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Saga of Marines and the Mayaguez

By Arnold Zeitlin
Associated Press

CLARK AIR BASE, The Philippines — Intelligence reports gave U.S. Marines no clue to the fierce resistance they met when they stormed Koh Tang island in the Mayaguez operation, an Air Force sergeant said today.

"According to reports, we should have been able to go in with our helicopter land,

drop off the Marines, let them do their thing, and fly away," said S. Sgt. Ronald Gross, 30, of Baltimore, Md., from his hospital bed here.

Instead, one helicopter behind Gross' aircraft was blown out of the sky. His own craft was shot down. He was wounded four times in a crossfire trying to escape from the wreckage, and he and a squad of Marines were stranded 12 hours in a

ravine before another helicopter was able to rescue them.

"The Marines couldn't understand," said Gross about the men with him, "why they had to secure something that had no value."

Just before his CH-53 helicopter carrying 20 Marines left a Thai air base for Koh Tang on May 15, Gross said, "we heard the crew of the Mayaguez was back on the

ship."

Mayaguez skipper George T. Miller said last week that the crew was on its way back from an island 25 miles away when the Marines landed.

Gross recounted his hours on the Koh Tang beach after the commander of the U.S. 13th Air Force here presented him and S. Sgt. Jesus Perez de Jesus, 25, of San Lorenzo, Puerto Rico, with Purple Hearts.

Gross said the heavy Cambodian fire shot off his helicopter's tail blades and sent it crashing about 75 feet to the beach.

Moments before the pre-dawn takeoff, Gross said, his copter's mission was shifted to that of landing Marines on the beach.

Originally, he said, Navy personnel also were aboard and the orders were to land

Turn to Page 22, Col. 1

—From Page 1 out. doing what it wanted to.

the Marines on the Mayaguez itself.

Gross said no one was hurt in the crash, but the helicopter was completely disabled.

"The Marines ran for cover in a ravine and left me, the photographer who was with us and my pilot," said Gross. "I was thrown to the deck in the crash. We were picking up ground fire from right and left. We thought it best at first to stay in the helicopter, which remained intact. We decided we couldn't stay there because the fire might blow up the gasoline.

"We decided to make our break. We thought about heading for the beach and swimming. I didn't think it was too good an idea. The photog couldn't swim.

"We decided to go for the ravine, about 35 yards away. I tried to signal for the Marines to cover us. But they didn't see me. I didn't want to make too much noise to make it obvious to the Cambodians we were leaving.

"We made our break with me in the lead. We got about 10-15 yards from the chopper when we picked up ground fire again. They had us in a cross fire. I got hit in the ankle. I fell. The others stopped, but I told them to keep going. I stood back up. But I got hit in my left shoulder, which totally disoriented me. All I could see was my left arm flapping

"I just lay there on the beach. I thought if I stay still, they'll think I'm dead and won't fire. The pilot and the photog made it safely to the ravine. I made little gestures for cover fire. I couldn't get cover from the Marines. I lay there entirely too long. I got up. I don't care how bad a man gets shot, when you are scared, you can still get up and go.

"I don't think I was a good 10 yards away from the ravine. I lay there five minutes. The Marines kept looking at me. I thought those fellows were not going to do a damned thing to get me up there.

"I still had my weapon. I got up firing to my right. I got it in the other shoulder. I fell down and I had enough momentum going so I rolled the other 10 yards into the ravine. I was hit four times and also took some shrapnel.

"We were there 10 to 12 hours. I was conscious all the time. The helicopters made two or three attempts to get us out. My co-pilot was directing air strikes from the ground. The air strikes had no effect. They took on toll. They kept firing at us. They were very well dug in.

"We couldn't move. From the time we exited that helicopter and made it to the ravine, that's where we stayed until they sent a chopper to pull us out. Other than that, we served no purpose whatsoever."

Gross said his wife, Deloma, and their two daughter lived in Baltimore.

He has been in the Air Force 10 years and has been reassigned to Andrews Air Force Base near Washington, D.C.

"I want to get back to Andrews so bad, I can taste it," he said.