The Mayaguez Ordeal

Glory depends upon a simple view of events. Qualification and questions arise with subsequent details. In the first flush of the successful Mayaguez operation there was the glory of a John Wayne movie. The Marines went in there, shot up the bad guys and rescued the ship. Slow fade.

Then came some of the details. The qualifications and questions that now bedevil us probably do not mitigate the inevitability of the decision that President Ford made —or its rightness in light of the situation. But the simple glory is shimmering less brightly behind a mist of imponderables.

The first reports of casualties were acceptable within the radiance of success. One or two Marines dead and a few injured. Then the Pentagon said 13 men were missing and presumed dead in a sea crash of one of the helicopters shot down by the Khmer Rouge. One Marine was killed in combat. And we were told that there were 22 wounded— three of them seriously. Now it turns out that there are five known dead, 16 missing, and between 70 and 80 wounded.

Along with the new, sobering casualty list, a question about the motive for the Mayaguez rescue operation is nagging at the afterthoughts of many.

Was it, simply, a determination to rescue a highjacked ship and kidnaped crew? Or was there also the desire of the administration which doubts its own global credibility in the tawdry aftermath of Vietnam to prove that there is still sting in the American tail, that we still trail a vapor of scary unpredictability as we lumber through the world? Dr. Kissinger at least kept that question alive when he told a press briefing here that the Mayaguez episode should teach the world that the United States will not be pushed around.

All well and good if the administration felt a need to re-prove its truculence. But how many of the dead, missing and wounded do we assign to the rescuing of the Mayaguez and how many to bolstering the doctrine of American unpredictability?

Such are the questions that arise from the details. For them there is no slow fade.