

Heavy Cambodian Fire Surprised the Marines

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WASHINGTON, May 15 — The American marines who landed on Tang Island in the effort to free the crew of the freighter Mayaguez lacked accurate information on the size of the Cambodian force on the island and were surprised by the amount of fire they met and the number of planes supporting the Cambodian's, according to Pentagon officials.

One Pentagon analyst describing the Defense Department's problem in deciding how many marines to use in the rescue operation said that "yesterday morning, it could have been anything—a company operation, a battalion attack, or anything we needed to get the crew and the ship."

Despite the lack of any information on Cambodian strength on the island, officials decided to gamble and send in one company of marines with air support, assuming that the company could be reinforced if it ran into serious trouble.

Consequently about 1,000 marines in Thailand were selected as the "ready reserve," and the Marine force aboard signed the job of freeing the Mayaguez.

In order to rescue the ship's crew the military priorities at this point were to capture the ship, neutralize the forces on the island and meet any air or sea counterattack launched from the mainland.

The Air Force and the naval air arm were ordered to provide all necessary support to the ground forces' landing, prevent any interference with the freeing of the Mayaguez and deter any aerial or naval interference from the mainland.

But the American forces were surprised by the amount of fire, both ground and light antiaircraft, drawn by the marines and their supporting aircraft.

The Cambodians apparently had been surprised by the infantry attack and, although they responded with heavy fire

in some areas, seemed to have no plans for a counterattack in force.

The loss of three American helicopters, a vehicle always vulnerable to light-weapons fire, resulted from the machine-gun fire directed at them.

The preliminary Defense Department estimate is that the operation represented a copy-book example of the combination of all arms—air, ground and sea. This estimate, qualified sources conceded, may be altered when all the combat reports are received. Some questions are already being raised.

One is whether there was sufficient suppression of ground fire before the marine force flew into the island. Had there been more air support in this period, some sources suggested, the helicopter force might have suffered fewer losses.

U. S. planes also struck the Ream Air Base, near Sihanoukville on the mainland. Whatever the political repercussions of the attack, Defense Department analysts apparently considered it a natural and necessary operation in support of the fighting on the island.

According to these sources the attacking aircraft employed Walleye smart bombs. These bombs have a television receiver in the nose and home on the target when directed by a device in another aircraft that picks the target and directs the bomb.

The preliminary estimate is that the strike destroyed 17 aircraft on the ground—none were encountered in the air — and some support facilities on the edge of the airfield.

Statements by officials indicate that there is good reason to believe that the whole operation would have been carried out earlier if the aircraft carrier Coral Sea and other fleet units had not been diverted by the South Vietnamese refugee operation.