

Detailing the Mayaguez Affair

Reviewed by
George C. Wilson

The reviewer is The Washington Post's military correspondent and author of "Bridge of No Return: Ordeal of USS Pueblo."

"The Four Days of Mayaguez" is a valuable memo for the author who decides to do a definitive book of the hijacking of that merchant ship and the American response. But—possibly because of the rush to get the account between hard covers—this first book on Mayaguez lacks depth or a strong story line.

Author Roy Rowan obviously went to great effort to look at the Mayaguez capture through the eyes of the 40 crewmen, taking the reader from one to the other. But his rapid-fire accounts of so many different men tends to blur the overall view and soften the impact of the event. As a result the story does not build. We come away not knowing any one person very well.

Still, Rowan's digging did bring up some nuggets for authors and historians to ex-

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The *FOUR DAYS OF MAYAGUEZ*. By Roy Rowan

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amine when they go deeper into the Mayaguez affair of May, 1975. Those nuggets include the following:

The 18 United States Air Force assault policemen and five crewmen who were killed May 13 when their helicopter crashed in Thailand shortly after taking off from the Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Base were being readied to assault the Mayaguez by landing on top of the steel containers on the deck. The final "go" order had not been given, however. To this day, the Pentagon does not count those 23 men killed when totaling the casualties from the Mayaguez operation.*

Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, the Cabinet member whom others have portrayed as strongly advocating the 1972 Christmas bombing of Hanoi by B-52s is portrayed as a hawk again this time. Writes Rowan, whose research included interviewing President Ford. "Kissinger was emphatic

on the use of force. He felt it was important for the American action to have impact on President Kim Il Sung and the North Koreans . . . He argued that if Cambodia used the Mayaguez crew the way North Korea had used the Pueblo crew, it could radically deteriorate the American position in the rest of Asia. Secretary (of Defense) James Schlesinger, on the other hand, stressed the need to recover the ship and punish the Cambodians but was less eager to use the Mayaguez incident as an example for Asia and the world . . ."

The military joint chiefs of staff, according to Rowan, had again offered the option of using B-52 bombers—this time to punish Cambodia, not North Vietnam. He writes that the for and against breakdown on the question was "Vice President Rockefeller, Henry Kissinger and [Air Force] Gen. [Brent] Snowcroft in favor; James Schlesinger, the Joint

Chiefs' chairman, George Brown and his deputy, Gen. David C. Jones, against. President Ford sided with the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs against the use of the B-52s . . . Kissinger maintains that once the (aircraft carrier) Coral Sea was known to be within striking distance, the decision against the B-52s became unanimous. . ."

Unfortunately, Mr. Ford's remarks quoted in the book are not footnoted nor otherwise identified to alert the reader when and under what circumstances they were made. Perhaps other readers will find some nuggets here.

Although there were similarities between the Pueblo and Mayaguez hijackings, the book account of the crew's treatment dramatizes how gently the Cambodians handled their captives—not so much as slap in the face. In contrast, Pueblo officers were beaten at the time of their capture as well as afterward in prison camp—often savagely.

Another striking difference is in the way American reconnaissance aircraft kept close watch on the Mayaguez and Cambodian boats involved in her capture. Even so, the Marines were sent to attack the wrong island. No Mayaguez crewmen were on it. Yet, 15 Marines were killed; three are still missing; and 50 other Marines were wounded in that island assault according to the Pentagon. Were they not victims of yet another intelligence gap? It would seem so.

*If one adds the 23 Air Force men who were alerted for a possible assault on the Mayaguez to the 18 Marines either killed or still missing, 41 Americans were lost to save 40 others. No wonder Mayaguez skipper Charles T. Miller cried when he learned the price of the rescue. "There are men over there dying," Charlie thought. "For me."