



CHARTING HIS SHIP'S SEIZURE

Capt. Charles Miller of the Mayaguez

—AP Photo

Mayaguez skipper tells the full story

United Press International

Following is Capt. Charles F. Miller's detailed story of the capture and release of his crew and ship, the Mayaguez, by Cambodians:

On Monday, May 12, I was challenged by a motor torpedo boat. I reduced the ship's speed . . . the engines were stopped at 11:21 a.m. . . . after the gunboat had fired at me with anti-aircraft guns. The final shot was a rocket over my bow, so I stopped the vessel and the torpedo boat pulled alongside.

Seven men boarded my vessel—seven armed

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men anywhere from 10 years old to around 30 — all carrying grenade throwers, shoulder rocket throwers, AK47s, and a U.S. Army field pack telephone.

None was able to speak English. The only thing they could do was point in the direction of the gunboat and indicate that I follow the ship.

I did so, but after the radio officer had sent out several SOSs and the third officer had already put a Mayday and contacted some oil workboat.

I proceeded to delay action, figuring our military or our government would begin some action to help us. At 8 p.m. that evening I dropped the anchor on the shoreside of Pulau Wai Island and followed instructions of the armed insurgents.

A few hours after dropping the anchor they wanted me to heave up the anchor and proceed into Kompong Som Wharf Number Two.

I delayed this action because I didn't want to get any closer to Cambodian soil than I actually was, claiming that I could not navigate, that my radar had broken down, that I could not navigate between the reefs to go into Kompong Som. So they let me remain there until 6 the next morning.

During the night nobody was allowed to sleep. At any time I tried to leave the bridge . . . they would make me go back up. So I sat up on the bridge all night with the armed men, the officer on watch and several other men.

At 8:30 a.m. we moved. I let go the port anchor at 1:18 p.m. one mile east of Koh Tang island and a launch came alongside with more armed insurgents . . . Khmer Rouge . . . and at 2 p.m. the crew was ordered to get off the ship.

They went down in the engine room with their rifles and made all the engineers secure the plant.

They took us ashore in two

fishing boats with two armed patrol boats to lead us into Koh Tang island. We got about 50 yards off the beach. This island was heavily fortified with 20mm cannon, anti-aircraft guns, rocket throwers. And during this time our jets came along and found we were anchored off this island.

We laid in this fishing boat all night listening to our reconnaissance jet planes circle us with heat-seeking radar that could tell there were 40 souls aboard this ship.

The only food we had for the day was the food that was cooked for us by the Thai fishermen who were also prisoners of the Khmer Rouge.

At 5 p.m. one young fellow off one of the motor patrol boats who could speak a little French and very little English, wanted to know what was in the rooms that were locked on the ship.

So the chief engineer and I agreed to go back to the ship to open the rooms to show them we had no arms or ammunition in the rooms.

We arrived on the ship and it was dark. Our jets were flying over and they were letting off flare bombs so they could take pictures of the ship. So we were removed from the ship without opening the rooms and taken back to the Thai fishing boat and there we slept on the open decks.

At 6 a.m. Wednesday we got under way to proceed to the old town that they call Sihanoukville (Kompong Som). At 10 we arrived at Sihanoukville Main Port.

But the voyage between Koh Tang island and Kompong Som is something this crew will never forget.

Our jets had arrived and you have to give our pilots credit. They did everything possible without blowing us out of the water to try to get this boat to turn around and take us back to the ship.

If we were strafed or bombed once, we were bombed a hundred times by our jets. When they saw that was not going to work, two jets overflew the boat from bow to stern approximately 70 feet above us and they tear-gassed us.

The first gassing wasn't too bad. I don't blame the pilots. They were only trying to keep us out of Kompong Som. They wanted us returned to the vessel.

The Thai fishermen were very willing. They turned around once and the armed guard on the boat put a gun to their heads and told them to get back on course.

After a half hour passed

and we were still going we were gassed a second time. I don't know whether it was tear gas or nausea gas but everybody on the ship vomited, skin was burning, a couple of men were struck by shrapnel.

The third engineer who had a bad heart passed out for about 20 minutes. We thought he was dead. Actually, we didn't realize the condition the man was in for the first five or 10 minutes because we were all pretty sick ourselves.

After we got in close to Kompong Som the jets left us alone and they put the recon plane on top of us again.

When we arrived in the harbor of Kompong Som we tied up to a pier alongside another fishing boat. There were 2,000 or 3,000 people armed to the teeth just waiting to parade us through the village. Then we proceeded to another island. I forget

the exact name of the island . . . I'd have to look at a chart . . . here it is . . . Koh Rong San Lem.

When we arrived we tied up to a dock.

The first man to speak English shook our hands and

welcomed us to Cambodia. There was nothing violent. They took us all ashore, explained our situation, and at this point started to negotiate.

He wanted to know whether we were CIA or FBI, how heavily armed our ship was, how much military cargo—arms, ammunition, bombs—we carried.

I insisted that we had no military cargo, that the ship was a civilian merchant ship that traded between merchants in Hong Kong, Bangkok and Singapore. I explicitly told him the ship never went back to the U.S., never went to a military base, that our route was a shuttle route from Hong Kong to Bangkok to Singapore and return to Hong Kong.

Finally this man was convinced that we did not have arms, ammunition and bombs in the cargo.

After several hours he asked us what we'd like to eat. They had food cooked for us. Rice and greens . . . I think the greens were garlic stems in some kind of wine vinegar. Some real small chicken legs. A little pork

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fat. Some small cucumbers or eggplants.

They fed all the crew first. After the crew had eaten they sat down and ate what was left. They gave us hot tea, cold water, and hot water with sugar, which is a popular drink in Cambodia. Just hot water and four or five tablespoons of their coarse sugar.

After dinner I again commenced negotiating with this young man who spoke English very well. He was only the speaker for the second in command of the military forces in Kompong Som.

I think at that time we had them fairly well convinced that we were strictly a merchant vessel because he got on the American-made field pack walkie talkie and talked to the first commander of military forces stationed in Kompong Som.

At all times I requested that the crew be released, taken aboard the ship so we could get steam up and I could call my company office, Sea-Land in Bangkok, and have them inform the authorities to stop the jet fighters and Marines from landing in Cambodia.

After an hour or so we got word back from his first commander that he would talk to the supreme commander in Phnom Penh and that we would probably be returned to our ship the following morning at 6.

This was around 7:30 p.m. He agreed to let myself, the chief engineer and seven men go aboard the ship and start the plant up and get word to Bangkok to notify them and get the military to stop the jets from flying over Koh Tang, sinking their motor patrol boats that were to bring armed troops out to the Mayaguez.

He agreed but said our aircraft had already sunk three motor patrol boats and had wounded over 100 Cambodian people.

We sat out on the dock and there was no boat to take us there and they were going to call for a patrol boat to take us.

But darkness was falling and we knew the jets were out in force over Koh Tang island, which was well-fortified.

So the chief and I and the

other seven crew members decided it wouldn't be safe to go out on a patrol boat because if we were spotted by our jets we'd be blown out of the water and we'd be killed. So we told the man tomorrow morning at 6 a.m. and he agreed.

So he left us alone the rest of the night, although I did keep negotiations going with the speaker trying to convince them that we had no arms; and that if we couldn't get to Bangkok our military planes would blow the ship out of the water, that it wouldn't be left for the Cambodians to use.

So we sat up, chatted with the group, bumming cigarettes off the guards and finally we went to bed around 9 o'clock. Everybody was awake at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning and we could hear jets screaming over Koh Tang island.

Finally, around 5:30 a.m., I got all the hands up out of bed because at 6 we were supposed to have word back from Phnom Penh whether this agreement would go into effect.

At 6 they contacted by walkie talkie the first command of Kompong Som who again talked with Supreme Command in Phnom Penh and around 7:20 it was finally agreed they would take the crew back to the ship, get power on the radiotelephone and I would call Bangkok and order overflights and bombing of Kompong Som, Koh Tang, Pulao Wai be halted.

I promised them faithfully

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that I could do this to get our release. Around 7:20 we were all put in this Thai fishing boat with about five or six armed guards.

In the meantime, this speaker of English informed me another fishing boat with more guards would follow us. I don't think the guards were on the boat for us. At this time there was no au-

thorization to release the Thai fishermen. The armed guard was to keep the Thai fishermen under Cambodian control.

We got about half a mile away from the dock and the fishing boat following us hailed us, came alongside, removed the guards from our ship, said something to the five Thais and you never saw five happier men in your life. They were released with us and we proceeded back to the ship.

The only worry we had

was if we were not recognized by our aircraft they would blow this ship out of the water like they did every other ship they tried to get alongside the Mayaguez in the last 24 hours.

So we picked up bamboo poles on the dock before we got on the Thai fishing boat. We took off our white shirts, our underwear, anything white that we had. We had seven or eight white flags so we could show our jets who we were.

As luck would have it, none of our jets overflew us. The recon plane overflew us five or six times, well away from the Thai boat, until they finally spotted the white flags we were waving and came closer and made several circles closer and then flew over three times.

We shouted and waved and he wiggled his wings.

This was a radar recon plane. We all knew we were identified. We proceeded out to the ship which is a 4 or 4½-hour run from where we were held captive.

We got closer and we saw there was some type of Navy ship alongside the Mayaguez tied up beside her and another big destroyer — the Wilson — No. 7 — they proceeded toward the boat.

They had not been in-

formed that the crew was on this boat. When they got within 200 or 300 yards I holered out and asked permission to come alongside. The skipper of the ship used his bullhorn, asked if we were the crew.

And they all shouted for joy.

So we went aboard the Wilson. I was first aboard her. I was taken right up to the master's bridge and from there to the Navy intelligence office that had a direct line to Washington.

At that time I informed the man who was talking direct to Washington about how our release was negotiated, the promise I made to the second in command of Kompong Som, to Supreme Command in Phnom Penh.

Also I requested from the Navy that the Thais be taken care of. They needed food and water. During our stay they didn't have much to eat — just rice and greens — but they shared it with us.

They had very little water but they shared it with all hands. They cooked our food. Two or three meals. So the Wilson supplied the Thai fishermen with food, water, cigarettes and protection to go from the Wilson to the

USS Holt, where they received enough fuel to reach their destination in Thailand.

We were well-received on the Wilson. We were given food and cigarettes. We were interrogated by Naval

Intelligence. I was. Finally, they put a boat over the side to take us back to the Mayaguez.

This was approximately 10:30 a.m. when the crew boarded the Wilson, on May 15.

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15. After we were all taken care of for gas burns, we were all taken to the fantail (rear of the ship) for several group pictures.

There were two or three men hit by shrapnel: The third assistant engineer, my second mate and the second engineer. But all 40 of the crew plus five Thais and our armed guard were burned by the gas. Everybody. Everybody on the ship. We were on an open deck. There were 39 crewmen plus myself making 40. Five Thais plus the Khmer Rouge.

The Air Force knew we were on board this ship. I don't blame the Air Force for what they did. All they tried to do was get the boat to turn around and take us back to the ship. So I give credit to our pilots.
