

THE VIETNAMESE AIR FORCE, 1951-1975, AN ANALYSIS OF ITS ROLE IN COMBAT and FOURTEEN HOURS AT KOH TANG



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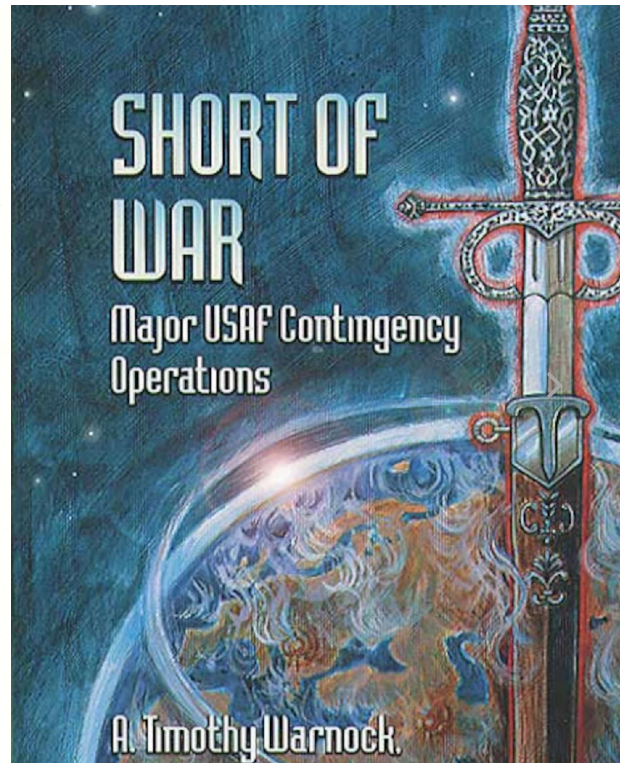


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1975 - The Mayaguez Incident



The Mayaguez incident took place in the Gulf of Thailand in May 1975. It began when Cambodian gunboats stopped and boarded the American cargo ship SS Mayaguez on 12 May, one month after the end of the Vietnam War. The Cambodians took the crew prisoner and moved the ship toward Koh Tang Island off the Cambodian coast. Considered an act of piracy by the United States Government, the U.S. military received orders to locate the seized vessel. After a U.S. Navy P-3 Orion located the ship off Koh Tang on 13 May, two USAF F-111 aircraft arrived on scene. That night, an AC-130 Spectre gunship circled over the island, keeping an eye on the situation. Throughout the day and into the evening, Cambodian gunboats travelled to and from the ship, the island, and the Cambodian mainland. U.S. and Cambodian forces exchanged fire and several gunboats were damaged or destroyed. On 14 May, USAF aircraft continued strafing enemy gunboats and vessels in the area to prevent them from reaching the mainland. However, one fishing vessel that made it to the mainland, and unbeknownst to U.S. forces at the time, carried the crew of the Mayaguez.

Early on 15 May, after diplomatic efforts had failed to secure the crew's release, U.S. forces received orders to seize the Mayaguez and recover the crew. The operation, hastily planned by Seventh Air Force (7 AF), initially included USAF Security Forces to secure the ship and locate the crew, who were thought to be held on the island. However, one of those helicopters crashed, killing its Air Force crew and all 19 Security Forces personnel aboard. When that happened, planners decided to use U.S. Marines. Although USAF C-141 Starlifters transported the Marines to staging areas in Thailand, USAF helicopters would play the major role in the operation. A total of 14 USAF helicopters, both HH-53 Jolly Green and CH-53 Knife helicopters were used. The hastily put together plan called for three helicopters to transport U.S. Marines to the destroyer, USS Harold E. Holt, which would then seize the Mayaguez. Eight additional helicopters would transport more Marines to two landing zones on the Eastern and Western sides of the northern tip of Koh Tang Island. The two landing zones were separated by a thin island neck about 1,100 feet across. However, because of the quick planning, the assault force had little intelligence on the number of Cambodian forces on the island and whether or not the crew was being held there. Still, a rescue attempt had to be made. As it turned out, the crew was not on the island and Cambodian forces were much stronger and entrenched than expected. Approximately 230 Marines boarded helicopters for the assault on the island and the ship. They did so with little knowledge or expectation of what they would find.

Three helicopters delivered their troops to the USS Holt, who then successfully boarded the Mayaguez and found it abandoned by the Cambodians. While that part of the assault went as planned, the same could not be said for the assault on Koh Tang Island. As planned, the helicopters attempted simultaneous insertions on the Eastern and Western beaches at dawn. On the Western beach, Knife 21 and Knife 22 made their approach and came under intense enemy fire that included automatic weapons, rockets, rocket propelled grenades, mortars, and unrelenting small arms fire. As soon as the Marines clambered off Knife 21, the helicopter struggled out to sea but crashed one mile off shore. Knife 22 also attempted to insert its Marines but came under such intense fire it aborted its landing and sustained so much damage that it barely made it back to the Thai mainland. Knife 32 then came into the landing zone, and while it managed to unload its Marines, it sustained such severe damage that it too barely made it back to the mainland carrying a critically injured flight mechanic.

While the situation was grim on the Western beach, a far worse situation developed on the Eastern beach as the first helicopters, Knife 23 and Knife 31, came in. The Cambodians held their fire as the two helicopters approached. But as soon as Knife 23 hovered over the beach, the enemy opened up with such intense fire that Knife 23 crashed onto the beach. Somehow, 20 Marines and an Air Force photographer scrambled off the downed helicopter and into the trees while the crew powered down the helicopter. As Knife 23 was crash landing on the beach, its pilot saw Knife 31 burst into flames in mid-air. A direct hit by a rocket or rocket propelled grenade severely injured Knife 31's pilot and killed the co-pilot and the helicopter went down at the edge of the beach in the water. Still, 18 of the 26 Americans on board survived that crash and exited the helicopter only to come under intense enemy fire as they tried to swim out to sea out of range of the enemy's weapons. All told, 13 men lost their lives in the crash of Knife 31. In spite of the tragedy unfolding on the Eastern beach, the co-pilot of Knife 23, Lt John Lucas, as well as a Marine forward air controller who had survived the crash of Knife 31, used their survival radios to call in close air support, provided by USAF A-7s, which attacked enemy positions in the thin strip of land between the two beaches. One hour after the assault began, only 54 Americans were on the island and 14 others had perished.

Soon, the last three Air Force helicopters carrying the initial wave of Marines approached the Western beach. While under intense enemy fire, Jolly 42 and Jolly 43 managed to unload their Marines. Jolly 41 made several attempts to land, but aborted because of enemy fire and left to refuel. At that point, there were 109 Marines and 5 Air Force crewmembers on the island, pinned down by heavy enemy fire. One of the helicopters that had delivered Marines to retake the Mayaguez, Jolly 13, orbited off Koh Tang to conduct Search and Rescue. After Knife 23 and Knife 31 went down on the Eastern beach, Jolly 13 attempted a rescue but the enemy fire was so intense and the helicopter damaged so severely that it aborted its rescue attempt and struggled back to the mainland. After the failed rescue attempt, USAF A-7s, F-4s and a Spectre AC-130 gunship stepped up their strafing and bombing attacks on the enemy positions. Meanwhile, Jolly 41, which had refueled, returned to try and unload more Marines on the Western beach. After several attempts, Jolly 41 managed to unload all but 5 of its Marines, but it too returned to its staging base so severely damaged that it could not be flown again.

With the departure of Jolly 41, the initial assault wave was complete. There were 131 Marines and 5 Airmen on the island. 82 were on the Western beach, 29 were south of the Western beach, and 25 were trapped near the Eastern beach. Fifteen Americans were dead and eight of the nine helicopters in the first wave had either crashed or were so severely damaged they could not immediately fly again. Perhaps most tragic of all was that three hours after the initial assault began, a Thai fishing boat flying a white flag approached the island. On board the boat was the unharmed crew of the Mayaguez. Soon, the crew was safe on board the USS Henry B. Wilson, and the focus of the Koh Tang Island operation suddenly shifted from an assault to evacuating U.S. forces from the island. However, five additional helicopters were already en-route with reinforcements. They proceeded with their mission because the landing zones needed to be secured before extracting the Marines and Airmen. Also, the aircraft carrier the USS

Skip to main content (Press Enter)! It could support the operation. Furthermore, now that it was understood that the crew was not on the island, the close air support aircraft could strike enemy positions without fearing for the crew's safety although they

Soon, the five helicopters with reinforcements arrived over Koh Tang. The first, Knife 52, approached the Eastern beach but aborted its landing and flew over the island from east to west but had to return to the mainland because of severe damage to its fuel tanks. The four other helicopters then approached the Western beach. Knife 51 and Jolly 43 successfully offloaded their Marines. Knife 51 also evacuated five wounded Marines and returned to base. After unloading its Marines, Jolly 43 conducted a mid-air refueling and then attempted to rescue on Eastern beach. Finally, the remaining two helicopters, Jolly 11 and Jolly 12, made their approach. Jolly 11 successfully unloaded its Marines and then moved to a position where its weapons could provide cover for Jolly 12. Jolly 12 delivered its cargo of Marines and evacuated wounded. Much like the previous two helicopters, Jolly 12 sped to the mainland with its cargo of wounded marines, while Jolly 11 joined Jolly 43 in search and rescue activities on the Eastern beach. However, the enemy fire remained so intense and Jolly 43 suffered so much damage that it was forced to abort and flew on one engine to the USS Coral Sea, escorted by Jolly 11. There it underwent quick repairs to get back in the fight. At that point, the only remaining operational helicopters were Jolly 11, Jolly 12, Jolly 44, and Knife 51.

After more strafing by U.S. aircraft, Jolly 11 attempted once again to rescue the 25 Americans trapped near the Eastern beach, while Jolly 12 provided suppressing fire and attempted to locate a Marine who had been seen near the wreckage of Knife 23. Knife 51, which had returned from dropping off wounded Marines on the mainland, also assisted in the third rescue attempt on the Eastern beach. Although under intense and unremitting fire from as close as 50 meters, Jolly 11 landed on the beach and the Marines and Airmen were able to board the helicopter. It then sped toward the USS Coral Sea. As soon as Jolly 11 departed the area, an Air Force C-130 flew over the island and dropped a 15,000 pound bomb on the neck between the two beach landing zones. It was followed by an AC-130 gunship that sprayed the area with fire as Jolly 12 and Knife 51 attempted to locate the Marine seen near the wreckage of Knife 23. Unfortunately, the man could not be located and the helicopters abandoned the search. After landing on the USS Coral Sea, Jolly 11's crew realized their helicopter had sustained so much damage that it could not be flown again. That left only three helicopters, the repaired Jolly 43 as well as Jolly 44 and Knife 51, to extract the remaining Marines from the island. The burden of extracting the more than 200 Americans on the island at night would fall to those three USAF helicopters and their crews.

Night had fallen as the three helicopters arrived over the Western beach. Knife 51 was the first into the landing zone and under intense fire from Cambodian forces managed to load a full complement of Marines and depart for the Coral Sea. Next, Jolly 43 came in and boarded 54 Marines, more than double the standard load. As Jolly 43 strained for the Coral Sea, Jolly 44 loaded more Marines and headed out to sea. Approximately 73 Marines remained on the island in darkness, surrounded by Cambodian forces and in a desperate situation. The pilot of Jolly 44, 1st Lt Robert D. Blough, decided to unload his Marines at the USS Holt, which was much closer than the USS Coral Sea. However, landing a helicopter on the deck of a destroyer at night posed a significant risk. In addition, Jolly 44 had no landing lights. Lt Blough made three attempts to land on the destroyer, and when he finally succeeded, the rotor blades of the helicopter came within two feet of the destroyer's superstructure.

At that point, the ground commander radioed the OV-10s that his position was in danger of being overrun, and Jolly 44 raced back to the Western beach while an AC-130 pounded the area. Jolly 44 took on more Marines but received such damage that it was out of the fight by the time it landed on the Coral Sea. Twenty-nine Marines remained on the Western beach for extraction. Knife 51 was the next to return to the beach while the AC-130 continued to provide suppressing fire near the landing zones. After boarding 27 Marines, crewmember TSgt Wayne Fisk left the helicopter and searched the darkened tree line for any remaining Marines. He found two and the three men raced back to the helicopter which then departed the beach. Finally, all the Marines and Airmen had been evacuated. All told, 15 had been killed, 3 were missing in action, and 50 were wounded.

The Mayaguez rescue operation was undertaken with hasty planning, little intelligence and in the face of a vastly more entrenched and powerful enemy than expected. Nevertheless, the crew and their ship were recovered and 230 Marines were inserted and evacuated from the island, something that could not have been done without the dedication, persistence, and bravery of the USAF helicopter forces in the face of intense and almost overwhelming enemy fire. Two Air Force crewmembers were killed during the operations and six were wounded. Four crewmen received the Air Force Cross and two others received the Silver Star. As Pacific Air Forces Commander General Louis L. Wilson Jr., wrote: "The professionalism, perseverance, and courage of American fighting men at Koh Tang was exemplified by USAF helicopter crewmembers who, despite overwhelmingly unfavorable conditions, delivered, reinforced, and then extracted some 230 Marines at the island." The hasty response of the U.S. Government to the seizure and Mayaguez occurred as a way to restore some measure of prestige to the nation after the end of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam in April, 1975. Although the military operation was not a "model of military strategy for future operations," the recovery of the ship and its crew sparked the imagination of the American people and was "greeted in the U.S. with nearly universal acceptance and even exuberance." As Gen Wilson concluded, "the United States, as a nation, had reaffirmed its will to act decisively."

For more information see:

The USAF study by Captain Thomas D. DesBrisay, [Fourteen Hours at Koh Tang](#), USAF Southeast Asia Monograph Series, Volume III.

[Crisis in Southeast Asia: Mayaguez Rescue](#) by Daniel L. Haulman, from the publication: Short of War: Major USAF Contingency Operations 1947-1997.

[The Mayaguez Rescue](#), by George M. Watson, Jr. from Air Force Magazine July 2009.

For additional information see the [National Museum of the USAF](#).

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