

Rescued Sailor's Return To S.F.



By Joseph J. Rosenthal

Stephen Malore and Frank Damos watched Mary Peterson pour a glass for Mayaguez crewman Al Minichiello at Coffee Don's

By Michael Grieg

The Mission welcomed home The Cambodian Kid yesterday.

Albert Minichiello, 62-year-old chief engineer of the rescued Mayaguez, was the only San Franciscan

among ten crew members who were the first to return to the United States.

"It was a lousy couple of days," he said of his capture after arriving at San Francisco International Airport from Hong Kong.

Escaping from 40 news-

men who crowded the customs exit, Minichiello went to a favorite Mission district haunt—"Frank Damos' Coffee Don's at 22nd and Valencia streets—for a hero's welcome that was a little less hectic.

The pizza bistro was fes-

tooned with banners that read "Welcome Home, Al," "Don't Give Up the Ship" and "The Return of the Cambodian Kid."

"I was the engineer on the watch, the guy at the thro-

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tle, when the Cambodian gunboat first fired at us." Minichiello told friends over a beer or two.

"Naturally, I stopped the ship. Before I know it, the first chief comes running down and the next thing there's three Cambodian soldiers, kids rather, with machine guns and rifles . . .

"Sure, I was a little worried. After all, there's this 14-year-old boy with a 22-mm. gun in my back."

Minichiello, who was six weeks short of retirement when the Mayaguez was stopped, was upset that the Cambodians took the crew off the ship "without letting me secure her first . . . just left her to idle."

"They wouldn't even let me go to my room on the next deck to pick up my passport and some cigarets. I was left with six cigarets in my pocket."

The worst part of the crew detainment, he said, was the food and the lack of cigarets.

"It was rice, rice, rice. Once they kind of helped things a bit by putting three slices of cucumber on the rice. The last day they gave us a little fish . . . Let me tell you, I ain't going to eat rice again for a couple of years."

Aside from questioning them about two Central Intelligence Agency spies the Cambodians presumed were aboard, the crew members weren't bothered, he said.

"They let us wander around the island we were on. There was no place else to go. It was all jungle. It's not a place I'd go for a vacation—not until I'm 101 years old."

The 40 crew members, he said, occupied themselves in part by trying to roll cigarets made of jungle leaves and pages from a school book they found.

"Then the Cambodians came through with a pack of Camels," said Minichiello, a Benson & Hedges man. "I don't know where they got them—those 20 Camels for 40 of us."

The dapper chief engineer, who sported a bright striped jacket for the homecoming get-together, said he never worried for his life, the way they were being treated.

At worst, before the rescue, he felt there might be protracted negotiations for their release and they might spend as much as two years in jail, as one Cambodian captor told them.

"Then those naval planes came in and the Cambodians were suddenly in an awful hurry to get rid of us," he said.

"Frankly, I was surprised they sent the U.S. Navy out to resume an old rusty freighter. They didn't do as much for the Pueblo. Maybe we've learned a lesson."

Minichiello said the Navy had "all kinds of planes above us" during the crew's safe transfer from a fishing boat. "They stuck around until we were all OK. Then they started shelling the hell out of the shoreline."

It went much more smoothly, he said, than the earlier operation when the Navy used tear gas to keep a Cambodian launch from taking the crew ashore.

"I was at the end of the launch when the gas

started drifting all the way back. I really got it pretty bad. I'm going to have to get my eyes checked now that I'm home."

Then he thought of those involved in the rescue who would never return home.

"There were 20 killed and 100 wounded," he said. "I ought to know. 'I even saw a few of them on the destroyer when I was taken aboard and happened to go to the wrong deck and ended up with the medics."

"Sure, for the rest of us, that rescue operation was a great success. Not for those poor kids, though."

(American casualties in

the Mayaguez incident, according to the latest Pentagon figures, are 15 dead, 50 wounded and three missing.)

One well-wisher wanted to lighten the mood. "Tell us, Al, aren't you really a spy, like the Cambodians say?"

The Cambodian Kid answered him straight.

"What were we going to spy on?" he said, noting the Mayaguez was six miles from Cambodia; "well outside their water limits." All that anyone would see anyway, he added, would be "a lot of jungle and a lot of coconuts."

(Earlier, officials in Wash-

ington reported that the ship was eight miles off Ko Way, an island some 60 miles from Cambodia in the Gulf of Siam claimed by both Cambodia and Vietnam.)

As for the days ahead, he said he was going to get some real rest after those days of sleeping on a bamboo floor. "The Cambodians didn't have enough cots to go around and I wasn't fast enough."

In time, he expects to go back to sea to qualify for retirement as a 30-year engineer.

He's looking for a ship going anywhere but the Gulf of Siam. Maybe a slow boat to Los Angeles.