

The truth behind the Mayaguez incident



Initially US Air Force security units from Nakhon Phanom Air Base were to co-ordinate their plans with U-tapao units and seize the Mayaguez before the marines would have been prepared...but then the crash of a helicopter killing all 23 on board delayed matters



The 23 crew members of the Mayaguez were taken to Koh Tang island after the crash of the helicopter.

ON Sunday, May 11, Cambodian gunboats seized the US freighter Mayaguez off the coast of Cambodia. American sources said the ship was taken in international waters while Phnom Penh radio said the Mayaguez had intruded five kilometres into Cambodian waters.

Washington declared that the Mayaguez was transporting commercial goods en route to Thailand and was not carrying weapons, even defensive weapons, or war cargo. Cambodia charged that the ship was spying on Cambodia as were other US ships, as well as planes, and that was the reason for its capture. Cambodia also asserted that the ship was carrying weapons and intelligence equipment.

Both sides, however, agreed that the ship was taken without a struggle, whereupon the crew of thirty-nine became captives. Likewise there was no controversy concerning the identity or citizenship of any crew member.

After the seizure the US asked China to mediate on its behalf for the return of the ship. Diplomatic sources say that a stiff ultimatum was given and a specific deadline for return of the crew and the ship. But, they say, Cambodia did not take the threats of military action seriously enough to release the crew and ship.

This was natural in view of the decline of US prestige in the wake of the fall of Phnom Penh and Saigon — and, with them, Cambodia and South Vietnam — to the Communists. Many Americans, including President Ford and Henry Kissinger, apparently felt that the United States could not ignore this threat and had to act lest America's reputation in Asia be sullied to the point of complete disgrace — resulting in ineffectual diplomacy and the questioning of American alliances.

Thus, after the passing of only two days, on May 13, battle plans were laid out. All of the US bases in Thailand were informed of pending action and certain units were placed on an alert footing. No base was placed in full combat readiness and the units concerned were not told why they were being called to action. Washington did not want to alert Cambodia. Nor did it want the Government of Thailand — that had requested the United States not to use American bases in Thailand for military action in the area —

to know what was happening.

Meanwhile US marines were sent from bases in Okinawa and the Philippines to U-tapao Airbase in south-eastern Thailand. American naval craft were also dispatched to the area.

The initial plan of action was this: Air Force security units from Nakhon Phanom Airbase were to co-ordinate their plans with U-tapao units and get the ship early on Wednesday — before the marines could have been prepared. The marines ap-

Disagreements between marines and Air Force security forces became heated almost to the point of violence.

parently were going to be held in reserve; or they were to attack Koh Tang Island in a retaliation move afterwards. Or there may have been some question whether the crew was really on the ship and the marines were to rescue them from the island.

En route to U-tapao, one of the fleet of helicopters carrying security forces and weapons crashed and all 23 on board died. The plane fell from 9,000 feet, about 30 miles out from Nakhon Phanom Airbase. The apparent cause of the crash was a mechanical defect or poor repairs, although rumour says it may have been hit by a rocket fired from the ground by North Vietnamese units in the area.

Part of the mystery surrounding the crash results from the fact that a similar crash occurred in almost the same place two months ago,

killing all four on board. Also, the US military hierarchy did not want the Government of Thailand to know what it was doing. Even after the attacks on Cambodia and the retrieving of the Mayaguez, it did not choose to let Bangkok know that forces from Nakhon Phanom were involved in the action.

This explains why the crash was in no way related in official reports to the fighting that followed at Koh Tang Island. The Pentagon may also have feared hostile public reaction in the US. Or Washington chose not to include the 23 deaths in the Mayaguez affair, hoping to make it appear a clear-cut victory for the US.

In any event the crash decimated the security force from Nakhon Phanom Airbase. It also delayed for several hours the rest of the helicopters, one or two of which remained on the scene to see if there were survivors and to locate the site of the wreckage for ground rescue crews.

Units from every US base in Thailand got a piece of the action.

Security forces from Nakhon Phanom and U-tapao were slow in assembling and intelligence information was apparently sketchy. There were ostensibly conflicting reports on the location of the crew and the defensive capabilities of Cambodian troops on Koh Tang. Some wanted to wait for the marines and to co-ordinate plans; others felt that it was the complete responsibility of the marines.

When the marines arrived, they took charge and insisted that they seize the ship, rescue the crew and attack Koh Tang Island.

According to one version, Air Force security forces were upset about the crash and the marines preempting their part in the mission. In fact, disagreements became almost violent. The controversy was resolved by compromise: Air Force security insisted that the marines kill all of the Cambodians on the ship and attack Koh Tang.

According to another version the decision to attack Koh Tang came from higher echelons and thus took the form of a premeditated retaliation.

F-4 Phantom fighters from Udorn Airbase in northern Thailand bombarded the island with rocket and cannon fire. This was followed by attacks by A-7 fighters and C-130 gun carriers from Korat Airbase in central Thailand. F-111s were also sent. Units from every US base in Thailand got a piece of the action. US Air Force craft also bombarded Ream Airfield on the mainland of Cambodia destroying 20 or more planes on the ground. An oil storage depot was then set on fire.

Air Force fighter planes and US naval craft also hit and sank two or three Cambodian boats in the area. According to an intelligence report an American-built C-130 which was left in Cambodia and flown by a Cambodian pilot was also shot down.

When the marines approached Koh Tang Island, however, they found the defence put up there so much stiffer than they had antic-

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igated. One helicopter with 20 to 25 marines was "shot out of the sky," according to a passenger on board another helicopter. Two more helicopters were subsequently downed. Two others were hit so badly that one had to land on the beach nearby and one had to limp back to U-tapao.

A total of five or ten more helicopters were also hit. According to a US military source, a number of helicopters were damaged so severely that they will never fly again.

About 150 marines landed on the north side of Koh Tang Island — most of them in a trough on the beach. They met with gunfire from higher ground and many were pinned down in the water and on the beach for a while, some of them apparently killed and wounded.

The US military command made a serious miscalculation regarding the defence forces on Koh Tang. Also, the slow helicopters made good targets. These were not the same helicopters that were used in Vietnam, which were more manoeuvrable and faster.

Furthermore, US milita-

ry authorities had failed to send in advance the spotter planes from Nakhon Phanom Airbase to U-tapao. They were needed to guide both the helicopters carrying marines and the air strikes. And, presumably because of bunkers or underground caves on Koh Tang, bombing casualties inflicted on Cambodian forces were not too serious.

When an experienced American pilot in a spotter plane arrived on the scene to guide air and naval strikes against the island, the situation changed, and the F-4s, that fly too fast to spot their targets, began to prove effective. The same was true of other aircraft and guns from nearby US naval craft. He also directed other spotter planes in the area and, quickly adjusting to the battle situation, cut up areas of reconnaissance responsibility and target zones.

After remaining in the air for more than five hours — and some ten to twenty minutes past the maximum time his small spotter craft could, according to specifications, stay in the air — he returned to U-tapao. He is now being recommended for a Silver Star and a Distinguished Flying Cross.

According to those on the scene, American air and naval strikes, when properly guided, directly hit a number of "enemy concentrations." One naval gun hit a small boat on the shore that was having the marines under automatic fire. Some air strikes hit groups of twenty-five to fifty soldiers. One US

officer estimated the number of Cambodian soldiers killed at one hundred to two hundred; others said one thousand.

A Cambodian radio broadcast begged those on shore to release the ship 'before we all die.'

During the heaviest fighting a radio broadcast in Cambodian from the island said "the US marines are going to kill us all." A voice, in desperation, begged those on shore to release the ship "before we all die."

When the marines stormed the ship, however, there wasn't a soul on board. Hot food, though, was still on the table, suggesting that the Cambodians must have known the marines were coming and got off just in time. Also the marines failed to take the island. When they retreated from Koh Tang they were still under fire. Some were yet in the low, disadvantageous position where they landed when the battle started.

Meanwhile, a Cambodian vessel appeared on the scene flying white flags. The crew members of the *Mayaguez* were released unharmed. In addition, some Thai fishermen captured earlier by Cambodian forces were turned over. The Cambodians declared that they were going to turn over the crew anyway.