

Crisis in Southeast Asia: Mayaguez Rescue

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DATES: May 12–15, 1975

LOCATIONS: Cambodia and Gulf of Thailand

OVERSEAS BASES USED: U-Tapao Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB), Thailand; Cubi Point and Clark Air Base (AB), Philippines; Kadena AB, Okinawa

AIR FORCE ORGANIZATIONS:

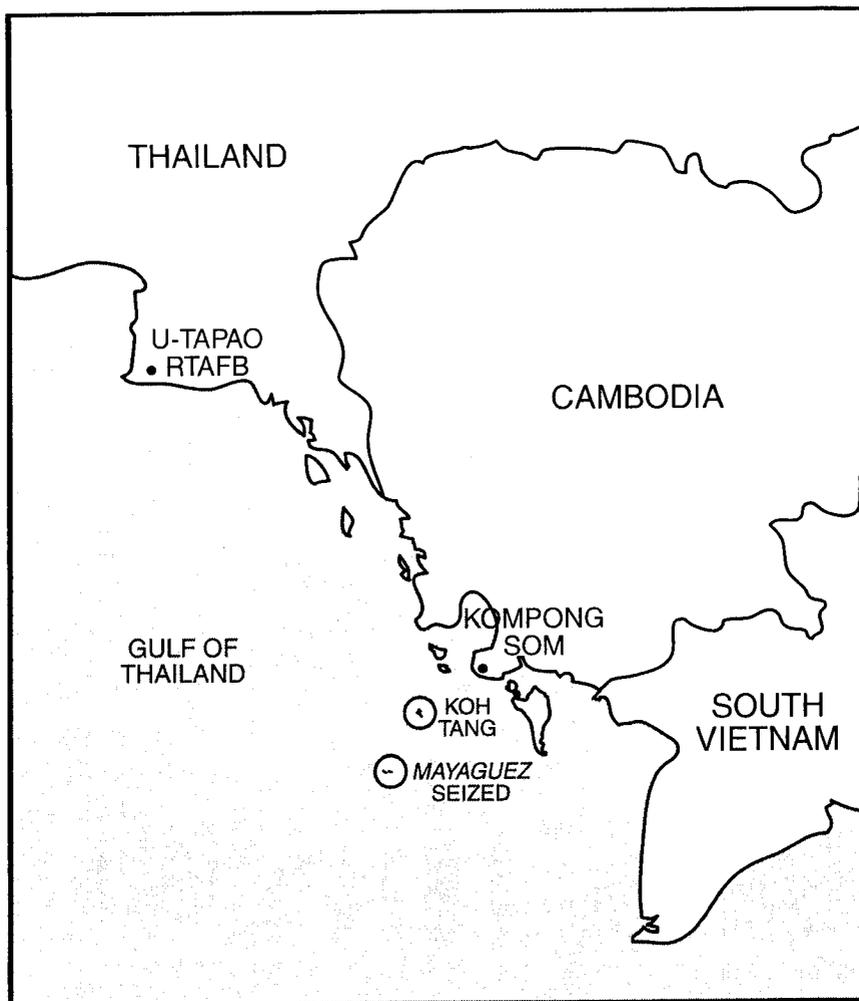
WINGS:	SQUADRONS:
41st Aerospace Rescue and Recovery	7th Airborne Command and Control
56th Special Operations	16th Special Operations
60th Military Airlift	
62d Military Airlift	
307th Strategic	
314th Tactical Airlift	
347th Tactical Fighter	
374th Tactical Airlift	
388th Tactical Fighter	
432d Tactical Fighter	
437th Military Airlift	

AIR FORCE AIRCRAFT: CH-53, HH-53, A-7, F-4, F-111, AC-130, C-130, HC-130, KC-135, OV-10, C-141, RF-4, U-2, C-9, C-5

Operations

On May 12, 1975, as the American civilian merchant ship SS *Mayaguez* on a voyage from Hong Kong to Thailand passed about sixty miles off the Cambodian mainland, a gunboat pulled alongside, and armed Khmer Rouge soldiers climbed aboard. They quickly seized the vessel and its forty-man crew, but not before one of the crewmen sent a “mayday” distress message.

When U.S. President Gerald Ford learned that an American ship had been seized in international waters, he responded



Area of USAF Operations during Mayaguez Crisis

immediately. He remembered that North Koreans had seized the U.S. Navy ship *Pueblo* in 1968 and held its crew for a year, not releasing them until the United States had issued an apology. Just a month before the *Mayaguez* seizure, Cambodia and South Vietnam had fallen to Communist forces, suggesting that the United States was a “paper tiger.” President Ford sought a quick solution to the crisis through diplomacy, but that option faded quickly. Since the collapse of the Phnom Penh government a month earlier, the United States had no formal diplomatic ties with Cambodia. Ford tried negotiating through China and the United Nations, but neither produced any immediate results. He turned from the state to the defense department.



Marines board a CH-53 helicopter bound for Koh Tang.

President Ford ordered military aircraft to search the Gulf of Thailand for the *Mayaguez*. USAF F-111s from Thailand located the ship near Koh Tang (Tang Island), about thirty-four miles southwest of the mainland city of Kompong Som. Reconnaissance flights suggested that the Cambodians were holding the *Mayaguez* crew on the tiny island. The President hoped to rescue the American hostages before they were taken to the Cambodian mainland.

At the time, the United States still maintained powerful military forces in Thailand and the Philippines. Lt. Gen. John J. Burns, USAF, Commander, Seventh Air Force, and the U.S. Military Advisory Group in Thailand assumed local command of the rescue operation, reporting to Adm. Noel A. M. Gayler, USN, Commander in Chief, Pacific Command. USAF F-4s, A-7s, F-111s, and AC-130s from Thai bases kept watch over the *Mayaguez* and Koh Tang, prevented the ship from being taken elsewhere, and stopped virtually all shipping between the island and the Cambodian mainland. They sank or damaged seven Cambodian gunboats, but they could not prevent a fishing boat from voyaging from Koh Tang to Kompong Som on the mainland, despite their use of rockets and riot control

agents. Reconnaissance flights showed that the boat might contain some of the *Mayaguez* crew. Actually, all of the captured Americans were aboard the fishing boat, but Burns believed that most of them remained either on the ship or on Koh Tang.

U.S. air and ground forces concentrated at U-Tapao, the nearest Thai base to the scene. Among them were USAF CH-53 Knife helicopters from the 56th Special Operations Wing and HH-53 Super Jolly Green Giant choppers from the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron. Both helicopter types bore armor plating and machine guns, and the HH-53s could refuel in the air. One of the CH-53s, loaded with air policemen, crashed on the way to U-Tapao, killing all twenty-three men aboard. Meanwhile, 16 Military Airlift Command C-141s carried more than 1,100 U.S. Marines from Kadena AB in Okinawa and Cubi Point in the Philippines to the Thai base. The movement took twenty-two hours. At the same time, a flotilla of U.S. Navy ships, including the aircraft carrier USS *Coral Sea* and the destroyers USS *Henry B. Wilson* and USS *Harold E. Holt*, voyaged toward the Gulf of Thailand.

General Burns and his staff planned to use about 230 marines to board the *Mayaguez* and assault Koh Tang simultaneously, hoping to find the *Mayaguez* crew members on either the ship or the island. Pacific Command intelligence sources estimated as few as 19 enemy soldiers on the island, although the Defense Intelligence Agency warned that there could be 200 or more. Lt. Col. Randall W. Austin, USMC, Commander of the Marines destined for Koh Tang, reconnoitered the island in a USAF aircraft on May 14 and expected little opposition. Normal amphibious procedure called for a three to one numerical superiority for an attack and a preliminary bombardment. Burns refused preparatory air strikes on Koh Tang because he did not want to hit the *Mayaguez* crewmen he believed to be there.

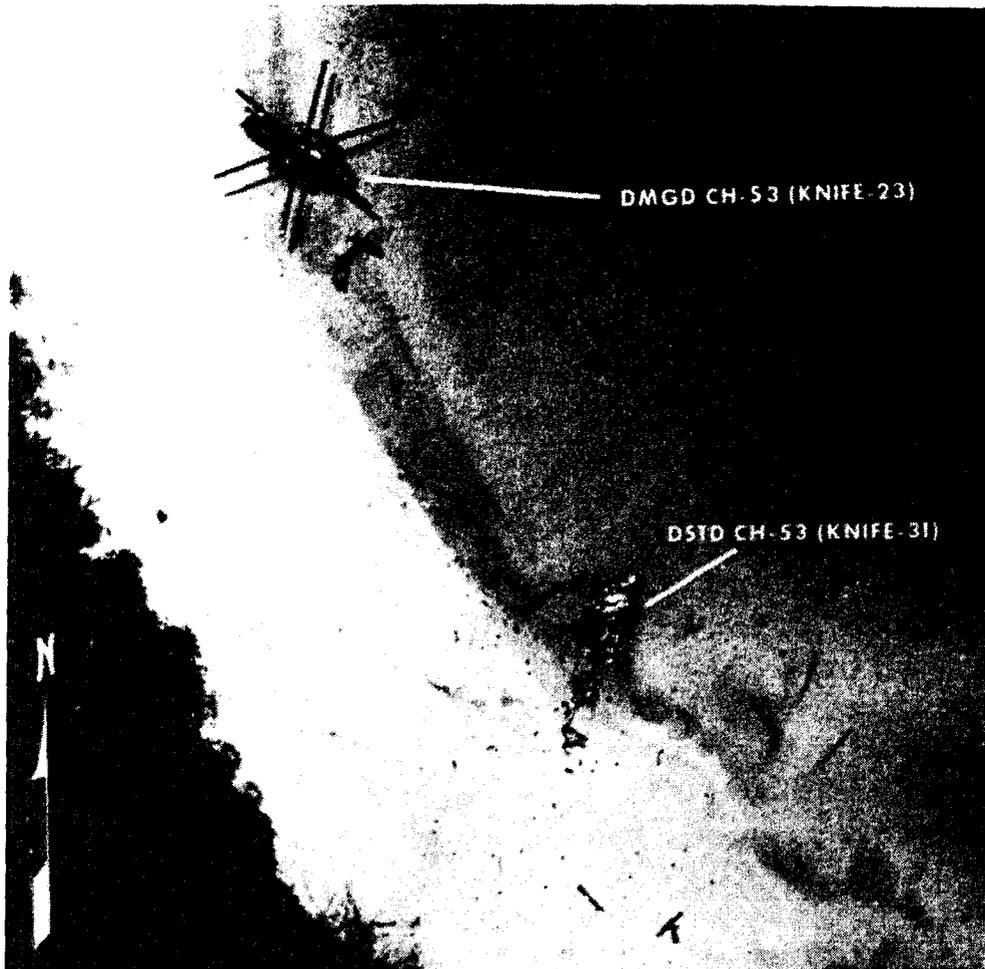
Early on May 15, the rescue operation began. Three USAF helicopters transported forty-eight Marines to the *Holt*. As the *Holt* sailed toward the *Mayaguez*, USAF A-7s dropped tear gas cartridges on the decks of the merchant ship to immobilize any enemy who might be aboard. Shortly afterwards, the *Holt* pulled alongside the *Mayaguez*, and Marines with gas masks boarded

the ship. They found it empty. The Navy personnel could not start the old merchant ship's engines, so the *Holt* attached a line and began towing the ship away from the vicinity of Koh Tang. At this point, the Cambodian government broadcast a message that it was going to release the *Mayaguez*. The message contained no reference to the crew members, who were still in an unknown location. Since General Burns reported that the *Mayaguez* crewmen were probably on Koh Tang, President Ford directed that military operations continue.

Eight USAF helicopters loaded with about 180 Marines attempted to land on the northern side of Koh Tang. Disaster followed. An entire entrenched enemy battalion heavily armed with automatic weapons, rocket launchers, mortars, heavy-caliber machine guns, and grenades opened fire on the big helicopters as they approached. Three went down, including one with most of the Marines' forward air control radio equipment. Four other helicopters suffered severe damage, one of them returning to Thailand without unloading its men. Only one escaped heavy damage. The helicopters delivered about 130 Marines to Koh Tang in the first assault wave.

The Cambodian soldiers outnumbered and outgunned the U.S. Marines, who were fragmented into three groups. They needed air support, but it was slow in coming. A USAF forward air control A-7 flew overhead to direct air strikes but had difficulty communicating with the Marines on Koh Tang. Some of the ground forces contacted the airplane with survival radios. Flying high and fast, the A-7 could not determine the exact location of friendly or enemy forces on the island and refused to direct heavy fire into areas that might contain Americans. General Burns had ordered that supporting fire from the air be limited to small-caliber gunfire or riot-control gas to prevent casualties among possible *Mayaguez* crewmen.

While the fighting on Koh Tang continued, reconnaissance aircraft spotted the *Mayaguez* crewmen in a fishing boat in the Gulf of Thailand. The *Wilson* intercepted the boat and took on the liberated Americans. Now both the *Mayaguez* and its crew were free, but the fighting on Koh Tang continued. Austin needed reinforcements to allow him to fight off the enemy until he could unite his scattered troops and withdraw safely. Burns' superiors debated the need for putting more



Wreckage of U.S. helicopters on Koh Tang.

Marines on an island from which they were to withdraw but eventually decided a second assault wave was necessary, even with seven of the helicopters destroyed or severely damaged. Four surviving helicopters landed Marine reinforcements on Koh Tang around noon, bringing the number of Americans on the island to about 220. A fifth helicopter was hit repeatedly and had to turn back without unloading its troops.

Once General Burns learned that the *Mayaguez* crewmen were not on Koh Tang, he directed heavier air bombardment of the island. A series of F-4, A-7, and AC-130 air strikes reduced enemy fire. American strafing increased, first with 20- and 40-millimeter ammunition and later with 105-millimeter ordnance from the AC-130 gunships. In the late afternoon, Maj. Robert W. Undorf, USAF, arrived in an OV-10 Bronco

aircraft to act as forward air controller. The OV-10, which could fly lower and slower than the A-7, allowed Undorf to pinpoint the positions of the Marines and to direct more accurate gunfire from the USAF fighters and gunships. At about the same time, the two groups of Marines on the western side of the island established a combined perimeter, while a search and rescue HH-53 helicopter evacuated twenty-five Marines isolated on the eastern side of the island. KC-135s and HC-130s orbiting over the Gulf of Thailand refueled the fighters and helicopters. To disrupt the enemy defenders psychologically, a C-130 dropped a huge 15,000-pound BLU-82 bomb, the largest non-nuclear explosive in the American arsenal, on the southern part of the island. It fell far enough away not to injure any Marines, leaving a crater the size of a football field. By then, the aircraft carrier USS *Coral Sea* had arrived, but it used its fighters to hit targets near Kompong Som on the Cambodian mainland in order to prevent their intervention in the island fighting. Other U.S. Navy ships bombarded Koh Tang to support the Marines.

As darkness approached, Burns had very few USAF helicopters left for the extraction of the almost 200 troops remaining on Koh Tang. During the insertions and search and rescue attempts, eleven helicopters had been destroyed or damaged. Only three USAF helicopters accomplished the final extractions, two of them making repeated trips. Picking up the last of the Marines was extremely dangerous, not only because the enemy continued to challenge the helicopters and soldiers with heavy fire, but also because of almost total darkness. Air Force fighters and gunships, directed by additional OV-10s, provided air support for the final extractions. The helicopters took the Marines to the *Coral Sea* and the *Holt*, each equipped with a small helicopter deck. The troops had been on Koh Tang a total of fourteen hours.

The *Mayaguez* rescue operation was a qualified success. The primary purpose of the mission, the rescue of the forty-man *Mayaguez* crew and the return of their ship, had been accomplished. The United States had demonstrated that it would not tolerate the seizure of its ships in international waters and discouraged Khmer Rouge piracy, which had threatened other ships in the Gulf of Thailand. The action

restored, to some extent, the confidence of U.S. allies in the willingness and ability of the administration to respond to Communist challenges, a confidence that had fractured after the fall of the Cambodian and South Vietnamese governments.

The *Mayaguez* operation, on the other hand, aroused a great deal of negative criticism. Counting the helicopter that crashed in preliminary movements in Thailand, the U.S. Air Force lost four CH-53 helicopters. Enemy fire badly damaged eight others. More important than the loss of aircraft was the loss of life. In the assault on Koh Tang, the United States lost eighteen lives, most of them in one destroyed helicopter. The helicopter crash in Thailand took the lives of another twenty-three USAF personnel. In the contingency as a whole, the United States suffered ninety-one casualties, including forty-one dead and fifty wounded, to save the lives of forty men who might have been released without military action. Viewed as a whole, the operation cost more lives than it saved.

Of all the lessons learned in the *Mayaguez* incident, the first was that inadequate intelligence leads to disastrous results. American intelligence failed to locate the *Mayaguez* crewmen, leading planners to think that they were either still on the ship or on nearby Koh Tang, when in fact they were in neither place. American intelligence also failed to predict accurately the strength of the enemy on Koh Tang. Observers, including the USMC commander, who had flown over the island the day before the assault, expected only token resistance. The USAF helicopter crews and Marines flew into an ambush. They should have known better. The USAF and USN aircraft that kept watch over the *Mayaguez* and Koh Tang on May 14 had attracted considerable anti-aircraft gunfire from the island. Given the short suspense, the scanty intelligence is more understandable.

Should American aircraft have bombarded Koh Tang before the Marines attempted to land there? After all, preliminary bombardment was a traditional part of Marine Corps amphibious doctrine. But General Burns believed that *Mayaguez* crewmen were on the tiny island and did not want to endanger them. If he had thought the crew was not on Koh Tang, there would have been no reason for the assault.

Air support for the Marines was initially poor. This was not because the EC-130 airborne command and control center

was too far from the scene of action, as some critics have charged. Operation commanders did not want to endanger the *Mayaguez* crewmen they believed to be on Koh Tang, the enemy destroyed a helicopter that contained most of the Marines' forward air control radio equipment, and the fast and high-flying A-7 could not pinpoint the location of friendly or enemy positions. The OV-10 proved to be a more effective forward air control aircraft than the faster and higher-flying A-7. The poor selection of landing sites also contributed to the inadequate initial air support, because it placed friendly and enemy troops in such close proximity that heavy air strikes would have resulted in fratricide.

The Cambodians abandoned the *Mayaguez* and released its crew at the same time the costly assault on Koh Tang was beginning, suggesting that military action was premature and unnecessary. There was no previously prepared operational plan to build on or consult. The crisis began on May 12, and President Ford sent American men into battle three days later. He could have allowed more time for diplomacy to work, but he wanted to rescue the *Mayaguez* crewmen before they could be taken to the mainland. Even if the United States had had diplomatic relations with the new Cambodian regime, there was no assurance that it exercised full control over the Khmer Rouge forces on Koh Tang and at Kompong Som.

Riot-control gas, used extensively in the *Mayaguez* operation, was not very effective as a military instrument. It did not prevent the fishing boat with the *Mayaguez* crew from leaving Koh Tang and reaching the Cambodian mainland on May 14. Gas played no useful part in the retaking of the *Mayaguez*, because the ship was empty when it was boarded. A change in the wind made the gas useless on Koh Tang during the fighting there, blowing it out to sea.

The BLU-82 "daisy-cutter" bomb had little effect on the battle on Koh Tang. It was dropped far enough from the Marines to avoid injuring them, but it was also far enough from the battle line to make little difference there. It had been designed to clear helicopter landing zones in the jungles of Southeast Asia and had been very effective for that purpose, but that was not how it was used on Koh Tang. Dropped late in the fighting, the big bomb had little more than a psychological effect

during the operation, although the football-field size area it cleared might have also contained some enemy troops and weapons. More effective were the air strikes of A-7s, F-4s, and AC-130s.

Although the initial U.S. air attacks from the *Coral Sea* on the Cambodian mainland occurred just before President Ford learned that the *Mayaguez* crew was free, they continued afterwards. Some critics have suggested that the subsequent air strikes were useless bluster, because the purpose of the operation had already been achieved. The air raids were designed not to free the crew but to prevent hostile Cambodian forces on the mainland from joining in the battle on Koh Tang, which was not yet over.

The United States suffered strained relations with Thailand as a result of the *Mayaguez* operation. Anxious to avoid confrontations with its new Communist neighbors, the Thai government officially protested the use of its territory to stage U.S. attacks against Cambodia. For diplomatic reasons, one C-5 and thirteen C-141s transported all remaining U.S. Marines in Thailand back to Okinawa and the Philippines within twenty-four hours of the assault on Koh Tang. The Thai government expelled all U.S. military forces from Thailand within a year, but that decision had been made in March of 1975. The *Mayaguez* affair was the last major American military operation in Southeast Asia.