesterday, and, according to Pentagon sources, forced the invaders to pull back and try again.

The Cambodians kept shooting back with small-caliber weapons.

As Marines boarded the abandoned freighter *Mayaguez* and the island battle seesawed back and forth, Navy A-6 fighter-bombers roared over the Cambodian mainland and bombed an airfield near Kompong Som harbor — the first mainland Indochina air attack by U.S. planes since Congress for-

bade them in midsummer of 1973.

Mr. Ford said the air attacks were essential to destroy or pin down the 17 Cambodian planes on the airstrip and the estimated 2400 troops available for amphibious approach to Koh Tang.

The *Mayaguez* later steamed toward Singapore.

Shortly after the Marines had charged onto Koh Tang and boarded the *Mayaguez* — only to find her empty — the entire crew was spotted, waving white flags, aboard a Thai fishing vessel. The U.S. destroyer *Wilson* took the 39 Americans aboard and returned them to their ship.

Just where they had been held before the attack was not clear. Their Cambodian captors apparently had forced the five Thais on the

fishing boat to take them aboard, then put out to sea.

Many details of the assault — especially the final maneuvers — remained sketchy yesterday. The last helicopter reportedly left the island at 6:10 a.m. PDT.

State Department press officer Robert Funseth reasserted yesterday the administration's position that the seizure of the unarmed *Mayaguez* last Monday had been patently illegal — and that Cambodian authorities had failed to respond to U.S. demands for release of the ship until the military attack was under way.

Shortly after the Marine assault began, a Khmer Rouge radio broadcast said the ship and crew would be freed — although it made no mention of the attack or how and when the release would occur.

Before the assault, U.S. planes sank three Cambodian patrol boats and damaged four others when the craft attempted to sail toward the island.

Presidential press secretary Ron Nessen characterized the U.S. actions as having employed the minimum force necessary. He said President Ford believed they were directly responsible for the Cambodians' decision to release the *Mayaguez* crew.

But "obviously, we have no way of knowing the motives of the Cambodians," he added at a midday briefing.

Nessen disclosed that an earlier diplomatic communication demanding the release had been returned without acknowledgement through the Chinese liaison office in Washington.

A.P. & U.P.