

# 'Mystery Ship' Off Cambodia Still a Puzzle

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Three days before the Mayaguez episode began, U.S. intelligence reported that another American-owned ship was seized and held by Cambodian gunboats for about 36 hours in the same vicinity in the Gulf of Siam.

Now the Pentagon says that the intelligence was wrong and it does not know the identity of the ship, flying a Panamanian flag, which was seized May 7, five days before the Mayaguez.

The original report was received in Washington on May 9 and identified the ship as the Esso Regulus, a small coastal tanker owned by Exxon and registered under a Panamanian company. Exxon denied it, when inquiries were made at its corporate headquarters in New York, and the Pentagon subsequently agreed that the Regulus was not the ship.

It could not be established that the intelligence system provided President Ford with the name of the Esso ship during the Mayaguez episode but the White House was informed of the May 7 incident, and it seems improbable that the American name of the ship was not included in the report.

This muddled prelude leaves some unsettled questions about the Mayaguez seizure and the military action taken to recover the ship and its crew.

Was White House decision-making influenced in any way by faulty intelligence? If the earlier seizure did not involve the Esso Regulus, then what ship was it?

Nobody seems to know—not the various agencies of the U.S. government which might normally collect such information, not the private

insurance companies, such as Lloyd's of London, which keeps close track of worldwide shipping.

The Navy answered a formal query on the subject with this statement:

"The identity of the Esso Regulus was made known to the Navy through intelligence channels in the early morning hours of Saturday, May 10. Based upon information available at that time, these sources reported there was a ship experiencing difficulties in that area and that the Esso Regulus was that ship.

"Subsequent analysis has revealed that the Esso Regulus was not the ship reporting that she had been interfered with. We do not know what ship, if any, reported Cambodian interference."

It is possible that there wasn't any ship seized on May 7 and that the whole business was a misunderstanding—except for one thing. The Cambodian government also reported the seizure and described the incident in some detail.

A Cambodian communique issued after the Mayaguez action also failed to name the vessel but identified it as "a merchant ship flying the Panamanian flag," carrying a crew of Thais, Taiwanese, Filipinos and Americans.

The available evidence suggests strongly that there was such a ship. The incident was reported, not only by the American government, but by the infant Cambodian government. The Cambodian communique also failed to name the vessel, but identified it as "a merchant ship flying the Panamanian flag," carrying a crew of Thais, Taiwanese, Filipinos and Americans.

The ship, according to the

Cambodian statement, "intruded deeply into Cambodian territorial waters" on May 7, close to the same coastal islands where the Mayaguez got into trouble five days later.

The Cambodians did not claim that it was an American ship, yet they accused it of being part of "the U.S. imperialists' espionage activities in our territorial waters."

"It was evident that this ship, having intentionally violated Cambodian territorial waters, had only two possible goals: either to conduct espionage or to provoke incidents," the Cambodian government claimed. The U.S. government has denied that it was doing anything in that vicinity to spy on the Cambodians.

The unidentified ship, according to the Cambodians, was held until May 9 while the coast guard checked with the government in Phnom Penh. "The [government] decided to allow this ship to continue its route out of Cambodia's territorial waters," the Phnom Penh government later reported. "This is clear proof of our good will."

The approximate details of this incident were known to at least one unidentified U.S. intelligence service — presumably the Central Intelligence Agency — by the afternoon of Friday, May 9. It is not known how this information was obtained, but the Navy's statement suggests that ship radio communica-

tions were being monitored.

On May 5, the CIA had reported in its daily publication of foreign broadcasts that a South Korean freighter, the Masan-ho, had been fired on and hit once off the Cambodian coast, though this information apparently did not provoke any special alert either.

Early on Monday morning, May 12, the Mayaguez, an American ship with American registry was seized and held.

Several White House officials said they could not recall whether the President was informed then that an American-owned ship had been seized five days earlier. One source familiar with White House intelligence data reported no recollection of Esso ship at all. Another source said he remembered hearing the name, but couldn't recall whether it was on May 12 or later, or whether it was re-

ported as rumor or fact.

The government did not issue a maritime warning to U.S. shipping on the trouble in the Gulf of Siam until after the Mayaguez was seized. It is not known why these earlier incidents, which the government intelligence knew about, did not produce an alert.

The President issued a strong statement of protest at midday on May 12, calling the seizure an "act of piracy" and hinting that the United States might use force to free the ship. That afternoon, White House press secretary Ron Nessen mentioned in a briefing that a "Panamanian ship" had been seized and held temporarily in the same vicinity on May 7, but he did not provide a name for the ship or indicate that the name was known to the White House.

It was several weeks after the Mayaguez episode that a reliable source within the government said that the Panamanian-registered ship seized on May 7 had been identified as American-owned.

When the Pentagon was asked about this report, a spokesman at first responded that the ship was the "SS Unid." A check of ship registries did not turn up any ship by that name. The Pentagon spokesman later said, with some embarrassment, that he had discovered that "Unid" apparently stood for "unidentified."

When Exxon was asked about the Esso Regulus, a spokesman in New York vehemently denied that any of Exxon's ships was involved in any kind of difficulty with the Cambodians.

The Exxon spokesman said, however, that the Regulus went from Singapore to a port in Thailand, unloaded and returned directly to Singapore, arriving there, May 9 without any interference.

The crew, he said, included Filipinos, Singaporeans and several Italians—but no Americans.

The intelligence error, he suggested, may have started with a misunderstanding about the ship's location. It was in the Thai port of Phuket, he said, which may have been mistaken for a port called Phuquoc on the Cambodian-Vietnam border, leaving the impression that the ship was in Cambodian hands.

The Pentagon could not ex-

plain further how the intelligence system identified the wrong ship in the incident or shed any light on the correct identity.

Experts in the maritime industry found it curious that no one has heard anything reliable about the seized ship's correct identity, but they said it is possible that the ship belongs to one of those marginal overseas companies which operate under foreign flags and prefer to keep their business operations as secret as possible.

The "mystery ship" was not the only one to run into trouble from the Cambodians in the Gulf of Siam during mid-May. A number of small Thai fishing boats were seized that same week and accused of landing U.S. spies to infiltrate Cambodia.

One imponderable from all of this is whether the White House response to the Mayaguez might have been conditioned in any way by the lack of information or by the apparently inaccurate report on the Regulus.

If U.S. officials thought that another American-owned ship had been seized and then released a week earlier, it might have stiffened their resolve to make an issue of what they regarded as intolerable interference with international shipping.

On the other hand, the Cambodian behavior in the earlier incident, regardless of the ship's identity, might be used to argue that the Communist government was not looking for another Pueblo incident, as U.S. officials feared.