

SS Mayaguez Call Sign KNIFE! 56th SPS, NKP / 21st SOS

23 USAF personnel were killed en route to the rescue.
Compiled by Don Poss., VSPA © 2001



As Air Force forces re-gathered, after the crash, Marines had time to advance to a staging area, where controversy and anger swirled as to which service would smite the enemy responsible for setting in motion events that killed 23 Air Force personnel, including 18 members of the 56th SPS. Tempers raged to near blows between Air Force and Marines... and was settled only when Marines agreed to the demands of the 56th SPS that when boarding the Mayaguez—all enemy would be killed and no prisoners taken! Blood-vengeance, slaughter, revenge... were terms of peace between Airmen and Marines.

And then came the Cover Up... Lies... and Betrayal — by our own government!

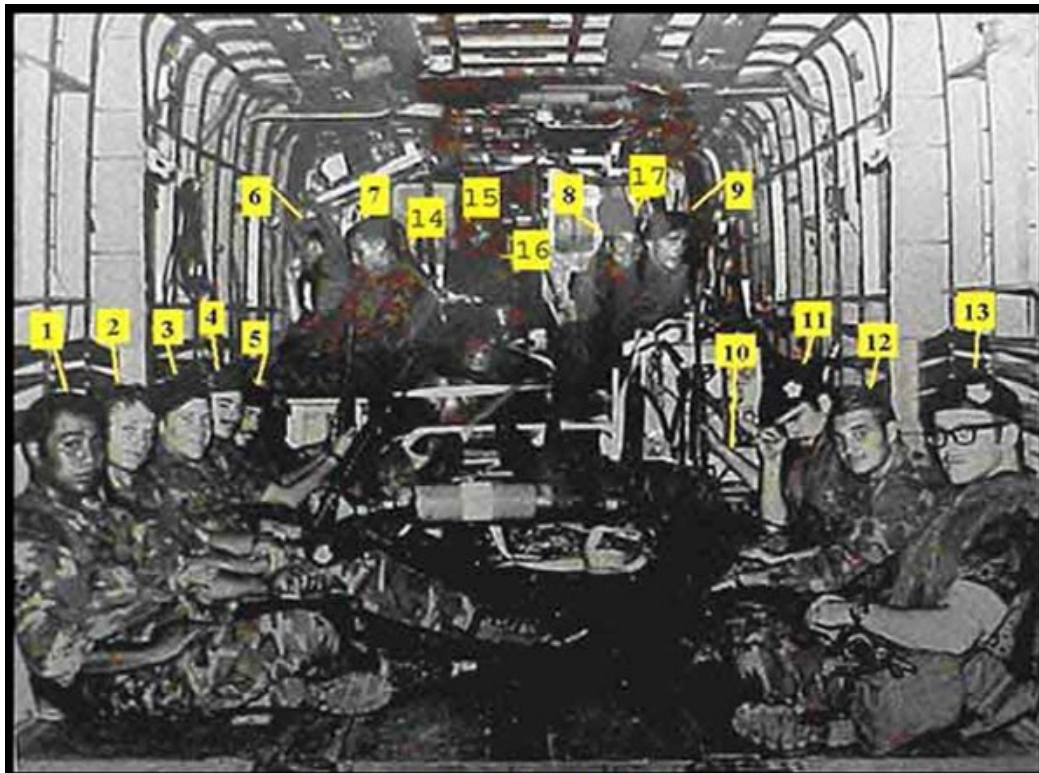
On May 12, 1975, Khmer Rouge Naval Forces seized the S.S. Mayaguez and her crew of 41, ironically, the last American merchant ship to leave Saigon. The Mayaguez Rescue Operation is well known today, however, little is known of rescue efforts played by the U. S. Air Force 56th SPS, NKP, and their tragic loss of 23 dead. Little known perhaps because of U.S. government bureaucrats' efforts to disassociate 56th SPS early casualties of the rescue from the rescue in order to reduce the true cost, as recognized today .



U.S. Air Force Photo, by Boyd Belcher

The Mayaguez Incident: "An hour after this photo was taken, everyone aboard this CH-53 helicopter was killed when it crashed in a remote area of northwest Thailand. The passengers were all security policemen assigned to the 56th Special Operations Wing, Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand, and were to be a part of the assault force to recapture the USS Mayaguez and rescue its crew from Cambodian forces on Koh Tang."

(Click photo for Photo with names)



USS MAYAGUEZ RESCUE INCIDENT

Believed to be:

- | | | |
|-----|--------------------------------------|------|
| 1. | Iloa, Faleagafulu | SSgt |
| 2. | Nealis, Tommy R. | A1C |
| 3. | Hankamer, Gregory L. | Sgt |
| 4. | Fritz, Gerald W. | Sgt |
| 5. | Dwyer, Thomas D. | Sgt |
| 6. | crew member | |
| 7. | McKelvey, William R. | Sgt |
| 8. | Glenn, Jackie D. | TSgt |
| 9. | Lane, Michael D. | Sgt |
| 10. | | |
| 11. | Moran, Edgar C. II | Armn |
| 12. | Mathias, Robert P. | A1C |
| 13. | Ross, Robert W. | Sgt |
| 14. | | |
| 15. | | |
| 16. | | |
| 17. | | |

USAF Security Police (Photo ID Pending):

- | | |
|------------------------------------|------|
| Black, Jimmy P. | Sgt |
| Collums, Bobby G. | Sgt |
| Coyle, Gerald A. | SSgt |
| Ford, Bob W. | Sgt |
| Hamlin, Darrell L. | Sgt |
| Higgs, David A. | Sgt |
| London, Dennis W. | Sgt |

Crew:

- Pilot: James G. Kayes
 Co-Pilot: Laurence E. Frohlich
 Flight Engineer: George E. McMullen
 Flight Engineer:

[Click Here for Large Photo with caption](#)

Names

The 56th SPS was selected to assist in the recovery operation for the USS Mayaguez and effect rescue of the Mayaguez's crew prior to Marines involvement. Their giant helicopter launched from Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, en route to U-Tapao, at 2030 on 13 May 1975 with a crew of five and 18 USAF Security Police. All onboard were killed."

On the 13th of May 1975, fifty-one SPS members were to join in the recovery operation for the USS Mayaguez--fate had other plans. At 9,000 feet, the chopper carrying 23 USAF personnel overflowed an area near the Thai-Laotian border where two months prior another aircraft was shot down. At that location, the chopper disappeared from the airfield's departure radar and either fell or was blown from the sky, crashing approximately 330 miles N/E of Bangkok and 40 miles west of the airfield. Cause of the crash is still controversial: enemy action, or faulty maintenance--the truth may never be known.

As Air Force forces regathered, Marines had time to advance to a staging area, where controversy and anger swirled as to which service would smite the enemy responsible for setting in motion events that would kill 23 Air Force personnel, and members of the 56th SPS. Tempers raged to near blows between Air Force and Marines... and was settled only when Marines agreed to the demands of the 56th SPS that when boarding the Mayaguez, all enemy would be killed and no prisoners taken. Blood-vengeance... slaughter... revenge... were terms of peace

between Airmen and Marines.

And then the cover-up and betrayal. During the war years, body-count (theirs, not ours) was the name of the game. Vietnam casualties were known to have been medevaced to Japan where deaths were sometimes attributed to unrelated causes, and not counted as battle casualties. So, when 23 USAF personnel were killed en route to the rescue, the cover-up began. Why? Reasons mentioned in the [Bangkok Post](#) were that Uncle Sam did not want Thailand officials to know that a rescue of the Mayaguez was launched from their bases without consulting them. Other reasons included curtailing protests from U.S. Citizens by portraying a victory without significant casualties. No concern seemed given toward the memories of the 23 Airmen and their parts in the rescue. Betrayal of the spirits of the 56th SPS dead... was easy.

The Pacific [Stars & Stripes](#) (May 15, 1975) printed Official Claims: *"A spokesman said the chopper was flying from one location to another within Thailand and was not involved with the U.S. military reaction to the seizure of the container ship Mayaguez."*

The controversial truth began to surface as printed in the English language newspaper, [Bangkok Post](#) , which wrote: *"Initially US Air Force security units from Nakhon Phanom Air Base were to coordinate 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."*



Last person named on Vietnam Memorial laid to rest

10/30/00 - ARLINGTON, Va. (AFP) -- The Air Force honored 2nd Lt. Richard Van de Geer with a full-honors funeral Oct. 27, at Arlington National Cemetery. Van de Geer died when the CH-53 helicopter he was copiloting was shot down approaching Koh Tang Island, Cambodia, during the USS Mayaguez rescue May 15, 1975. He was the only Air Force member aboard the helicopter that carried 26 people. Thirteen were rescued and 13 perished including 10 Marines and two Sailors. Van de Geer's name is the last name inscribed on the Vietnam Memorial in Washington.

(Photo by Staff Sgt Jennifer Gangemi)

Courtesy Air Force News Archive

Read examples of the official ([cover-up](#)) version and the unfolding stories, in Headlines:

Article submitted:

- **23 GIs Die In Thailand Helo Crash** (Pacific Stars and Stripes, Thursday, May 15, 1975, Page-2)
- **[23 Americans Die in Mystery Crash](#)** (Bangkok Post, May 1975)
- **[The Truth behind the Mayaguez Incident](#)** (Bangkok Post, Wednesday, May 21, 1975)
- **[Special Operations CH-53 SEA Losses](#)**
- **[Final Combat: The Mayaguez Incident at Koh Tang](#)**

Read [e-mails from Airmen who were there](#)

Check out [VSPA](#)

• [NKP 56th SPS stories and photos!](#)

• [Mayaguez stories and photos: \[Mayaguez Remembered\]\(#\)](#), by Charles Coles, CMSgt, USAF, 56th SPS

U.S. AIR FORCE CASUALTIES

ON ROUTE TO KOH-TANG:

[USAF 56th SPS KILLED IN CRASH](#)

Sgt Jimmy Black

Sgt Bobby Collums



[Click to Read the 56th SPS Chapel Bulletin.](#)



SSgt Gerald Coyle

- Sgt Thomas Dwyer**
- Sgt Bob Ford**
- Sgt Gerald Fritz**
- TSgt Jackie Glenn**
- Sgt Darrell Hamlin**
- [Sgt Gregory Hankamer](#)**
- [Sgt David Higgs](#)**
- SSgt Faleagafulu Ilaoa**
- Sgt Michael Lane**
- Sgt Dennis London**
- Sgt Robert Mathias**
- [Sgt William McKelvey](#)**
- Amn. Edgar Moran**
- Sgt Tommy Nealis**
- Sgt Robert Ross**

**ON ROUTE TO KOH-TANG:
USAF 21st SOS KILLED IN CRASH**

- Capt James G. KAYS, (pilot)**
- [1LT. Laurence E. FROELICH,](#)**
(copilot),
- TSgt George E. McMULLEN, III,**
(flight mechanic),
- SSgt Paul Raber,**
- Sgt Robert Weldon.**

ON THE ISLAND OF KOH-TANG:

AIR FORCE KILLED IN ACTION

- Rumbaugh, Elwood E.**
- Van de Geer, Richard**

AIR FORCE WOUNDED IN ACTION

- Bateson, Thomas J.**
- Corson, Howard A., Jr.**
- Dejesus, Jesus P.**
- Gross, Ronald, A.**
- Harston, Jon D.**
- Morales, Nick**

KIA WIA MIA Non-battle deaths

Army	0	0	0	0
Navy/Marine Corps	13	44	3	0
Air Force	2	6	0	23*
U.S. Total	15	50	3	23

[* Crash of helicopter carrying Combat Security Police Squadron in Thailand -- \[possibly\] due to mechanical failure.](#)

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