

SFChronicle MAY 20 1975

Pentagon Tally of Wounded Now 49

Washington

Confusion over the toll of the Mayaguez rescue operation continued yesterday as the Pentagon reduced its estimate of the number wounded to 49. Five were still listed as killed and 16 missing.

Defense Department spokesman Joseph Laitin said the number of wounded was being dropped "for the time being" from the 70 to 80 estimated Sunday by Defense Secretary James Schlesinger.

Laitin also named three of the five killed in the incident last week off the Cambodian coast. They were identified as:

Air Force Second Lieutenant Richard Vandageer of Buckland, Mass.

Air Force Staff Sergeant Elwood E. Rumbaugh, of Dothan, Ala.

• Marine Lance Corporal Asrton N. Loney, of Albany, N.Y.

Asked why there was still confusion about the number of casualties days after the operation at Koh Tang, an island off Cambodia where the crew of the captured merchant ship Mayaguez was thought to be, Laitin said:

"These things get very complicated when men get scattered among different ships and different bases."

Only a few minutes earlier in a separate briefing at the White House, Presidential Press Secretary Ron Nessen said that "generally speaking, during the operation, people were spread over a number of ships and several were separated from their units. It just takes time to get firm figures."

Laitin said a review is being made of the wounded to determine how many were hurt seriously enough to be considered wounded.

Some Marines, he said, had suffered only superficial hurts such as sprained ankles.

None of the bodies of those killed has been recovered, he said, and there are no plans to search for the bodies, including those of the 13 Marines believed missing in the flaming crash of a helicopter into the sea. The toll of killed was based on eyewitness accounts, he said.

He said officials are "pretty certain" that no U.S. servicemen were left behind at the end of the operation last Wednesday.

"We have held back nothing," said Laitin. He said he hoped that a "preliminary final count" of the casualties would be available by today.

Nessen, meanwhile, denied that there was any news management in the delay announcing losses at the island.

"There was no intention to hide the bad news. There was no intention to hide the casualties," he said.

Nessen said President Ford regrets the casualties and is "frustrated at not being able to get all the figures, and he is somewhat puzzled about the length of time taken."

Nessen reiterated the statements of Schlesinger that air attacks on the Cambodian mainland after the

Mayaguez crew had been recovered were in support of Marines still fighting at Koh Tang.

Associated Press