

TIMING OF ATTACK RAISES QUESTIONS

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Drive Was Reportedly On When Ford Got Word of Cambodians Yielding

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WASHINGTON, May 15—The American attack in the Gulf of Siam was already in progress, according to official accounts, when President Ford received word that the Cambodian Government was willing to release the American merchant vessel Mayaguez and its crew of 39.

But there remains considerable confusion as to the reasons why air strikes were carried out on the Cambodian mainland at almost the moment the crew members were approaching an American destroyer in a small fishing boat.

The sequence of events that unfolded last night and early this morning over and off the coast of Cambodia, and at the White House and Pentagon, was still not completely clear late today.

But a careful reconstruction, based on interviews with American officials, as well public briefings, yielded the following picture:

Since the capture Monday of the Mayaguez, a containership, by Cambodian forces, diplomatic initiatives had evoked no response. Indeed, the White House press secretary, Ron Nessen, said this morning, Mr. Ford not only had no idea what

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Ford's Preliminary Moves

Mr. Ford then took three steps before authorizing the final land-sea-air assault.

He ordered an attack on Cambodian patrol boats to try to prevent the removal of the American crewmen to the mainland, an attack in which three of the boats were sunk. He consulted once more, yesterday afternoon, with the National Security Council. He arranged to meet with bipartisan Congressional leaders to tell them his plans.

At 7:07 P.M., Wednesday, Washington time (6:07 A.M. Thursday, Cambodian time), while the meeting with the Congressmen was going on and while American forces were moving into position for the assault, the Phnom Penh radio broadcast a statement offering to free the ship and the crew. It was the Communist Government's first public comment on the affair.

The Word Is Received

An account of the broadcast, making it clear that the Cambodians were ready to accede to American demands, appeared on news agency wires here at 8:19 P.M. A less complete, somewhat garbled version—passed from an American monitoring station to Maj. Gen. Brent Scowcroft of the National Security Council to Secretary of State Kissinger to Mr. Ford—reached the President no more than three or four minutes earlier.

By then, according to logs maintained at the Pentagon and the White House, the operation was under way. At the direction of Mr. Ford, who was in the State Dining Room for a party for the Premier Joop M. den Uyl, of the Netherlands, Mr. Nessen issued a statement calling upon Phnom Penh to release the crew members unconditionally. It was also broadcast by short wave. He issued the statement at a 9:15 briefing.

In Indochina, meanwhile, a fleet of 11 CK-53 helicopters had set out from U Taphao Air Base in Thailand for the hour-and-45-minute flight to the area where the Mayaguez was held. Three copters peeled off and lowered a platoon of 48 Marines by sling to the destroyer escort Harold E. Holt.

Marines Land and Dig In

The rest off the copters flew on to Tang Island, a C-shaped patch of jungle foliage with good sandy beaches. Encountering heavy fire from dug-in Cambodians, the helicopters put down a force of 100 marines at island's eastern end and the men dug into a semicircular perimeter under fire.

One helicopter went down in the surf and two went down on the beach. Two others managed to limp back to Thailand, together with the six that were undamaged. It was 7:20 P.M., Washington time.

Though the original plan called for a sweep across the island, that never happened, even after a second contingent of 100 marines arrived. The men remained on the beach, taking heavy but sporadic small-arms fire, for more than 12 hours while the Mayaguez and her crew were freed. Capturing the island was unnecessary, Defense officials explained, because the American crewmen were not there.

Navy Ships More In

The scene now shifts to the ships and planes of the Navy.

In the flotilla assembled off the coast, in addition to the destroyer escort Holt, were the carrier Coral Sea, the guided missile destroyer Henry B. Wilson, the destroyer Bausell, the guided missile frigate Gridley, the destroyer escort Lang and the store ship Vega. The senior officer was Rear Adm. R. P. Coogan, aboard the Coral Sea.

While planes from the Coral Sea and the guns of the Wilson supported the marines on the beach, the Holt came alongside the Mayaguez, lying dead in the water. In Washington it was 8:20 P.M., about the time news of the Phnom Penh broadcast reached Mr. Ford.

Ten minutes later, marines clambered aboard the container ship—and found no one. In the mess, plates with warm food were found, indicating a hurried departure.

At about 9 P.M., word was passed to Washington that the ship was empty—which may account for the American statement, 15 minutes later, demanding the release of the crew members, which the Cambodian radio had already promised.

Communications between Washington and the task force were almost instantaneous.

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had motivated the Cambodians, he also had no idea whether they ever received the messages he had sent them, mainly through the Chinese.

According to Representative Thomas P. O'Neill of Massachusetts, the House Democratic leader, the final communication constituted a 24-hour ultimatum demanding the ship's release.

with radio reception uninterrupted.

At 10:15 P.M. here, the Coral Sea began launching A-7 and F-4 fighter-bombers for a strike on the airfield at Ream, on the mainland near the port of Sihanoukville, called Kompong Som by the fallen Cambodian Government.

But there were other events in train near the Wilson, which was closer to Tang Island. At 10:45, a small fishing boat, manned by five Thais who had been captured with their craft several days ago, was sighted, white flags flying, by sailors on the Wilson. Eight minutes later the destroyer flashed word to the Pentagon that 30 or more Caucasians appeared to be in the boat—it later developed that all 39 of the Mayagüez crewmen were aboard.

Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger did not pass that word to the President, however, until 11:14 P.M., a lapse of 21 minutes. During that 21 minutes, the Navy planes began their strike at Ream—either at 10:57 or at 11:09, depending which of two Pentagon briefings was accurate.

The Pentagon said later that 17 enemy planes had been destroyed on the ground, a hangar had been smashed and the runways had been cratered.

Momentum Is Cited

But since both the container ship and the crew had been recovered before the first wave went in, why was the strike not stopped? Some military officials argued that it was necessary to protect the Marines still on Tang Island; a civilian source said that the momentum of the operation was too great to reverse quickly.

But if the need was to protect the marines and their helicopters against attack by Cambodian T-28's, why were the raids not carried out at the onset of the assault? Or why didn't the American fighters simply orbit the airbase, waiting to pounce on any Cambodian plane that prepared to take off?

Further confusion arose from Mr. Schlesinger's statement, at his news conference today, that the crewmen "arrived at the

Wilson as a result of what is presumed to be the decision of the Cambodians to deliver them up in order to terminate combat activities directed primarily at the mainland."

It is presumed that the crewmen were taken from the Mayagüez to Tang Island and then to Sihanoukville, from which they set out by boat for the Wilson. They must have left shore long before the first American "combat activity" on the mainland—the air strikes.

How, then, could the air strikes have motivated the Cambodians to put the crewmen in the boat and send them out?

Ship Heads for Singapore

In any event, all 39—for a time, it was thought that the number was 40, but that was revised—were in good shape, according to a message from the Mayagüez captain. At 7:30 P.M., her boilers fired, the ship set sail for Singapore, and is due there Saturday.

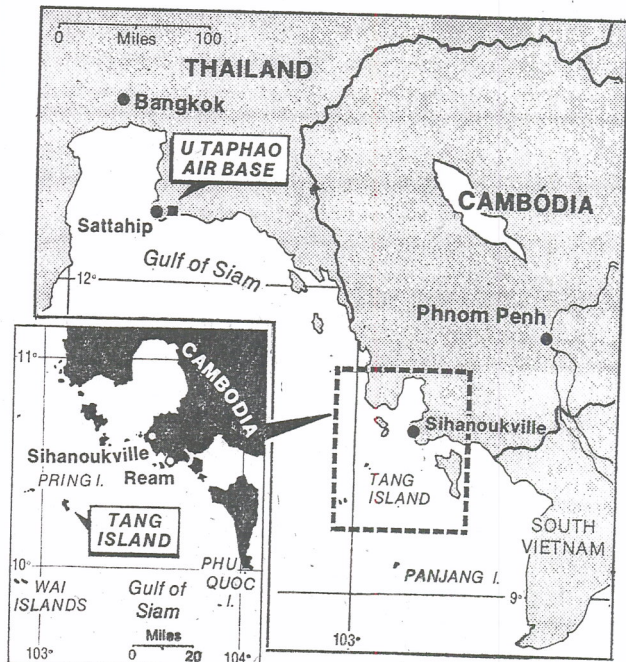
On Tang Island, there was trouble. The helicopter force, reduced by losses, was driven back by Cambodian ground fire as it attempted to land to extract the marines.

So the Coral Sea, at her top speed of 30 knots, pulled closer to the island to reduce the flight time, and aircraft and naval guns were used to lay down a barrage of fire on the Cambodians defending the six-square-mile islet.

At 7:13, just as the Mayagüez was getting ready to weigh anchor—and more than six hours after President Ford had promised, in a nationally televised statement, that the marines still under hostile fire were "preparing to disengage"—the first of those on the beach were lifted safely off.

Not until 9:10 A.M. today, Washington time—well after dusk in the Gulf of Siam—did the last helicopter leave the island, the site of the first American ground combat since 1973. It arrived on the Coral Sea's flight deck at 9:20

Even then, the casualty toll was not known. One death—a marine killed on the beach—was confirmed, and there were reports of perhaps 14 missing and others wounded.



* 1250 8:45 PM - NYT 17 MAY, BORDER The New York Times/May 16, 1975