

WXXPost
Toll in
MAY 21 1975
Mayaguez Rescue Is Now at 15

By Michael Gehler

Washington Post Staff Writer

The official toll of U.S. servicemen known to have been killed in the effort to recapture the American merchant ship SS Mayaguez climbed to 15 yesterday, the Pentagon announced.

Three other servicemen officially are listed as missing in action, though Defense Department spokesman Joseph Latin acknowledged that "there is little likelihood" that these men are still alive.

Therefore, almost six days after U.S. Marines, Air Force helicopter crews and Navy ships went into a 15-hour battle to try to recover the Mayaguez and free its crew, the final total cost in U.S. lives appears to be 18.

The official figure of 15 dead—11 Marines, two airmen and two sailors—released by the Pentagon yesterday is considerably higher than the preliminary figure of five dead disclosed last Sunday by Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger. Two days earlier, the Pentagon had given still more preliminary estimates of only one killed.

However, in these earlier accountings, the number of men missing and presumed lost was much higher. The 16 men mentioned that Schlesinger mentioned on Sunday has now been scaled down to three, all of them Marines. In an attempt to explain



Air Force Maj. Howard Corson stops conversation with Marine Maj. Gen. Kenneth Houghton, second from left, to congratulate 1st Lt. John Tonkin (with neck brace) who received Purple Heart in Philippines ceremony.

United Press International

Dead

the sharp switch from missing to known dead. Laitin said there apparently had been some "double-counting" in the earlier listing of the missing.

The confusion and delay in getting an accurate casualty figure released brought a public display of annoyance with the Pentagon from President Ford's press spokesman on Monday.

Pentagon officials privately are claiming that they, too, are annoyed, mostly at the Marines for an allegedly slow count.

The Pentagon, however, denies that an accurate casualty toll was delayed on purpose so as not to take the glow of success off initial reports of the recapture of the vessel and release of its 39-man crew. The Mayaguez was seized by Cambodian forces May 13 Cambodian time.

Laitin said another 50 servicemen—41 Marines, seven airmen and two sailors—were wounded, but that only two were hurt seriously and that both of these were expected to recover. The wounded toll is considerably below the figure of 70-80 used by Schlesinger Sunday.

The Defense Department has said that the Marines used in the battle wound up being scattered over several

different recovery ships and at other bases in Thailand, delaying an accurate count.

Laitin said yesterday that there could still be some "minor adjustment" to the figures but the totals now released were "as close to final as possible."

Laitin said 13 of the dead were killed in a helicopter crash just off the beach on Tang Island where the Marines were invading. Another airman died in another chopper crash and another Marine was killed in battle on the island.

The three missing Marines, according to eyewitness reports, were all known to have been fighting on the island and were last seen on the island, according to Laitin.

"But all eyewitness reports so far indicate that no American fighting men were left alive on the beach. "Laitin added, suggesting that the bodies of the missing men may still be on the island.

Actually, the indirect toll of dead servicemen in the Mayaguez episode includes 23 other U.S. airmen killed in a helicopter crash in Thailand May 13, before U.S. military action got under way.

In the early stages of

planning to recapture the ship, according to Pentagon sources, the only assault-trained U.S. troops in Thailand were a contingent of

air policemen and there was some thought of using these troops fast to board the ship. Nineteen of them were being moved aboard the hel-

icopter from bases in Northern Thailand to the big Thai base at Utapao, much closer to the Cambodian coast, when the copter, with a

crew of four, crashed. The plan to use the air police was eventually dropped in favor of using Marines.

The French press agency, quoting unidentified sources of the new Cambodian government, reported from Paris yesterday that 30 U.S. troops had been killed or wounded in the assault.

Fifteen Marines wounded in the Mayaguez operation were given Purple Heart medals in the Philippines yesterday after the aircraft carrier Coral Sea, with the Marines aboard, arrived at the big U.S. base at Subic Bay.

Cdr. J. Michael Rogers of the U.S. destroyer Wilson, which picked up the Mayaguez crew members after they were released by the Cambodians, told reporters that the Thai fishing boat that brought the crewmen out to the Wilson was initially thought to be a Cambodian gunboat.

He said, according to United Press International, the Wilson was preparing to force the gunboat away when U.S. spotter planes reported men waving white flags aboard. Thus, it appeared that one more stroke of luck kept the Mayaguez crew free of serious injury. The crew narrowly escaped injury when an alert U.S. pilot held his fire after spotting them a few days earlier being whisked to shore aboard another Cambodian gunboat.

"They drew alongside shouting: 'We are Americans. We are the crew of the Mayaguez. It's good to see you. Good to see the old U.S. Navy,'" Rogers said.