

southeast asia

In the Mayaguez's Wake

COUNTING the cost of the Mayaguez affair was beyond simple arithmetic; even the White House said it was puzzled at the length of time taken to arrive at a definitive total.

In terms of American lives, preliminary figures of one dead, 22 wounded and 13 missing were still being revised as the week began. Defense Secretary James Schlesinger told reporters on television Sunday that five American servicemen had been killed, 16 were missing and between 70 and 80 had been wounded. Several helicopters had also been lost.

Schlesinger said that the Mayaguez skipper Charles Miller "was in error," when he told reporters last weekend in Singapore — where the container ship had paused after the rescue operation — that he had seen the bodies of seven died Marines "on ice" aboard the U.S. destroyer Wilson (one of several U.S. naval vessels in the Gulf of Siam). According to Schlesinger, Miller had "probably referred to wounded Marines."

The casualty count was readjusted again two days later, when the Pentagon revised its estimate of wounded to 49, while still listing five dead and 16 missing. "These things get very complicated when men get scattered among different ships and different bases," explained Defense Department spokesman Joseph Laitin.

And the official Pentagon toll released Wednesday was still different: 15 dead (11 Marines, two airmen, two sailors) and three Marines missing in action, with "little likelihood" they had survived. Laitin said there had apparently been

"some double-counting" in earlier reports.

In addition, Administration spokesmen disclosed Wednesday that 23 American servicemen had died in a helicopter crash while being transported for possible use in the Mayaguez operation.

"We have held back nothing," declared Laitin.

The Cambodians had not issued a casualty list. But a U.S. Marine, Lieutenant Colonel Randall Austin, estimated 25 Cambodians in a force of perhaps 150 had died in the American storming of Koh Tang island — which, said Lawson, had been defended with much more firepower "than I personally expected," from 60-mm mortars.

In any case, Captain Miller and some of the Mayaguez crew said the Marines had "hit the wrong island. We were 25 miles away" on an island Miller's

The World

charts identified as Rong San Lem.

Confusion also persisted about other aspects about the air-sea Mayaguez rescue. It appeared that in addition to the Marine landing on Koh Tang island at dawn ten days ago (in the mistaken belief the crew of the Mayaguez was being held there), four groups of planes had been ordered by President Ford to move against the mainland Cambodian port of Kompong Som.

The first wave of U.S. planes, said Schlesinger, had flown over the harbor without bombing or strafing; the second had bombed a nearby airport; and the third had attacked a petroleum depot. The fourth,

'The actions were judicial. I have no regrets'

said the defense secretary, had been "terminated" before it took off from the carrier Coral Sea because the National Security Council and the President knew by then the Mayaguez and her crew were safe.

The chronology of the attacks was puzzling because the second and third strikes against the Cambodian mainland apparently were made after the Mayaguez crew was safely aboard the Wilson, and the assault on Koh Tang occurred after the crewmen had in fact left that island.

Schlesinger said; however, that — compared with "several thousand" tactical sorties against Vietnamese targets in 1972 — the attacks on Kompong Som had

been "a very prudent, limited use of force" intended "to protect the Marines on the island." At the time, he said, "we did not know whether or not the crew in its entirety or even in part had been removed from the island," and "we therefore thought it essential to seize the island . . .

"The main thing is the U.S. must take action to defend the right of innocent passage, to defend the right of freedom of the seas . . . The actions that were taken were judicial . . . I have no regrets."

Nessen meanwhile had told reporters that during the first 60 crucial hours after Cambodian gunboats seized the Mayaguez, Washington had received no response whatever from Cambodia to "diplomatic messages which we knew the Cambodians had received," and hence the decision to use force had been



BANGKOK STUDENTS BURNING UNCLE SAM IN EFFIGY

AP Wirephoto

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made. It was, he insisted, a decision "based 100 per cent . . . on a single consideration—to get the crew and the ship back."

Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, however, had said at a weekend news conference that the rescue operation should show the world "there are limits beyond which the U.S. cannot be pushed." But he too said the U.S. had not sought the military confrontation, and any benefits to America's international prestige were only "a by-product, a bonus."

Kissinger's obvious exhilaration at the success of the operation was shared by the White House, many in Congress and much of the public. When Mr. Ford, speaking at University of Pennsylvania graduation exercises in Philadelphia, compared the spirit behind the military venture to that of the American Revolution and praised the "skill and courage" of the servicemen involved, he was roundly cheered by an audience of 17,000. Only a few silent



UPI Telephoto

SCHLESINGER

student pickets and about 100 other demonstrators protested his remarks.

On Capitol Hill, the President's military action won approval from such leading Republicans as Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, often a presidential critic, and such Democrats and Senators Henry Jackson of Washington and Robert

Byrd of West Virginia.

But the Mayaguez affair had also threatened U.S. friendship with Thailand, site of the Utaphao air base from which U.S. Marines had been flown to Koh Tang. Early last week Edwin Master, the U.S. Charge d'affaires in Bangkok, had handed Thai Foreign Minister Chatichai Choonhavan a note expressing regret for the "misunderstandings that have arisen" in "unique circumstances" and reaffirming American respect for Thailand's sovereignty and independence.

Though it did not use the word "apologize," the note was acceptable to the government of Premier Kukrit Pramoj — but not to several hundred Thai students, who had milled about Bangkok for days carrying signs with slogans reading "Go to hell bad Americans."

Still demanding a formal American apology, groups of students burned effigies of Kissinger and Uncle Sam. And on the front door of the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok, the Great Seal of the United States was ripped off and replaced by a black vulture.