

The *Mayaguez* Incident: Near Disaster at Koh Tang

CSC 1998

Subject Area - History

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: The *Mayaguez* Incident: Near Disaster at Koh Tang

Author: Major Mark J. Toal

Thesis: The tactical leadership, initiative, and individual heroism at Koh Tang overcame poor operational command and control to narrowly avert a strategic disaster.

Discussion: The *Mayaguez* incident is a clear example in which the tactical, operational, and strategic level of war merged: where tactical actions had strategic implications. The strategic objectives determined by the National Command Authorities were to recover the ship and crew and in doing so demonstrate U.S. strength and resolve. Discussions in the National Security Council meetings clearly prioritized the objectives, the most important of which was to demonstrate to the world that the U.S. remained an international power willing and able to defend its overseas interests.

Poor operational command and control during planning created real problems that would plague the operations until its conclusion. From an execution point of view, these problems were developed by a combination of several factors that included:

1. A joint task force, composed of units from three different services, was hastily formed and tasked to rapidly conduct a complex operation with strategic implications.
2. Command and control failures during planning caused by the absence of centralized leadership to unify the effort and form a cohesive task force.
3. Faulty dissemination of crucial intelligence to the tactical planners and operators which resulted in a flawed scheme of maneuver.

These factors created a planning environment characterized by chaos and confusion which accentuated the fog and friction of the operation which nearly resulted in defeat.

Chaotic, confused, and incomplete planning based on faulty intelligence proved to be a recipe for disaster. During the operation, the same problems of command and control that plagued it during planning were present to a greater degree and accentuated the fog and friction of the battle. At the operational level, there was little situational awareness, and no one was in command or coordinating the battlespace. Throughout the fight, there were occasions when the Marines were nearly overrun by the numerically superior, well-trained, and disciplined enemy force. During the fourteen hour battle seemingly minor tactical events influenced the outcome. The tactical leadership, initiative, and individual heroism of countless servicemen overcame significant command and control obstacles to prevent tactical defeat and strategic failure.

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE 1998		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-1998 to 00-00-1998	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Mayaguez Incident: Near Disaster at Koh Tang				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Marine Corps War College, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Quantico, VA, 22134-5067				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Superior technology and firepower did not dominate the battlefield at Koh Tang. The fighting ability, courage, and steadfast determination of Marines and airmen prevailed to achieve strategic objectives. Technology cannot replace the intangible factors that influence all levels of war.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	i
I. AN IMPORTANT SUCCESS	1
II. SETTING THE STAGE	3
Cambodian Intentions	
The Strategic Environment	
III. 12-14 MAY 1975: AN ISSUE OF NATIONAL PRESTIGE	9
Tuesday, 13 May	
Wednesday, 14 May	
IV. A TRAIN WRECK IN THE MAKING	17
Organizing a Joint Task Force	
Command and Control	
Poor Dissemination of Intelligence	
Scheme of Maneuver	
V. 15 MAY 1975: A FIERCE BATTLE AND NEAR DISASTER	29
First Wave	
Second Wave	
The Extraction	
VI. TACTICAL LEADERSHIP AND BRAVERY PREVENTS DISASTER	41
Command and Control Obstacles	
Breaking Through Friction	
VII. LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE	47
FIGURES:	
1. Location of Mayaguez and Crew 12-15 May 1975	49
2. Map of Koh Tang	50
3. Military Chain of Command	51
4. Enemy Disposition 15 May 1975	52
5. Scheme of Maneuver	53
6. Koh Tang Rescue Operations	54
BIBLIOGRAPHY	55

AN IMPORTANT SUCCESS

Inscribed on the 140 black granite panels of the Vietnam War Memorial are the names of 58,183 Americans who sacrificed their lives in the service of their country. The last eighteen names are those who died in the final combat action in the long and bitter war in Southeast Asia and are unknown to most Americans. These eighteen servicemen did not actually die in Vietnam but rather on a small and jungled island in the Gulf of Thailand named Koh Tang, where a small, forgotten, and yet savage battle was fought to achieve geopolitical objectives. On 12 May 1975, Cambodian naval forces seized a U.S. merchant ship, the *SS Mayaguez*, along with its unarmed civilian crew of forty men. The U.S. responded with swift military action that resulted in a ferocious fourteen hour battle on Koh Tang and the successful recovery of the ship and all crew members. After failure in Southeast Asia, a successful military operation was important to the U.S. As the authors of *Crisis Resolution: Presidential Decision Making in the Mayaguez and Korean Confrontations* observed, "For the first time in several years, the utility of force was demonstrated in a successful U.S. military operation. That success generated a moral uplift for the American people, restored a belief in American credibility, and demonstrated a strategic resolve worthy of a great power."¹ Across the nation, media accounts declared victory. The *Atlanta Journal* opined, "There seems to be a feeling of joy that at last we have won one."² The *New York Times* announced a "domestic and foreign triumph."³ *Time* stated that the military resolution of the *Mayaguez* incident "significantly changed the image of U.S. power in the world...."⁴ *U.S. News and World Report* responded, "President Ford's fast and forceful response to a challenge...was meant as a signal to U.S. allies and adversaries. In essence: Don't take us lightly."⁵ What was omitted from these media accounts was how narrowly the Marines on Koh

¹ Richard J. Head, Frisco W. Short, and Robert C. McFarlane, *Crisis Resolution: Presidential Decision Making in the Mayaguez and Korean Confrontations* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1978), 148.

² Atlanta Journal quoted in "A Strong but Risky Show of Force," *Time*, 26 May 1975, 18.

³ The New York Times May 16, 1975, quoted in "A Strong but Risky Show of Force," *Time*, 26 May 1975, May 16, 1975.

⁴ "A Strong but Risky Show of Force," *Time*, 26 May 1975, 9.

⁵ "New Test For U.S. Why Ford Moved So Fast," *U.S. News and World Report*, 19 May 1975, 19-22.

Tang escaped defeat in fighting against a well-disciplined, tough, and numerically superior force. At one point in the battle, the Marines were so close to being overrun that a company commander turned to his company gunnery sergeant and said, "Gunny, I think we've had it."⁶ One can only speculate the media accounts, the domestic and international reaction, and the strategic implications had a Marine company been overrun, and its members either killed or taken hostage by a military force viewed as "fourth rate." Although the strategic objectives were accomplished, at the tactical level it was a very close fight that nearly resulted in defeat and thus strategic failure. The *Mayaguez* incident is a clear example of a situation in which the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war merged; where tactical actions had strategic implications. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate that the tactical leadership, initiative, and individual heroism at Koh Tang overcame poor operational command and control to narrowly avert a strategic disaster.

⁶ James H. Davis quoted from an interview with John F. Guilmartin, Jr., *A Very Short War. The Mayaguez and the Battle of Koh Tang* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 133.

SETTING THE STAGE

On 12 May 1975, the U.S. merchant ship, *SS Mayaguez*, was enroute from Hong Kong to Sattahip, Thailand, with a containerized cargo of commercial products to include food, clothing, medical supplies and other general cargo.⁷ The ship was transiting a customary sea lane and trade route through international waters approximately sixty miles southwest of the Cambodian port of Kompong Som in the vicinity of the Cambodian island of Poulo Wai. At 1410 local time (0310 Eastern Standard Time [EST]) the *Mayaguez* was challenged by a Cambodian gunboat with several rounds across the starboard bow. Minutes later the ship was boarded by seven armed men carrying AK-47s and rocket propelled grenade launchers (RPGs).⁸ The Cambodians seized the ship and took the unharmed crew prisoner. At 1418 (0318 EST) the *Mayaguez* radioed a mayday distress call which stated, "Have been fired upon and boarded by Cambodian armed forces at 9 degrees 48 minutes N and 102 degrees 52 minutes E. Ship is being towed to an unknown Cambodian port."⁹ Mr. John Neal of the Delta Exploration Company in Jakarta, Indonesia, received the distress call and forwarded the information to the American Embassy Jakarta. At 1612 (0512 EST) the National Military Command Center (NMCC) in Washington D.C. received its initial report from the American Embassy Jakarta.

After the seizure a Cambodian gunboat led the *Mayaguez* to an island, Poulo Wai, where it anchored for the night. The next morning the *Mayaguez* set sail toward Cambodia and anchored a mile off the northeast tip of Koh Tang, located approximately thirty miles south of Kompong Som, Cambodia. (Figure 1 and 2)

⁷ Head, Short, and McFarlane, 101.

⁸ Major George R. Dunham, and Colonel David A. Quinlan, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Bitter End* (Washington D.C: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1990), 238.

⁹ US Congress, House, Subcommittee on International Political and Military Affairs, Committee on International Relations, *Seizure of the Mayaguez*, Hearings on the *Mayaguez* Incident, pt. 4, *Report of the Comptroller General of the United States*, 94th Cong., 2d sess., October 4, 1976, 16. (Hereafter referred to as *GAO Report*)

Cambodian Intentions

Cambodian motives to seize the *Mayaguez* were unclear during the crisis and remain so today. On 17 April 1975, the radical communist Khmer Rouge overthrew the Lon Nol government and seized the capitol, Phnom Penh. With the exception of the mass executions occurring in Cambodia, little was known about the Khmer Rouge. The U.S. did not recognize the newly established government and did not know the identity of the actual leaders.¹⁰ It was also not known whether the ship was seized by order of the Khmer Rouge or on the initiative of a local commander.¹¹

There were indications that the Khmer Rouge wanted to establish their nationalist credentials and legitimacy by extending their territorial waters ninety miles offshore to include several contested islands in the Gulf of Thailand which Cambodia had historically claimed.¹² These islands included Poulo Wai and Koh Tang. Just days before the *Mayaguez* seizure, there were four incidents of Cambodian aggression against foreign vessels in international waters:

- May 2: Capture and subsequent release of several Thai fishing boats
- May 4: Firing upon and attempt to board a South Korean ship
- May 6: Seizure of several South Vietnamese small craft
- May 7: Detention of a Panamanian ship for 36 hours.¹³

These incidents against vessels of various countries support the notion that Cambodian aggression was not aimed exclusively at the U.S.

While Cambodian intentions were unclear, the Ford Administration generally believed the *Mayaguez* seizure was an act of provocation and intimidation aimed at humiliating the U.S. Senator Barry Goldwater captured the feeling when he referred to the incident as a "little half-assed country...taking a shot at us."¹⁴ In his book, *A Very Short War*, John Guilmartin makes the

¹⁰ Head, Short, and McFarlane, 103.

¹¹ Lamb, 91. The idea of a local commander taking action without governmental sponsorship was proposed by White House photographer David Kennerly during a National Security Council meeting.

¹² GAO Report, 16.

¹³ Head, Short, and McFarlane, 103.

¹⁴ "A Strong but Risky Show of Force," *Time*, 26 May 1975, 18.

following point that suggests the Khmer Rouge would have preferred to avoid conflict with the U.S.:

As Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries, the new rulers of Cambodia no doubt welcomed an opportunity to embarrass the United States. But having captured Phnom Penh less than a month before, they were surely preoccupied with consolidating their power. It is therefore unlikely that the leaders were willing to go to any great trouble or run any great risk to do so.¹⁵

Even if the motives were unclear, it was clear that the Khmer Rouge took subsequent control of the ship and crew and showed no indication of freeing them. The captain of the *Mayaguez*, Captain Charles T. Miller, stated later in congressional testimony that once it became apparent that the crew and ship were American, the Cambodians received orders by direct radio link with the authorities in Phnom Penh.¹⁶ The Khmer Rouge accused the ship of spying and ordered the captors to transport the crew to the Cambodian mainland. President Ford and his advisors correctly assumed that the Khmer Rouge would oppose with military force any efforts to retake the ship and crew.¹⁷

The Strategic Environment

From a current perspective, the seizure of the *Mayaguez* may not appear to have major strategic implications. However, taken in the context of the events of the time, the situation loomed much larger. In the global arena, U.S. reliability as an ally and its ability to play a positive leadership role in the international affairs were being questioned domestically and internationally alike.¹⁸ The prestige and credibility of the U.S. as a superpower was challenged. In general, America's morale was low.

The U.S. had just concluded an exhaustive and controversial ten year conflict in Southeast Asia that had divided the American people. On 17 April 1975, the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh fell to the communist Khmer Rouge regime, and just two weeks later on 30 April the South

¹⁵ John F. Guilmartin, Jr., *A Very Short War. The Mayaguez and the Battle of Koh Tang* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 35-36.

¹⁶ Lamb, 188.

¹⁷ Guilmartin, 36.

¹⁸ Head, Short, and McFarlane, 102.

Vietnamese capital of Saigon was overrun by North Vietnamese forces. U.S. military forces conducted consecutive operations to evacuate Americans and allied personnel from both capitals with Operations Eagle Pull and Frequent Wind respectfully. Although these operations were successful, the American retreat from two third world countries overrun by communist forces was a humiliating blow to national prestige. The Phnom Penh and Saigon evacuations virtually ended the presence of the U.S. in Indochina and marked an end to thirty years of determined efforts by successive U.S. presidents to keep Indochina noncommunist. The U.S. had clearly suffered a strategic loss.

In the spring of 1975, tensions with the belligerent North Koreans were rising, and the U.S. was concerned about the likelihood of conflict on the Korean Peninsula. During April 1975, the South Koreans had discovered and destroyed several tunnels constructed by the North Koreans under the Demilitarized Zone. The South Korean President Park Chung Hee, as well as the Japanese, predicted a North Korean invasion before 1976. The North Korean dictator, Kim Il Sung, believed that U.S. resolve was weak based upon previous U.S. responses to North Korean aggression.¹⁹ In January 1968, the North Koreans had seized the *USS Pueblo* and its crew. In April 1969, North Korea shot down an American EC-121 surveillance aircraft in international waters/airspace killing all aboard. In both cases, the U.S. responded with diplomacy and little resolve. In his memoirs, Henry Kissinger expressed the opinion that the U.S. response to the EC-121 crisis was weak and indecisive which "demoralized friends and emboldened adversaries."²⁰

During 1975, the U.S. was also focused on the Mideast peace process and attempted to broker an agreement for the disengagement of Israeli and Egyptian forces in the Sinai. The 1973 OPEC oil embargo and the resultant escalation of oil prices had pushed most Western economies into a recession. Additionally, the U.S. continued to be fully engaged in the Cold War against the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea.

¹⁹ Lamb, 72.

²⁰ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years*, (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1979), 316, 318, 321.

On the domestic front, the country was still reeling from Watergate, and only nine months had passed since the resignation of President Nixon. Consequently, Gerald R. Ford became the first president appointed to office who did not have a political mandate from the people.²¹ The public confidence and the prestige of the Office of the President of the United States was arguably the lowest since the Civil War, and Ford knew that it would be an enormous task to restore confidence in the presidency at home and abroad.²²

The seizure of the *Mayaguez* offered an opportunity for the US to make a political statement to the world with a tough response. With recent setbacks in Indochina and the Middle East and rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula, Ford had sought an opportunity to demonstrate to the world that the U.S. was not a paper tiger and was willing and able to defend its overseas interests.²³ Ford was determined not to preside over another humiliation.²⁴ Even before the seizure of the *Mayaguez*, *Time* quoted an unnamed U.S. government policy planner as stating, "There's quite a bit of agreement around here that it wouldn't be a bad thing if the other side goes a step or two too far in trying to kick us while we're down. It would give us a chance to kick them back - hard."²⁵ The *Mayaguez* incident gave the Ford Administration the opportunity they sought. With U.S. political and military credibility at stake, there was substantial risk of serious damage with strategic implications. As Guilmartin said, "Although the scale of the action was not, the stakes were high."²⁶

21 Head, Short, and McFarlane, 102.

22 Ibid, 71.

23 "A Strong but Risky Show of Force," *Time*, 26 May 1975, 9.

24 Head, Short, and McFarlane, 71.

25 "A Strong but Risky Show of Force," *Time*, 26 May 1975, 9.

26 Guilmartin, 3.

12-14 MAY 1975: AN ISSUE OF NATIONAL PRESTIGE

On Monday 12 May 1975, at 0512 Eastern Standard Time (1612 12 May, Thailand time) the NMCC in Washington, D.C., was alerted by the initial report from the American Embassy Jakarta on the *Mayaguez* seizure. This report initiated a flurry of activity at the National Command Authority (NCA) and started a chain of events that would conclude about 100 hours later. At 0530 Lieutenant General Brent Skowcroft, USAF, Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs, notified Ford. At 0646 the acting Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), General David Jones, USAF, was contacted. The Chairman, General George S. Brown, was in Europe at the time. By 0730 reconnaissance aircraft were ordered by Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to search for the *Mayaguez*, and within 90 minutes P-3 surveillance aircraft from Thailand and the Philippines were launched. The nearest surface ships were also ordered to proceed to the area and soon afterward the escort destroyer *USS Harold E. Holt* and the supply ship *USS Vega* were steaming at best speed west to the Gulf of Thailand. At 0740 Skowcroft and a Central Intelligence Agency representative briefed Ford at his usual daily morning intelligence brief. The Secretary of State and National Security Advisor, Dr. Henry Kissinger, was notified at his 0800 staff meeting and immediately called the president. At 0923 Ford, Kissinger, and Skowcroft met in the Oval Office to discuss the situation. During this meeting, Ford called for the National Security Council (NSC) to meet at 1205, almost nine hours after the seizure.

It is important to note that Ford implicitly understood the seriousness of the *Mayaguez* seizure before the first scheduled NSC meeting. Ford stated in an interview after the crisis, "My feeling that the seizure of a U.S. vessel and crew, especially by a country which had so humiliated us,

was a very serious matter."²⁷ Ford was well aware of the similarities of the current crisis and the North Korean seizure of the U.S. intelligence-gathering ship *Pueblo*. On 23 January 1968, when North Korean gunboats seized the *Pueblo*, local US military forces were present but were not used promptly. By the time the Johnson Administration had acted, the ship was in a North Korean port and the crew were being held at an unknown location in North Korea. As Guilmartin noted, "The deep humiliation inflicted by brutal North Korean exploitation of *Pueblo's* crew and the diplomatic price of securing their release had left their mark."²⁸ In dealing with the *Mayaguez* incident, Ford, Kissinger, and Skowcroft were foremost influenced by the *Pueblo* incident and subsequent acts of North Korean aggression. During all four NSC meetings that were held during the *Mayaguez* crisis, North Korea was a frequently discussed topic. Ford believed if the *Mayaguez* crew were taken to the Cambodian mainland, they would be virtually irretrievable by military action. It was clear that the feasibility of a military response was decreasing with time. Personally taking charge of the situation, Ford understood that immediate action was necessary to resolve the crisis favorably. He wanted to prevent another *Pueblo* incident and to demonstrate to the world, especially North Korea, that the U.S. was still a superpower and that aggression would not go unpunished.²⁹

The NSC met at 1205 with eleven participants.³⁰ During the meeting, Kissinger was adamant that the greatest issue was not international piracy, but the global perceptions of American power and resolve.³¹ In the meeting, Kissinger was quoted as stating, "At some point the United States

27 Lamb, 68.

28 Guilmartin, 37.

29 Lamb, 84, 245-286.

30 Ibid, 80. The participants included the President, Vice President Nelson D. Rockefeller, Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State; James Schlesinger, Secretary of Defense; William Colby, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency; LtGen Skowcroft, Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs; Robert Ingersoll, Deputy Secretary of State; William Clemens, Deputy Secretary of Defense; Donald Rumsfeld, Assistant to the President; and W. Richard Smyser, senior National Security Council staff officer for East Asia.

31 Ibid, 81.

must draw the line. This is not our idea of the best situation. It is not our choice. But we must act upon it now, and act firmly."³²

During the initial NCS meeting, the president directed the following:

1. Deliver a strong diplomatic protest to the Cambodian government via the People's Republic of China.
2. Redirect the USS Coral Sea, enroute to Australia, to the area of seizure.
3. Assemble an Amphibious Task Force in Philippines.
4. Maintain continuous photo reconnaissance of the area.
5. Issue a public statement (designed to reach the Khmer Rouge) reporting the facts and noting the US demand for the immediate return of the ship and crew.

Most importantly, the strategic objectives were determined in the initial NSC meeting to be: (1) to recover of the ship and its crew; (2) to avoid the possibility of a hostage negotiation (i.e., prevent a reenactment of the *Pueblo* incident); and (3) to demonstrate American power and resolution with a forceful response as an example to the international community that the U.S. has the capability and firm resolve to protect its interests.³³ Participants noted that the first two objectives could be contradictory. Ford summed up the dilemma when he asked his press secretary, Ron Nesson, a hypothetical question, "Would you go in there and bomb the Cambodian boat and take a chance with Americans being killed?"³⁴ Kissinger seemed to prioritize the strategic objectives when he was quoted as stating that the lives of the *Mayaguez* crew "must unfortunately be a second consideration."³⁵ The Ford Administration actions suggest that the foremost objective was to demonstrate American power with a forceful response at the expense of the crew's safety, if necessary.³⁶

At 2116 a P-3 positively identified the *Mayaguez* anchored near Poulo Wai. Once located, it remained under constant surveillance throughout the crisis. Thirty minutes after the initial sighting, the ship was observed to weigh anchor and proceed toward Kompong Som.

32 Kissinger quoted in Gerald R. Ford, *A Time to Heal*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979), 276.

33 Guilmartin states that another objective was to "avoid the possibility of a hostage negotiations," 38.

34 Ron Nesson, *It Sure Looks Different from the Inside* (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1978), 118.

35 "Ford's Rescue Operations." *Newsweek*, 26 May 1975, 16.

36 Lamb, 164.

Tuesday, 13 May

On 13 May CINCPACFLT ordered the aircraft carrier *USS Coral Sea* and the guided missile destroyer *USS Henry W. Wilson* to join the *Holt* and *Vega* in the waters of Kompong Som. As the NCA received reports of the *Mayaguez's* movement, there was serious concern that the ship and crew would be taken to the Cambodian mainland. At 0230 Scowcroft requested permission to conduct interdiction efforts to isolate the *Mayaguez* from the mainland. Ford authorized these interdiction efforts and the use of riot control agents and gunfire by Thailand-based U.S. aircraft to prevent the ship from reaching Cambodia. At approximately 0218 it was observed to anchor about a mile off the northeast coast of Koh Tang. At 0552 Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger, briefed Ford that the ship was anchored off the island of Koh Tang. Ford instructed Schlesinger not to allow another "Pueblo" to take place and to quarantine the *Mayaguez* from the mainland. At 1717 (0617 EST) JCS ordered the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC) to quarantine the ship in order to prevent the transfer of the crew to mainland Cambodia. Within the hour after the order was transmitted, pilots observing the *Mayaguez* reported that the crew members were being transferred to Koh Tang.

The second NSC meeting was held at 1030 and lasted 56 minutes. Kissinger was not present at this meeting due to an engagement in Kansas City. During the meeting, the director of the CIA, William Colby, briefed that the *Mayaguez* was anchored near Koh Tang and the crew had been most likely transferred to the island. Concerning the diplomatic efforts, there was no Cambodian reaction from the released U.S. statement, and the Chinese refused to deliver the note of protest to the Khmer Rouge. Additionally, the Thai government had stated it would not permit the use of its bases for U.S. action against Cambodia. The second NSC meeting discussed the following courses of action:

1. The use of diplomacy with the Peoples Republic of China (PRC), Khmer Rouge, and the United Nations in an attempt to return ship and crew
2. Conduct a military show of force operation
3. Seize an island in retaliation
4. Conduct a heliborne landing on the *Mayaguez*
5. Conduct a ship to ship boarding operation

6. Conduct a Marine heliborne assault at Koh Tang
7. Attack Kompong Som with carrier air strikes
8. Conduct B-52 strikes at Kompong Som.³⁷

Upon conclusion of the meeting, Ford understood the urgency to deploy US forces to the area and ordered the following actions:

1. Position the second aircraft carrier *USS Hancock*, which embarked with a Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU) from the Philippines in the area
2. Isolate the *Mayaguez* and Koh Tang from the mainland by use of Thailand-based Air Force assets which included F-4, F-111, and A-7 tactical aircraft
3. Move a Marine Battalion from Okinawa to Utapao, Thailand, to provide the capability of a heliborne assault by Thursday morning, 15 May (Wednesday evening, 14 May ETA).

At 1200 JCS ordered CINCPAC to isolate both the *Mayaguez* and Koh Tang from the mainland. Additionally, JCS ordered that any interception of Cambodian gunboats must be reported to Washington, where the decision of whether to sink them would be made. Between 2010 and 2151, with orders relayed from Ford, three gunboats were sunk and four were immobilized. By the second NSC meeting, strategic planners and decision makers were discussing operational and tactical courses of action as well as making tactical decisions. At the initial stages of the *Mayaguez* operation, the tactical, operational and strategic level of war were already merging together.

The third NSC meeting was held at 2240. Kissinger was present at this meeting and continued to forcefully advocate the use of military action "to have an impact on President Kim Il-Sung and the North Koreans."³⁸ During the meeting, Ford was briefed on the progress of diplomatic activity which had produced no success to date. He also received operational reports concerning the efforts to isolate Koh Tang and the status of military forces converging on the area. During this meeting, Ford was notified that a Cambodian patrol boat followed by a fishing boat had departed Koh Tang and was heading toward Kompong Som. Under NCA orders, the patrol boat was sunk; however, the fishing boat continued its course. A pilot reported observing a number of caucasians, possibly the *Mayaguez* crew, on the fishing boat. After some

³⁷ Head, Short, and McFarlane, 114-115.

³⁸ Roy Rowan, *The Four Days of Mayaguez* (New York; Norton & Co, 1975), 141-142.

discussion, Ford ordered the pilots "to do everything possible to turn the boat around, but not to sink it."³⁹ U.S. aircraft used bombs, rockets, tear gas, and cannon fire in an attempt to turn the boat, but it continued its course toward Kompong Som.

After Jones presented military options and courses of action, Ford agreed to the following sequence:

1. Attack Koh Tang on Thursday morning May 15, Thailand time (Wednesday evening EST, May 14). From a staging area in Thailand, Marines will simultaneously recapture the *Mayaguez* with a boarding operation from the *Holt* and conduct a heliborne assault on Koh Tang.
2. Conduct naval air attacks against mainland targets to prevent reinforcements from Cambodia. In order to isolate Koh Tang and the *Mayaguez* from mainland Cambodia, small vessels will not be permitted to transit between Koh Tang and the Cambodian coast.
3. B-52 bombers will be put on alert for deployment against targets on the Cambodian mainland to prevent reinforcements from Cambodia, demonstrate U.S. power, and punish Cambodia for their aggression.
4. The State Department will deliver a letter to the United Nations Secretary General seeking assistance in securing the release of the ship and crew.⁴⁰

After deciding on the specific actions, Ford asked Jones if the schedule could possibly be advanced one day. Jones responded that the JCS could not recommend an earlier assault because forces were still converging into the area and further coordination was required.⁴¹

Upon conclusion of the third NSC meeting, the JCS met in the Pentagon to review the timing of the operation. The gathering was uneasy and those present questioned that there was enough time to establish effective command and control of the widely dispersed forces converging on the area. The JCS reached a consensus that an extra day would provide a higher assurance of success but agreed that the urgency of the situation overcame the degree of risk associated with a rapid military operation.⁴²

39 Ford, 278.

40 Head, Short, and McFarlane, 118.

41 Rowan, 142-143.

42 Lamb, 121-122.

Wednesday, 14 May

The fourth and final NSC meeting occurred at 1552. In Thailand, the time was 0252 15 May, less than ninety minutes before American assault helicopters were scheduled to launch from Utapao. During the meeting, Colby reported that some of the *Mayaguez* crew were most likely on the mainland and their location was unknown. Jones conducted a detailed brief of the overall operational and tactical plans. In doing so, he emphasized that postponing military action another 24 hours would increase the ability of the forces to conduct a well-coordinated attack.⁴³ Ford continued to feel that if immediate action was not taken, a "*Pueblo*" scenario would be repeated and quickly dismissed any suggestion of postponement. Between 1645 and 1710, (0345 and 0410, 15 May, Thailand time) and with helicopters loaded and waiting to launch at Utapao, the president issued orders to execute the recovery plan.

In summary, the strategic objectives determined by the NCA were to recover the ship and crew and in doing so demonstrate U.S. strength and resolve. Discussions in the NSC meetings clearly prioritized the objectives, the most important of which was to demonstrate to the world that the U.S. remained an international power willing *and able* to defend its interests.

⁴³ Ibid, 90.

A TRAIN WRECK IN THE MAKING

Poor operational command and control during planning created real problems that would plague the operation until its conclusion. From an execution point of view, these problems were developed by a combination of several factors that included:

1. A joint task force, composed of units from three different services, was hastily formed and tasked to rapidly plan and conduct a complex operation with strategic implications.
2. Command and control failures during planning caused by the absence of centralized leadership to unify the effort and form a cohesive task force.
3. Faulty dissemination of crucial intelligence to the tactical planners and operators.

These factors created a planning environment characterized by chaos and confusion which accentuated the friction of the battlefield.

Organizing the Joint Task Force

Because of the immediacy of the situation, forces from different services were quickly formed to execute the operation. When the *Mayaguez* was seized, only two U.S. Navy ships were within 24 hours steaming time.⁴⁴ Just two weeks earlier, a large armada of U.S. ships had participated in Operation Frequent Wind but were now scattered throughout the Pacific. On 13 May the *Holt*, *Vega*, destroyer *USS Wilson*, and the aircraft carrier *USS Coral Sea* were ordered to proceed immediately to the waters off Kompong Som.⁴⁵ These naval forces were the only ships that could arrive at the objective area prior to the morning of 15 May (Thailand time), the date operations would commence as directed by the NCA. The amphibious ready groups that had been involved in Operation Frequent Wind were returning Marines to Okinawa and Japan and

⁴⁴ J.M. Johnson, Jr., R.W. Austin, and D.A. Quinlan, "Individual Heroism Overcame Awkward Command Relationships, Confusion, and Bad Information off the Cambodian Coast." *Marine Corps Gazette*, October 1977, 25.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 25.

their distance from Koh Tang rendered these forces unavailable for a rapid response. As a result, the Air Contingency Battalion Landing Team (ACBLT), Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 2/9 located in Okinawa, and a reinforced company from 1st Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment (D 1/4) located in Subic Bay, were ordered to Utapao to take part in the recovery operation. When BLT 2/9 received its movement orders at 2030 13 May (Thailand time), all four of its rifle companies were conducting field training in Okinawa. By 0530 14 May, only seven hours after receiving the movement order, lead elements of BLT 2/9 were enroute to Utapao. D 1/4 departed Naval Air Station Cubi Point, Philippines at 0115 14 May and arrived at Utapao at 0505.⁴⁶ Less than 24 hours later, USAF assault helicopters carrying Marines would be enroute to Koh Tang.

The USAF ordered all the CH-53 and HH-53 heavy helicopters in the 7th Air Force to Utapao from Korat and Nakhon Phanom Air Bases in Thailand. Utapao was the closest allied military facility at 190 nautical miles from Koh Tang. Seventh Air Force's heavy helicopters included CH-53s from the 21st Special Operations Squadron and HH-53s from the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron.⁴⁷ There were a total of thirteen heavy helicopters at Utapao available for the operation. Two were designated as search and rescue (SAR) aircraft and eleven helicopters (6 HH-53s and 5 CH-53s) were dedicated to the assault. USAF tactical aircraft which included F-4s, A-7Ds, OV-10s, and AC-130s supported the operation from Korat and Nakhon Phanom.

As the incident unfolded, various units and commands from the USAF, Navy, and the Marine Corps were rapidly converging on Utapao and the waters off of Kompong Som to form a joint task force. All U.S. forces in Asia were under the command of Admiral Noel A. M. Gaylor, CINCPAC, who was located in Hawaii. Gaylor designated the Commander, US Support Activities Group/7th Air Force (COMUSSAG/7th), Lieutenant General John J. Burns, Jr, USAF, as the "on scene operational commander and the central coordinating authority."⁴⁸ In effect,

⁴⁶ Ibid, 25.

⁴⁷ HH-53s carry more armor than the CH-53 and have inflight refueling capability. CH-53s have external fuel tanks. Both are capable of extended air operations.

⁴⁸ Johnson, Austin, and Quinlan, 26.

Burns was designated as the Commander of the Joint Task Force (CJTF). USSAG Headquarters, located in Nakhon Phanom, was the closest US military headquarters to Cambodia and had been heavily involved in Operations Frequent Wind and Eagle Pull. Burns had also been the operational commander for Operation Eagle Pull.⁴⁹

Burns selected Brigadier General Walter H. Baxter, USAF, Commander of the 17th Air Division, to act as his deputy and supervise the planning. With the 7th Air Force's heavy helicopters moving to Utapao, Burns selected Colonel Loyd J. Anders, USAF, Deputy Commander for Operations, 56th Special Operations Wing as the helicopter mission commander.⁵⁰ It is ironic that Burns, Baxter, and Anders, each with fixed-wing aircraft backgrounds and no helicopter experience, were now tasked with planning and conducting a heliborne operation.⁵¹

On 13 May Major General Carl W. Hoffman, Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force, received notice to provide an ACBLT and other support to COMUSSAG. Hoffman formed a command group of five officers from his staff and designated Colonel John M. Johnson Jr. as the commander of the ACBLT (Task Group 79.9). In essence, Johnson was the Marine Corps service component commander to the CJTF/COMUSSAG. In addition to Johnson and his small staff, Task Group 79.9 consisted of BLT 2/9 (Task Unit 79.9.1), commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Randal W. Austin, and D 1/4 reinforced with a small command element from 1/4 (Task Unit 79.9.2). Task Unit 79.9.2 was commanded by 1/4 Executive Officer Major Raymond E. Porter and Company D's Commanding Officer was Captain Walter A. Wood.

During the execution of the operation, Burns determined that the operational control of the Marine forces and USAF tactical aircraft would be exercised by COMUSSAG through an Airborne Mission Commander (AMC) and battle staff located in an Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center (ABCCC). Inherent to the plan, the AMC would be the on-scene

⁴⁹ Lucien S. Vandembroucke, *Perilous Options. Special Operations as an Instrument of Foreign Policy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 95.

⁵⁰ Guilmartin, 46.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 47.

commander operating under the direction of COMUSSAG in Nakhon Phanom. Burns had used this command and control arrangement when he commanded operation Eagle Pull a month earlier. Aboard a specially equipped EC-130, the ABCCC would orbit approximately 90 miles northeast of Koh Tang in order to be within communication range of both Koh Tang and Nakhon Phanom. (Figure 3)

The various forces that merged together to form a joint task force possessed all the tools necessary to conduct a successful operation. What was critically required but missing was a leader to pull these forces together and direct everyone's efforts in the same direction.

Command and Control

Failures of command and control in the operational planning were primarily caused by the physical separation of planning cells and the absence of centralized leadership to unify the effort. A senior USAF officer described the planning atmosphere when he recalled that "preparations at Utapao lacked coordination and leadership. No one seemed to be in charge."⁵² Intrusive micromanagement from higher headquarters only exacerbated the situation.

Although Burns was the CJTF, he elected to remain in Nakhon Phanom and tasked his deputy, Baxter, to oversee the planning of the Marines and USAF helicopter units at Utapao. Under this arrangement, COMUSSAG would be physically separated by 160 miles from his subordinate commanders and planners. One flag officer commented, "it was quite clear that the on-scene commander was not on scene."⁵³ Additionally, Baxter never took charge of the planning process and did not provide any central direction. An after-action report by BLT 2/9 stated that Baxter was present at planning meetings but his "exact role was unknown to 2/9 personnel."⁵⁴ Bottom line: No one took charge of the planning process at Utapao. The absence of centralized authority and direction was the source of confusion in the planning phase.

Compounding this situation, the USAF and Marine commanders were assigned to different

⁵² Colonel George A Dugard, USAF, quoted in Vandenbroucke, 98.

⁵³ Major George R. Dunham and Colonel David A. Quinlan, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Bitter End* (Washington D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1990)

⁵⁴ Vandenbroucke, 98.

command posts that were physically separated from each other within the air base at Utapao. As a result, the Marines and USAF personnel planned independently. The physical separation of the commanders throughout the chain of command accentuated the disjointed planning.

The disjointed atmosphere was evident when key participants to the operation were absent from planning meetings and briefs. The final planning conference took place at 1900 14 May, about just nine hours before the scheduled helicopter launch time. Key participants included Anders, Johnson, Baxter, Austin, and Wood. Missing from the conference were all the helicopter crews who were in crew rest as well as the AMC and battle staff. Tasked with controlling the battle under the direction of COMUSSAG, the AMC and battle staff were available for the meeting but for some unknown reason were not present. Most likely the crew was not aware of the meeting, and their absence was a serious omission considering their key role in the operation.

The final planning meeting occurred at 0100 15 May, just three hours before the anticipated departure time of 0405. This was the first and only chance that most of the tactical commanders could personally interact and work out any problems in the plan. In effect, it was a confirmation brief. The atmosphere of the meeting was described as casual and relaxed, and the briefing was an impromptu affair conducted in a room without chairs or tables.⁵⁵ The helicopter crews, Marine commanders, and staff were present; however, the AMC and battle staff were again absent because they were preparing for a aircraft launch time of 0315. At 0430 the AMC and battle staff were finally briefed of the plan by radio as they were airborne in the ABCCC. Although COMUSSAG was to control the operation through the AMC in the ABCCC, COMUSSAG and the AMC were not aware of details of the plan, since neither had participated in any of the mission briefings. As the battle was about to begin, the AMC knew the general scheme of maneuver but was unaware of the friendly order of battle and essential

55 Guilmartin, 84.

communications information, such as call signs and frequencies. This situation was a source of tremendous friction throughout the battle.

From the start of the crisis, Burns and his planners were the recipients of simultaneous micromanagement from the JCS via the National Military Command Center (NMCC) at the Pentagon as well as from CINCPAC in Hawaii. By-passing CINCPAC, NMCC became increasingly intrusive and directive during the planning and usually communicated directly with Burns or his subordinate planners in Utapao. As a result, two higher echelons of command were simultaneously making the same information demands or providing redundant information and prescriptive directives to the planners. COMUSSAG was forced to simultaneously answer CINCPAC in Hawaii and the JCS at the NMCC. The NMCC and CINCPAC provided COMUSSAG specific guidance and demanded briefbacks of tactical and operational plans to ensure that preparations conformed with the president's intent.⁵⁶ Not only did the higher headquarters become actively involved in the tactical planning, but JCS and CINCPAC's "thirst for information was unquenchable."⁵⁷ They demanded continuous updates in extraordinary detail to include tail numbers and call signs of aircraft.⁵⁸ Johnson stated that the reporting requirements became a distraction to the planners and "simply interfered with any efforts to effectively carry out the planning for the task that faced us."⁵⁹

The NMCC and CINCPAC simultaneously offered directives, advice, and redundant information that applied to the tactical level. For example, the JCS directed COMUSSAG that the assault would occur at 0542. The JCS specified the exact time of the assault to the minute; a detail usually left decided by the operational and tactical planners. During the planning, the NMCC and CINCPAC frequently contacted tactical planners at Utapao with irrelevant information. Johnson was personally contacted by a major general in the NMCC just to be

56 Vandenbroucke, 95.

57 Ibid, 96.

58 Ibid, 96.

59 Ibid, 97.

informed that there were no snakes on Koh Tang.⁶⁰ In his book *Perilous Options*, LucienVandenbrouke summarizes the situation when he stated, "By imposing excessive reporting requirements, inundating the planners with a flood of at times useless information, and trying to direct local actions in the smallest detail, the Pentagon and CINCPAC greatly complicated USSAG's task."⁶¹

Poor Dissemination of Intelligence

USSAG headquarters in Nakhon Phanom possessed accurate intelligence from several sources concerning enemy strength and disposition at Koh Tang. Aerial photographs and other imagery was also available but none of this crucial intelligence was ever disseminated to the tactical planners at Utapao. The physical separation and flawed coordination between USSAG headquarters and the planners at Utapao had a devastating effect on the dissemination of intelligence.

USSAG headquarters in Nakhon Phanom received accurate intelligence from several sources concerning enemy troop strengths and dispositions. A report by CINCPAC's intelligence branch, Commander, Intelligence Pacific (IPAC), indicated that Koh Tang was defended by approximately 100 infantry supported by heavy weapons to include mortars, recoilless rifles, machine guns, and RPGs. A separate Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report indicated an understrength Khmer Rouge infantry battalion of 150-200 troops supported with a robust complement of heavy weapons. Using IPAC and DIA estimates, USSAG's own estimate was 100-300 enemy troops. Vandenbrouke states that, "USSAG forwarded these estimates to the U.S. Air Force 307th Strategic Wing at Utapao. But USSAG neither gave the information to the Marines who were to assault Koh Tang nor instructed the 307th Strategic Wing to do so."⁶² The end result was that the planners at Utapao never received these enemy estimates.

USSAG also had information concerning the employment and disposition of the Cambodian

60 Ibid, 97.

61 Ibid, 98.

62 Ibid, 99.

forces. USAF reconnaissance aircraft had reported to USSAG no fewer than eleven incidents of anti-aircraft fire from Koh Tang.⁶³ During the evening of 13-14 May, an AC-130 gunship received anti-aircraft fire and using scanning devices located and reported several gun emplacements oriented on the beaches that were planned as Landing Zones (LZs).

Accurate intelligence was available at the operational level but was never disseminated to the tactical planners and operators. The only information the assault forces received concerning enemy strength at Koh Tang included a preliminary report from IPAC estimating twenty soldiers and a former Cambodian naval officer's estimate of no more than eighteen to thirty irregulars. During most of the planning, Marines were using outline maps of Koh Tang prepared from U2 imagery. The only aerial photograph of Koh Tang the Marines possessed was taken from a personal camera at 4,500 feet during a visual reconnaissance.⁶⁴ The pictures were of limited use except to confirm that the beaches were narrow and the island was covered by dense jungle.

After-action reports proved that intelligence estimates by both IPAC and DIA were extremely accurate. There is evidence to suggest that the Cambodian troops on Koh Tang were expecting a heliborne assault and had positioned their forces accordingly, covering the only two possible LZs on the island. Oriented on the landing zones, enemy infantry reinforced with heavy weapons were dug into covered and concealed positions that indicated signs of recent construction.⁶⁵ (Figure 4) Although the intelligence estimates failed to be disseminated to the planners and executors at Utapao, the information was available to the USSAG staff to include Burns. Burns and his staff were also aware of the planned scheme of maneuver.⁶⁶ Timely intelligence is imperative to develop an effective plan. With knowledge of a large and well-armed enemy force on Koh Tang, it seems unusual that no one at USSAG questioned the plan that was developed at Utapao.

63 Ibid, 99.

64 Guilmartin, 72.

65 Ibid, 82.

66 Vanderbrouke, 98.

Scheme of Maneuver

With inaccurate intelligence concerning enemy strength and dispositions, the planners at Utapao developed operational and tactical plans for the recovery of the *Mayaguez* and crew. BLT 2/9 was tasked to conduct a heliborne assault to "seize, occupy, and defend the island of Koh Tang, hold the island indefinitely, (for a minimum of 48 hours) and to rescue any of the crew members of *Mayaguez*..."⁶⁷ A boarding party from D 1/4, consisting of 48 Marines and six sailors were given the mission to recover the *Mayaguez* and any crew members on board.⁶⁸ (Figure 5) On 1900 14 May, a planning conference determined the scheme of maneuver. Shortly after midnight on 15 May, about four hours before the assault force was scheduled to launch, the final plan was completed. The boarding party would be inserted on the *Holt* from USAF helicopters. Following *Holt's* closure on the *Mayaguez* and after USAF tactical air laid riot control agents on the ship, D 1/4 would conduct a ship to ship boarding.⁶⁹ Dictated by the JCS, the boarding of the *Mayaguez* and the assault on Koh Tang were planned to occur nearly simultaneously at 0542. USAF tactical aircraft were tasked with supporting the Marines at Koh Tang and to also interdict any attempts to move *Mayaguez* or crew to Cambodia. During the assault and boarding operations, Navy tactical aircraft from the *Coral Sea* would interdict Cambodia naval and air bases to prevent reinforcements from Cambodia.

The scheme of maneuver called for eight USAF helicopters to insert 180 members of BLT 2/9 on Koh Tang. This wave would consist of G Company, a section of 81mm mortars, and the BLT "Alpha" command group. One reinforced platoon would land at the western LZ and the remainder of the company, the 81 mm mortar section and the BLT command group would all land in the larger eastern LZ. The platoon in the western LZ would establish a blocking position, while the remainder of the company would push west from the eastern LZ. For the second and

⁶⁷ Johnson, Austin, and Quinlan, 25.

⁶⁸ Six Maritime Sea Command civilian personnel were also attached to the boarding party.

⁶⁹ The original plan called for a heliborne landing on the *Mayaguez*, but there was concern about landing helicopters and disembarking Marines on the containerized cargo.

subsequent waves, an availability of twelve helicopters was planned with a four and one-half hour turn-around time between waves. The second wave would consist of Captain Mykle E. Stahl's reinforced Company E and follow-on waves would be comprised of the remainder of BLT 2/9 and Johnson's command group.⁷⁰ The fire support plan contained an "on-call" plan for continuous close air support (CAS) and naval gunfire support.⁷¹ There was no preplanned preparation fires because of concern for the safety of any crew members that may be on the island.

If the intelligence were to have been disseminated, tactical plans would have changed significantly. Because the intelligence information and enemy situation were the foundation of the plan, faulty information resulted in an ineffective plan. If the planners had been aware of the intelligence reports that indicated a battalion-sized force in prepared defensive positions covering the LZs, the scheme of maneuver and fire support would have been modified. Under the assumption that there were only eighteen to thirty irregular forces on the island, the plan to conduct a heliborne assault against a well armed, numerically superior, and entrenched force with no preparatory fires was not tactically sound. Guilmartin summarized the situation when he observed, "If ever an infantry unit was set up to by circumstances for failure, 2/9 was it. Yet 2/9 did not fail. The same point applies to the two helicopter squadrons."⁷² The progressive failure of poor command and control, continuing inaccurate intelligence, and a flawed plan created chaos and near defeat during the execution of the operation.

⁷⁰ Johnson, Austin, and Quinlan, 28. Because of the limited availability of helicopters, Johnson decided to remain at Utapao during the initial waves and planned to insert into Koh Tang on a subsequent wave.

⁷¹ Ibid, 28.

⁷² Guilmartin, 42.

15 MAY 1975: A FIERCE BATTLE AND NEAR DISASTER

Chaotic, confused, and incomplete planning based on faulty intelligence proved to be a recipe for disaster. During the execution phase of the operation, the same problems of command and control that plagued it during planning were present to a greater degree and accentuated the fog and friction of the battle. As the helicopters approached Koh Tang, the operation began to immediately go wrong.

First Wave

At 0414 the assault force launched from Utapao. At 0602 Jolly Green (JG, HH-53s) 11, 12, and 13 began putting Porter's boarding force on the *Holt*.⁷³ Friction began immediately; neither the helicopters nor the ABCCC had the radio frequency for the *Holt*. As a result of the disjointed planning, this was the first of many communications problems to come during the day. Finally at 0631 the boarding party was safely aboard the *Holt*.

At approximately 0603 the first helicopter Knife 21 (K-21, a CH-53), landed at Koh Tang in the western LZ and was followed by K-22. As Second Lieutenant James McDaniel's 1st platoon of Company G were disembarking K-21, the jungle erupted with small arms and automatic weapons fire along with RPGs and mortar fire. At 0605 the call of "Hot LZ!" was transmitted on the UHF helicopter control frequency. K-21 and K-22 were both hit hard. K-21 immediately lost an engine and ditched three-quarters of a mile off the beach in the ocean and immediately flipped over. One crewman disappeared with the sinking aircraft and three other crewman were recovered a short time later. K-22, carrying Davis, the company commander, aborted the landing and provided fire to cover K-21's withdrawal. K-22, with one destroyed engine and a severe fuel leak, limped back to the coast of Thailand. A SAR helicopter picked up the heliteam and returned them to Utapao.

⁷³ Different sources contain different timelines in reference to the events during the battle. To remain consistent, I have used the times presented in Guilmartin's *A Very Short War*.

On the eastern LZ, the largest LZ which was to receive the bulk of the forces, the first two helicopters were shot down as they entered the landing zone. K-23 was touching down when intense fire erupted and destroyed an engine and shot off the tail pylon. The pilot managed to land the helicopter despite the loss of control and Second Lieutenant Michael Cicere's third platoon of Company G (G/3), sprinted for the treeline north of the LZ. Moments later, the crew evacuated the helicopter and joined the Marines. In the treeline, the small force set up a perimeter and dug in. K-31 was following K-23 into the zone when it began to take sustained automatic weapons and RPG hits from the jungle bordering the beach. As the helicopter was trying to gain altitude to abort the landing, a RPG impacted the cockpit and killed the co-pilot. Seconds later, another RPG impacted the aircraft causing the port external fuel tank to explode engulfing the helicopter in a ball of flame. K-31 crash landed in four feet of water approximately fifty meters from the beach. Seven Marines and two Navy corpsman were killed in the helicopter, and three Marines were killed as they made their way to the beach and charged the treeline. The remaining ten Marines and three USAF crewman swam seaward. One of the survivors in the water was the forward air controller (FAC), First Lieutenant Terry Tonkin. At 0620 using an USAF survival radio, he was able to direct firing runs from USAF A-7s on enemy positions surrounding the eastern LZ.⁷⁴

In the first twenty minutes of the assault, three helicopters were shot down and one sustained severe damage. On the western LZ, McDaniel and nineteen Marines were under continuous fire but managed to push into the treeline and overran an enemy 60 mm mortar position in the process⁷⁵. On the eastern LZ, Cicere and twenty Marines were isolated and pinned down. At this time, the AMC directed the remaining four helicopters to divert their landing from the eastern LZ to the western LZ. This decision probably prevented more helicopters from being destroyed in the heavily defended eastern LZ. K-32 diverted from the eastern LZ and landed thirteen Marines at the western LZ to increase the force there from twenty to 33 Marines. During

⁷⁴ Johnson, Austin, and Quinlan, 30.

⁷⁵ Guilmartin, 89.

the insertion, K-32 sustained heavy damage including a RPG hit in the tail section. Although severely damaged, the helicopter was able to return to Utapao. At 0626 JG-42 carrying First Lieutenant Dick Kieth, Executive Officer of Company G, and 29 Marines landed at the western LZ. JG-42 sustained heavy damage but made it back to Utapao. Neither aircraft was able to fly again. JG-43, carrying Austin, the BLT command group and a section of 81 mm mortars, attempted to land in the western LZ but was driven off by gunfire. On a second attempt, JG-43 landed the 29 Marines between 900 and 1,200 meters south of the western LZ. This group of Marines were isolated and particularly vulnerable because most carried only .45 caliber pistols as sidearms.

At 0630 the situation at Koh Tang was grim. Fourteen Americans were dead. Of the 180 Marines and sailors in the first wave, only 109 were ashore in three isolated positions. Sixty personnel of Company G were in the western LZ fighting against tough enemy resistance while establishing and expanding their perimeter. Twenty personnel from G/3 (not including five USAF crewman) were defending an isolated position near the eastern LZ and 29 personnel from the BLT command group and a section of 81mm mortars were about 1,000 meters south of the western LZ and working their way north against enemy resistance. There were also thirteen survivors swimming seaward from the eastern LZ. (Figure 6)

As the Marines were battling the Cambodians, USAF tactical air was not able to provide CAS. The situation on the ground was confusing, and the pilots were unaware of the location either of friendlies or the enemy. Because the jungle was so dense, the fighting was extremely close. Smoke to mark positions was difficult to see through the jungle and the Marines were running low on pyrotechnics. The loss of Tonkin, the BLT FAC, also eliminated the UHF link. Air-ground communications were made over the VHF tactical nets which were already overburdened with radio traffic.

At 0712 Austin was able to make radio contact with the main body in the western LZ and began to formulate a link up plan. At 0800 Kieth ordered McDaniel to take a patrol south of the LZ to link up with Austin's isolated group. The patrol entered the jungle and quickly ran into

strong enemy fire. One Marine was killed and four were wounded to include McDaniel. As the patrol withdrew to the perimeter, the enemy conducted a fierce counterattack on the heels of the patrol. The Marines, fighting bravely, repulsed the attack.

As the Marines on Koh Tang were fighting for their lives, the recovery of the *Mayaguez* was proceeding as planned. With the boarding party safely staged on the *Holt*, the ship steamed toward the *Mayaguez*. At 0714 USAF A-7s engulfed the *Mayaguez* with riot control agents, and ten minutes later the *Holt* pulled alongside. At 0725 Wood and the Marines of D 1/4, boarded the *Mayaguez* and quickly seized it. The *Mayaguez* had been abandoned, and the Marines declared the ship secure at 0822. At 0958 the *Holt* began towing the *Mayaguez* to international waters as three Maritime Sea Command personnel prepared to get it underway on its own power.

At 0720 the destroyer, *Wilson*, arrived off the east coast of Koh Tang. Its commanding officer, Commander Mike Rodgers, immediately sensed the confusion of the battle after he contacted the ABCCC. He was asked by the ABCCC what kind of aircraft he was and assigned an orbit of 10,000 feet.⁷⁶ Moments later a lookout on the *Wilson* spotted swimmers in the ocean, quickly discovered that these were thirteen survivors of JG-31, and began rescue operations. Due to an oversight caused by the rapid and chaotic events, the ABCCC never informed the *Wilson* of friendlies in the water. The unexpected events of the opening rounds of the battle overwhelmed the ABCCC battle staff. No one was in command or coordinating of the battle. After rescuing the swimmers, the *Wilson* was ordered by the ABCCC to intercept a small boat heading toward Koh Tang from Kompong Som. As the *Wilson* closed on the small boat, caucasians and a white flag were spotted. As it turned out, the entire *Mayaguez* crew was aboard. At 1005 the crew of the *Mayaguez* was safely aboard the *Wilson* and Washington was immediately notified. Due to another oversight by the ABCCC, the Marines at Koh Tang, tasked with rescuing the crew members on the island, were never informed that the crew had been

⁷⁶ Michael J. Rodgers from an interview with Guilmartin, 98.

recovered. About 1200 Austin was finally informed by Marines from the second wave that the crew was rescued

At 1005 the strategic objectives of recovering the *Mayaguez* and crew had been accomplished; however, at the operational and tactical level this was irrelevant. At Koh Tang 114 Americans were fighting for their lives against a tenacious enemy who had no intention of quitting.⁷⁷ Reinforcements would have to be put on the island to avoid a tactical defeat. Isolated in small perimeters, the Marines were in a perilous situation. The commanders at the strategic and operational level were unaware of this development. The ABCCC and COMUSSAG had little situational awareness and did not comprehend the tactical situation. Johnson at Utapao was receiving information from the returning helicopter crews and inherently understood the urgent need to reinforce the island. Johnson was probably the only one not at Koh Tang who understood the urgent requirement for additional troops.

After 0900 Kieth established communications with an USAF airborne tactical air controller (TACA) overhead. At 0938 an AC-130 gunship, Spectre 61, began to provide effective CAS in support of the Marines in the western LZ. Three hours after landing in a hot LZ, the Marines were finally receiving effective fire support. After three aborted insertion attempts and two aerial refuelings, JG-41 was able to finally land Second Lieutenant Richard H. Zales and his 24 Marines of 2d Platoon, Company G (2/G) in the western LZ. The additional firepower and ammunition was crucial in defending the perimeter. JG-41 was shot up, and while it returned to Utapao, it was not to fly again.

Second Wave

Of the eleven helicopters in the first wave, only four were still operable. Three had crashed and four were out of commission due to severe damage. Two helicopters (K-51, 52) in Nakhon Phanom had completed maintenance and were now available. With one helicopter dedicated to SAR, only five helicopters were available for the second wave. The five helicopters in the

⁷⁷ Guilmartin, 99.

second wave launched from Utapao between 0900 and 1000. Aboard K-52, K-32, JG-11, JG-12, and JG-43, were 127 reinforcements that included Davis and the remainder of Company G as well as elements of Company E.

With the recovery of the *Mayaguez* and crew, Ford wanted to disengage as quickly as possible. At 1155 JCS sent a message to CINCPAC directing "all concerned to immediately cease all offensive operations against the Khmer Republic...[and to] disengage and withdraw all forces from operating area as soon as possible."⁷⁸ This order passed through the chain of command until it reached the ABCCC. The AMC ordered the second wave to return to Utapao. After vehement protests from Johnson, Austin, and various helicopter pilots, the second wave continued toward Koh Tang. This is further indication that COMUSSAG or the AMC did not have a grasp of the battle.

As the second wave was inbound, the command group and mortar section continued to move north to link up with the main force in the western LZ. At around 1030 Austin's group was close to the perimeter. Austin and Kieth decided to task Zale's second platoon to conduct a link up attack to the south. Supported by CAS and 81mm mortar fire, G/2 attacked south and the link up was complete around 1200.

At 1150 JG-11 and JG-12, landed at the western LZ, off-loaded their Marines and took four wounded Marines aboard. After previously diverting helicopters from the eastern LZ, the AMC, mistakenly ordered K-52, JG-43, and K-51 to insert on the eastern LZ. K-52 was hit hard by enemy fire, aborted the landing, and barely made it back to the Thai coast.⁷⁹ K-51 and JG-43 diverted to the western beach and successfully inserted shortly after 1200. The main perimeter in the western LZ now had an effective force of 205 Marines.

G/3 and five Airmen on the eastern LZ were still isolated. After the second wave insertions, JG-43 and JG-11 were held in orbit for an attempt to rescue the isolated group. At approximately 1400 A-7's laid riot control agents in the vicinity of the eastern LZ and JG-43

⁷⁸ Ibid, 107.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 114.

attempted to land. The helicopter received heavy enemy gunfire, lost an engine and was forced to abort. Followed by JG-11, JG-43 returned to the *Coral Sea* for repairs. After this unsuccessful attempt to extract the eastern LZ, only three of the second wave helicopters were flyable.⁸⁰

After completing rescue operations of the thirteen swimmers, the *Wilson* had returned to Koh Tang shortly after 1300. Coordinating with the ABCCC and A-7s, the *Wilson* initiated and provided naval surface fires support and engaged targets near the eastern LZ. The naval gunfire was controlled by A-7's who had spotted enemy positions during JG-13's unsuccessful rescue attempt. The *Wilson*, located about 1,000 meters off the east coast of Koh Tang, fired 176 rounds of 5-inch fire in support of the isolated Marines. Seven hours after landing at Koh Tang, the Marines finally had their first naval gunfire support.

At 1500 the Marines in the western LZ were consolidating their defensive perimeter. Austin requested guidance from higher headquarters- should they dig in, seize the island, or extract? He never received an answer from the AMC or COMUSSAG. At 1620 two OV-10s arrived at Koh Tang; Major Undorf in Nail 68 and his wingman Captain Richard Roehrkasse in Nail 47. They arrived to a chaotic situation with no one commanding or coordinating the battlespace. This was the turning point in the battle. The fire support coordination arrangements were not working to support the Marines. During the planning, the Marines had requested but were denied OV-10s to support the assault. Unlike A-7s, OV-10s had the endurance to remain on station to provide operational continuity and the capability to maintain continuous eye contact on ground targets. The pilots were also trained as airborne FACs and TACAs. Once he arrived on station, Undorf quickly contacted the Marines on both the eastern and western LZs to establish friendly positions. Using the OV-10's smoke rockets to mark targets, he quickly controlled A-7 and F-4 air strikes. Just minutes after the OV-10s arrived, Undorf began to orchestrate the battle and

⁸⁰ Ibid, 117.

began to impose order to the chaotic situation. This was the first time since the Marines landed that someone was coordinating the battle and effective fire support.

After being briefed of the criticality of the situation on the eastern LZ, Undorf directed his attention to extracting the isolated group. There was a partly sunken Cambodian swift boat with twin-mounted .50 caliber machine guns still in operation and covering the eastern LZ. These machine guns had caused much of the damage to JG-43 in the aborted attempt to extract G/3. The *Wilson*, monitoring the tactical communication nets, volunteered naval gunfire support. In coordination with Undorf, the *Wilson* at 1655 completely destroyed the swift boat with 5" naval guns. The *Wilson* also made its gig available to provide close-in .50 caliber machine gun fire and to serve as an emergency extract and a surface search and rescue craft.

The Extraction

At 1630 there were only four helicopters available to extract the Marines: JG-11, JG-12, K-51, and K-52. JG-43 had been rapidly repaired on the *Coral Sea* and at 1710 was launched to make a total of five helicopters for extract. At 1736 Spectre 11 and 21 were orbiting Koh Tang, and at 1813 Undorf began to control fire missions for Spectre 11. Under the cover of gunship fires and machine gun fire from both the *Wilson's* gig and the OV-10s, JG-11 landed on the eastern LZ at 1820. The Marines and airmen fought their way back into the helicopter as enemy soldiers came within hand grenade range. USAF helicopter crew members and Marines knocked out the helicopters windows with rifle butts and fired through the openings.⁸¹ One minute after sunset, at 1823 JG-11 lifted off with 20 Marines and five Airman safely aboard. Moments after the eastern LZ was evacuated, a C-130 dropped a 15,000 pound bomb (BLU-82) in the center of the island. This drop was not coordinated with the Marines on the island. As the bomb floated down on a crate from a parachute, the Marines believed it was a misdirected resupply effort and were amazed when it exploded.

81 Ibid, 124.

The successful extraction of the eastern LZ relieved the most critical tactical problem. However, it was unclear as to what should happen next, to extract or reinforce? Undorf contacted Austin for guidance. Austin made it clear that the situation was critical. Unable to obtain orders or guidance from the AMC, Undorf contacted Austin and told him to make the call. Undorf told him he was confident he could control the helicopters and coordinate the fire support to extract his Marines but was unsure about the status of bringing in reinforcements. Austin decided to extract the force. With the decision to extract, the forces at Koh Tang began to execute one of the toughest tactical scenarios: a helicopter extraction in the midst of intense enemy fires during darkness.

As the forces prepared for extraction, the Marines in the western LZ began to reduce their perimeter. As Company E was retrograding from the perimeter under enemy fire, a machine gun team was left behind. These three Marines were not discovered missing until the extraction was completed and were declared missing in action and presumed dead. Another helicopter, JG-44 had been repaired and was now enroute to Koh Tang, adding the available helicopters to six. The *Holt* had completed her mission of towing the *Mayaguez* to international waters and was now in support off the west coast of Koh Tang. With no advance warning of an inbound helicopter, the Marines were surprised when K-51 landed at about 1840. The enemy illuminated the LZ with mortar rounds and poured heavy fire at the helicopter. Moments later, K-51 took off with 54 Marines aboard. Following K-51, JG-43 landed at 1847 and embarked 54 Marines as mortar rounds were impacting the beach. While JG-43 was still in the LZ, JG 44 (piloted by First Lieutenant Robert D. Blough) entered the tiny zone and nearly collided with JG-43.⁸² A near disaster! After JG-43 cleared the LZ, JG-44 made a second attempt to land but was driven off by heavy fire. On the third try, JG-44 landed at 1854 and departed with 40 Marines. Instead of returning to the *Coral Sea*, Blough decided to drop off the Marines on the *Holt* saving precious time.

⁸² High tide had decreased the size of the LZ.

There were now only 73 Marines left on the dark island fighting a numerically superior enemy. At this most crucial moment, the coordination of the battle had to be transferred to another OV-10. Running low on fuel, Undorf and his wingman expertly conducted a battle hand-off to Captain Seth Wilson in Nail 69 and First Lieutenant Will Carroll in Nail 51. Spectre 11 also had to depart because of low fuel and ammunition but was soon replaced by Spectre 21. During the battle handover, radio contact with the Marines was initially lost, and the OV-10 did a low flyover with landing lights on to make sure they were not overrun. Adding to the drama, Wilson's gig had only 1,000 rounds of ammunition remaining. The extraction was going to be a very close call.

Wilson and Carroll went to work controlling the helicopters and coordinating fires. Because of Blough's initiative to disembark the Marines on the *Holt*, JG-44 was inbound to take a second load just fourteen minutes after his first pick-up. At 1915 with Spectre 21 providing effective fires, JG-44 landed and picked up 34 Marines. JG-44 received heavy enemy fire, lost an engine, and was forced to land on the *Coral Sea*. In command of the 28 Marines remaining on the island, Davis, reported at 1929 that they were in danger of being overrun. Spectre 21 continued to provide CAS as K-51 was inbound to the LZ. Because of the darkness, battlefield smoke, and the reflection of flares and illumination off the surf and water, K-51 aborted landing attempts three times. At 1950, on the fourth try and guided by the outgoing tracers of the Marines, K-51 landed in the tight horseshoe perimeter with landing lights ablaze. The perimeter was so tight that the Marines were anchored in the waters edge and under intense enemy fire. After all Marines were on-board, a quick check of area was made by the crew chief, Technical Sergeant Wayne L. Fisk, to ensure no one was left in the small zone. Fisk, a veteran of the Son Tay raid, made his way back on the helicopter and fired his GAU-5 making him the last U.S. ground combatant of the Vietnam War. K-51 lifted off at 2000 ending the small war at Koh Tang. At the end of the day, friendly casualties included fifteen killed in action, 48 wounded in action, and three missing in action and presumed dead.

The U.S. strategic objectives had been accomplished but the battle had been a very close call. Uncoordinated and chaotic planning resulted in an uncoordinated and chaotic battle. At the operational level, there was little situational awareness, and no one was in command or coordinating the battlespace. Throughout the fight, there were occasions when the Marines were nearly overrun by the numerically superior, well-trained, and disciplined enemy force. In spite of the operational command and control failures, the ferocious battle was resolved by a narrow margin through competent tactical leadership, initiative, and individual heroism.

TACTICAL LEADERSHIP AND BRAVERY PREVENTS DISASTER

At Koh Tang U.S. forces approached the brink of tactical and operational disaster with strategic implications that can only be described as bleak.⁸³ The loss of an entire unit would have been a dramatic blow to national prestige and credibility, especially following the U.S. policy failures in Southeast Asia. Throughout the fourteen hour battle seemingly minor tactical events influenced the outcome. The tactical leadership, initiative, and individual heroism of countless servicemen overcame significant command and control obstacles to prevent tactical defeat and strategic failure.

Command and Control Obstacles

The same command and control failures that plagued the planning resulted in a chaotic battle where friction and confusion reigned. The most significant command and control obstacle was the inability to effectively communicate and coordinate fire support during the battle. Tasked with controlling the battle under direction from COMUSSAG, the AMC was ineffective and at best monitored rather than coordinated the battle. In spite of the technologically advanced, long range communications systems, COMUSSAG and the AMC were not able to command or even gain situational awareness through most of the battle. The AMC and battle staff were overwhelmed by unexpected events and could not react to the tempo of operations to make timely and accurate decisions. The communication system of radio nets tying higher echelons of command to tactical units created tremendous friction. Most of the nets were channeled through the ABCCC. As a result, the ABCCC was inundated with radio traffic and messages from tactical units and three echelons of higher command. Within the first minutes of combat after UHF radios were destroyed in helicopter crashes, the remaining VHF nets were used to coordinate actions between units on the ground and to coordinate CAS. These VHF nets were saturated to the point where they were barely usable. Compounding the problem was micromanagement from higher headquarters, which added friction and increased the burden on

⁸³ Guilmartin, 150.

the already stressed ABCCC. There was a constant and sometimes simultaneous demand of battle reports as well as tactical direction from both COMUSSAG, CINCPAC, and the NMCC. CINCPAC not only demanded continuous battle reports and casualty counts, but also attempted to control the tactics of helicopters and the Marines.⁸⁴ At one critical point in the battle when Marines were coordinating an AC-130 fire mission to support a helicopter insert, USSAG demanded to know if the Marines had a Khmer linguist and a bullhorn with them.⁸⁵ From the opening shots of the battle the ABCCC became a bottleneck in the information flow and as a result was overwhelmed, confused, and gained little situational awareness. Meanwhile, the battle raged with little coordination or direction from the AMC.

There was sufficient firepower to provide continuous support of the USAF helicopters and Marines at Koh Tang; however, there was no workable plan to coordinate fire support. Because the tactical planners were briefed that the *Mayaguez* crew members were being held by only a platoon of irregular forces on the island, no preparatory fires were planned. As the first inbound helicopters received withering fire in the LZs, there was no immediate fire support available. An AC-130 gunship was on station, but minutes before the helicopters began their descent into the LZs, it left station to refuel. With A-7s on station, no one at the battlefield could accurately direct any CAS. The ABCCC was unaware of the friendly locations and A-7s could not identify Marine positions. Because UHF radio links were severed, the Marines could not initially communicate with CAS aircraft but later established contact over the clogged VHF nets. To facilitate the coordination of CAS, a fighter pilot was designated as the airborne tactical air controller (TACA). The TACA was the on-scene commander of the tactical aircraft to direct CAS and to serve as the link between the ABCCC and tactical air elements. Because of high fuel consumption and short loiter times of the fast moving jets, TACAs were continuously changing. With each new TACA, the Marines had to brief the pilot on an over-burdened VHF net. After the pilots were finally fully briefed, the fighters only had time for a couple strikes and

84 Vandenbroouke, 107.

85 Guilmartin, 108.

then would leave station to be refueled. Between 0530 and 0630 during the first wave inserts, there were four different TACAs. During the fourteen hour battle, there was a turnover of fourteen different TACAs which severely hampered the desperately needed fire support and increased the friction of the battle.⁸⁶

Breaking Through the Friction

Tactical command and control exhibited through exemplary combat leadership on Koh Tang proved to be the most significant factor in overcoming operational command and control problems. The leadership of the BLT commander, company commanders, and small unit leaders was absolutely outstanding. Very few of the Marines in BLT 2/9 had any combat experience, and yet they performed magnificently. Individual acts of heroism were commonplace and are too numerous to cite. The Marines, outnumbered and facing a tenacious enemy, were able to quickly organize and react to unexpected and changing tactical situations.⁸⁷ Initially fighting from three isolated positions, the Marines were in danger of being overrun and defeated in detail, but the fighting ability of the individual riflemen and their leaders saved the day. The USAF helicopter pilots and crews displayed the same courage and tenacity during the harrowing inserts and extracts under intense enemy fires.

There are many instances where individual decisions and initiative affected the outcome of the battle. It appears from different accounts that a number of officers, Marines and USAF helicopter pilots alike, vehemently protested when the inbound second wave was initially aborted. The second wave of Marines and the ammunition resupply they brought with them provided the critical combat power and ammunition to prevent tactical defeat. Austin's decision to extract his forces instead of remaining overnight was a bold and correct decision. Without reinforcements, it is debatable whether the Marines could have defended their position through the evening, as their ammunition was running low. Blough, piloting JG-44, extracted two loads of Marines from the western LZ. After his first pick-up of forty Marines, he decided to

⁸⁶ Vandenbrouke, 104.

⁸⁷ Guilmartin, 153.

disembark them on the *Holt* rather than flying fifteen minutes further to the *Coral Sea*. Because of his quick perception of battle dynamics, Blough and JG-44 were revisiting the LZ just fourteen minutes later. Blough's critical action speeded the extraction during a time when the small number of Marines remaining in the LZ were almost being overrun.

To overcome fire support coordination problems, resourceful actions were initiated at the tactical level. After surviving a helicopter crash and while swimming in the ocean, Tonkin used a USAF survival radio to call in air strikes on the eastern LZ. Another example of resourceful action was demonstrated during the link up between Austin's isolated group and the Marines in the western LZ. Two officers in separate positions, Kieth in the western LZ and Captain Barry Cassidy located with the BLT command group, were able to direct effective CAS onto enemy positions located within a closing gap between converging friendly forces. Over a VHF net, Keith and Cassidy collectively controlled precision air strikes in a shrinking area by verbally guiding pilots onto the target. Simultaneously, Cassidy also controlled effective AC-130 fire missions. Once employed, the firepower of the AC-130s were critical to the survival of the Marines.

During the battle, Commander Rodgers, the captain of the *Wilson*, was monitoring tactical nets and initiated naval gunfire support. With an A-7 controlling naval gunfire, the ship provided 176 rounds in support of the Marines on the eastern LZ. Additionally, *Wilson's* gig provided close-in machine gun fires that proved critical during the extraction. Rodgers and his crew's situational awareness, initiative, and skill, led to effective fire support for the forces at Koh Tang. The first time that there was any control of the battle was shortly after Undorf and the OV-10s came on station at 1600; about ten hours after the battle began.⁸⁸ Coordinating maneuver with fires, Undorf personally imposed order on a chaotic situation. He also conducted a thorough and expert battle handover to a new OV-10 crew at a very critical point during the

⁸⁸ The Marines had requested OV-10 support from the Air Force early in the planning phase but were denied.

extraction. His tactical and technical competence, initiative, and leadership made a significant difference in the outcome of the battle.

The battle at Koh Tang was an extremely close call. There are a myriad of minor individual actions that collectively or separately may have changed its outcome. The intangible characteristics of the Marines and other servicemen at Koh Tang to include leadership, discipline, bravery, improvisation, dogged determination, and esprit de corps, were the most significant factors in overcoming friction of battle.

LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE

As Guilmartin observed, "Koh Tang was both a small war and the last battle of a larger one"⁸⁹ The *Mayaguez* incident and subsequent battle at Koh Tang represented the closing chapter in a long and unpopular war in Southeast Asia . In the same instance, it also provided a glimpse to the future. The *Mayaguez* incident resulted in a rapid response, joint military operation and was also a prelude to the type of conflict the U.S. would face in the future. The U.S. would begin to see conflict initiated with asymmetrical acts against non-combatants and/or property by well-armed combatants whose governmental sponsorship may or may not be known. In 1979 just over four years after the *Mayaguez* was seized, Iranians captured the U.S. Embassy in Iran and held 58 Americans hostage for over a year. This asymmetrical act resulted in a failed rescue attempt and a crippled presidency. On Sunday morning 23 October 1983, the Marine barracks in Beirut was attacked by a suicide bomber with a truck packed with explosives. Two hundred forty three Americans were killed, and the course of U.S. policy in Lebanon was altered. In 1993 using unarmed Somali civilians as cover and concealment, gunmen battled U.S. Army Rangers, killing eighteen and taking one prisoner. U.S. policy was again altered. The above listed are all examples in which the tactical, operational, and strategic levels merge together into one. In each case they were like the *Mayaguez* incident. Events at the tactical level involving small units of battalion size or smaller had strategic implications.

The *Mayaguez* incident also marked a change in the technological character of war. During the crisis, national and military leaders possessed and exercised global communications assets and capabilities to control and direct military forces at the operational and tactical levels of war. With the advanced communications resources available today, military and civilian leaders have an even greater capability. The *Mayaguez* incident illustrated that global communications can be a "double-edged sword." They have the potential to enhance command and control and reduce the fog and friction of war. Conversely, their misuse through intrusive micromanagement can

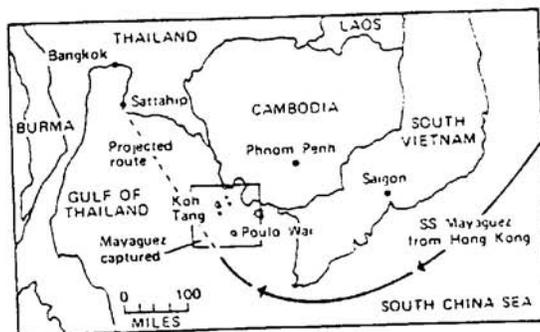
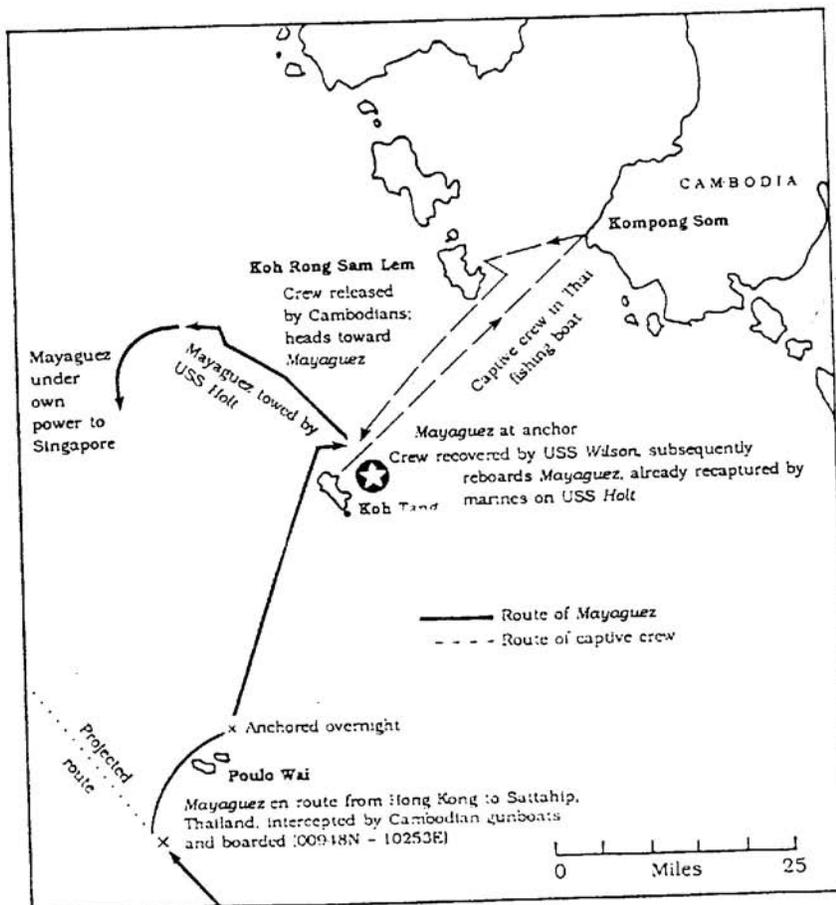
⁸⁹ Ibid, 151.

degrade command and control and significantly increased the fog and friction of war.

Technology also provides a means to collect intelligence. As exemplified in the *Mayaguez* incident, accurate and timely intelligence is not effective unless disseminated.

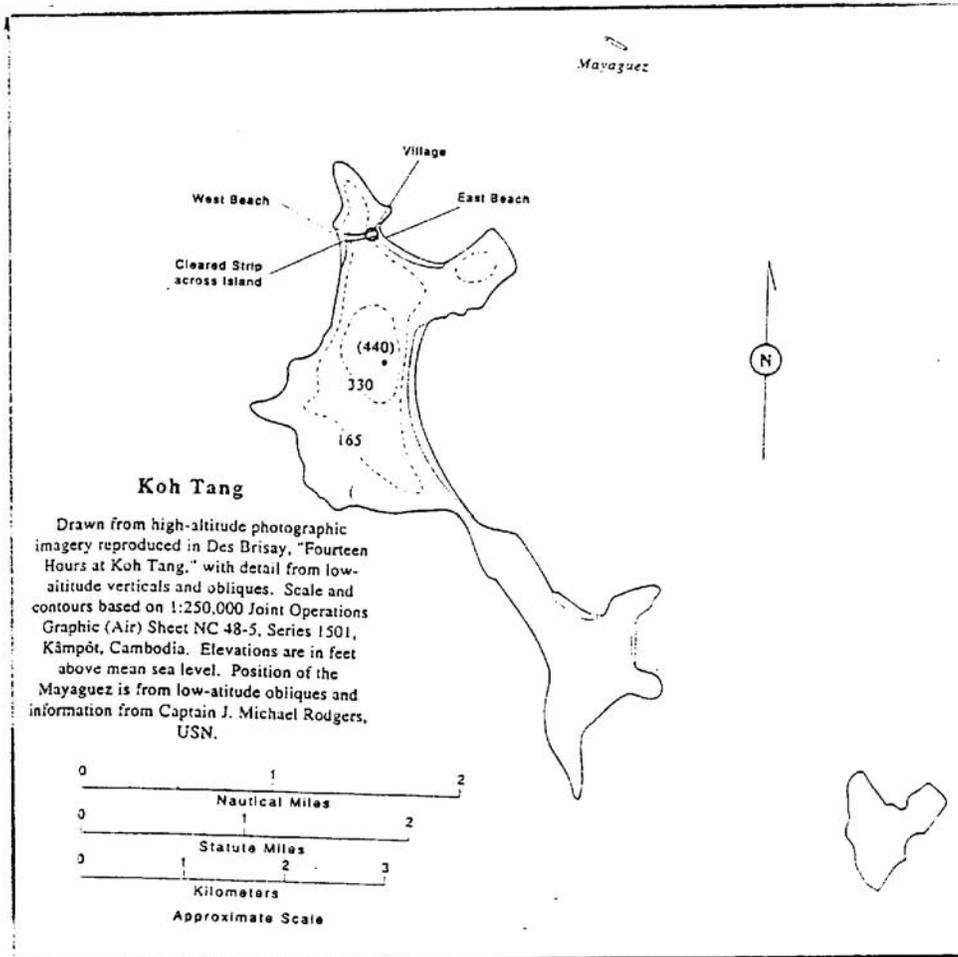
Superior technology and firepower did not dominate the battlefield at Koh Tang. The fighting ability, courage, and steadfast determination of Marines and airmen prevailed to achieved strategic objectives. The value of competent leadership and the fighting ability of an individual Marine or serviceman cannot be overemphasized. Technology cannot replace the intangible factors that influence all levels of war.

**FIGURE 1:
LOCATION OF MAYAGUEZ AND CREW 12-15 MAY 1975**



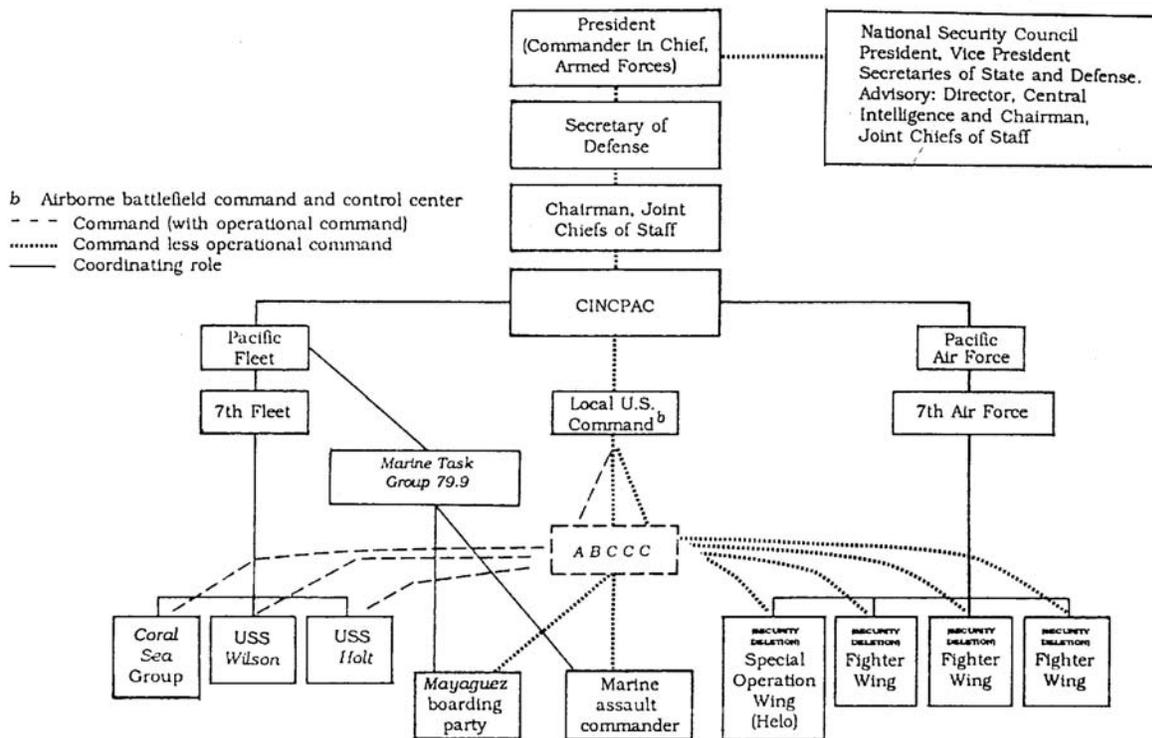
Source: GAO Report, 64.

**FIGURE 2:
MAP OF KOH TANG**



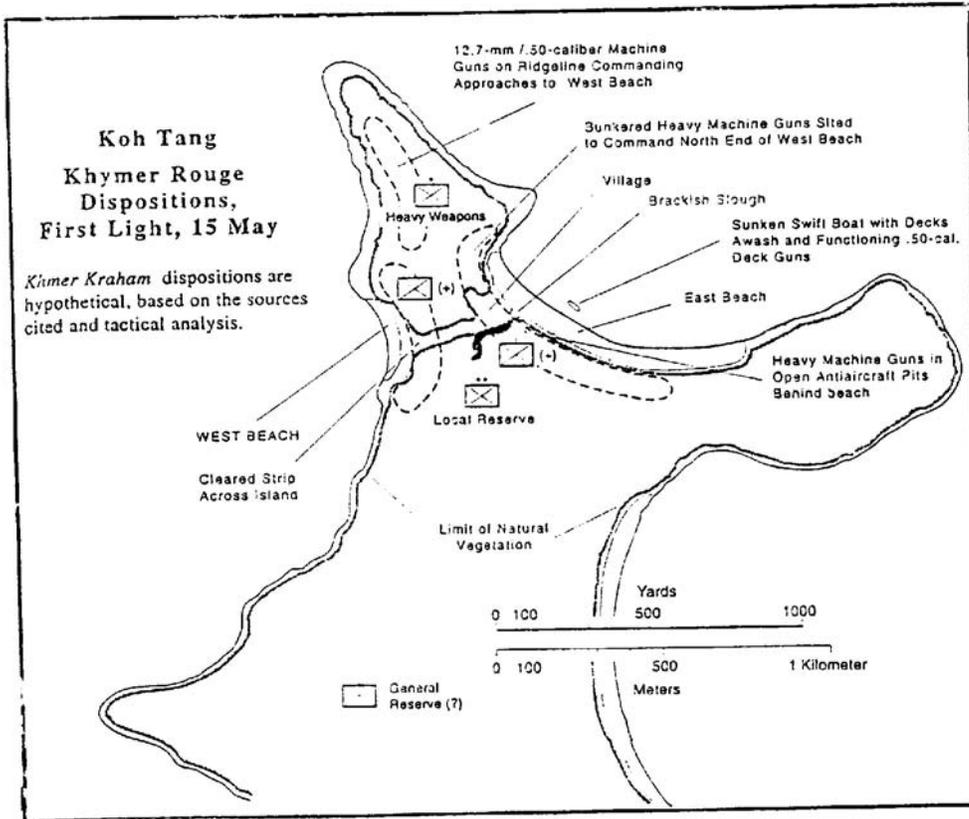
Source: Guilmartin, 71.

**FIGURE 3:
MILITARY CHAIN OF COMMAND**



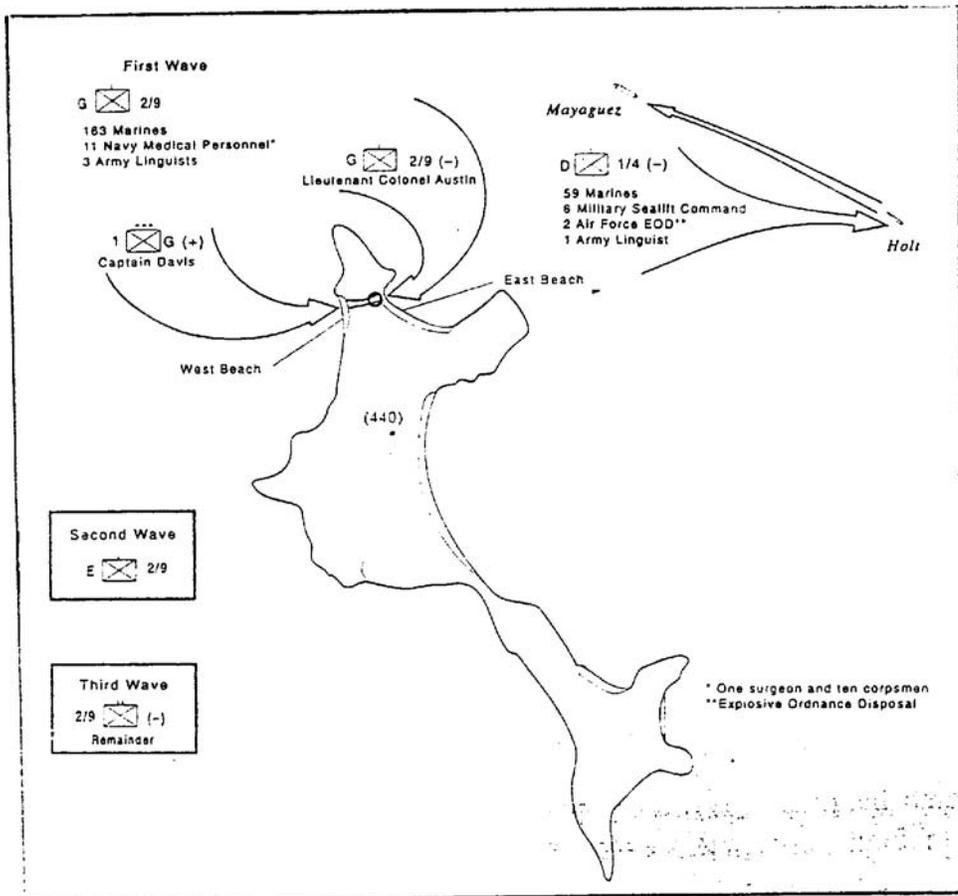
Source: GAO Report, 86.

**FIGURE 4:
SCHEME OF MANEUVER**



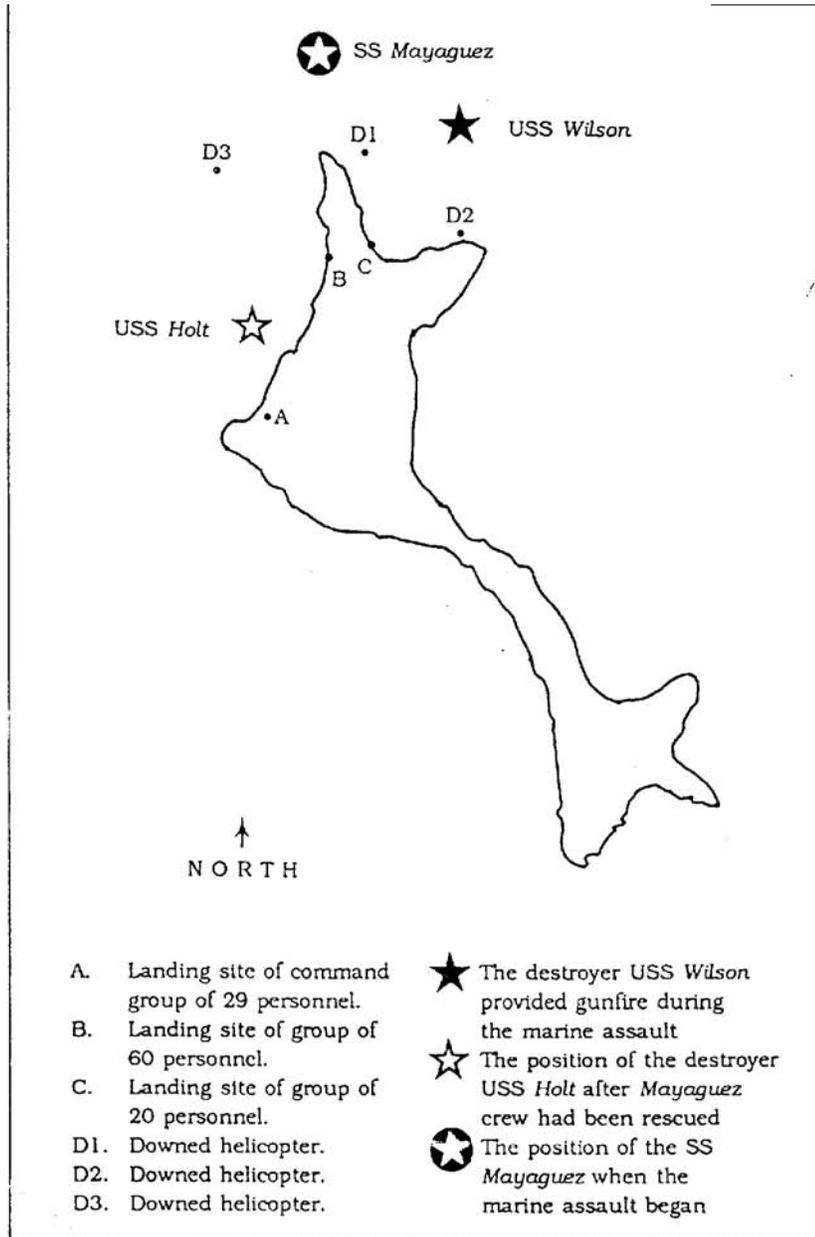
Source: Guilmartin, 78

**FIGURE 5:
ENEMY DISPOSITION 15 MAY 1975**



Source: Guilmartin, 83

**FIGURE 6:
KOH TANG RESCUE OPERATIONS**



Source: GAO Report, 93.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- "A Strong but Risky Show of Force." *Time*, 26 May 1975, 9-18
- Dunham, Major George R., and Colonel David A. Quinlan *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Bitter End*. Washington D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1990
- Ford, Gerald R. *A Time to Heal*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979.
- "Ford's Rescue Operations." *Newsweek*, 26 May 1975, 16-18
- Guilmartin, John F., Jr. *A Very Short War. The Mayaguez and the Battle of Koh Tang*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1995
- Head, Richard J., Frisco W. Short, and Robert C. McFarlane. *Crisis Resolution: Presidential Decision Making in the Mayaguez and Korean Confrontations*. Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1978.
- Hendricks, J. B. "'Mayday' for the *Mayaguez*: The Battalion Operations Officer." *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, November, 1976, 104-108.
- Johnson J.M., Jr., R.W. Austin, and D.A. Quinlan. "Individual Heroism Overcame Awkward Command Relationships, Confusion, and Bad Information off the Cambodian Coast." *Marine Corps Gazette*, October 1977, 24-34.
- Kissinger, Henry. *White House Years*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1979.
- Lamb, Christopher. *Belief Systems and Decision Making in the Mayaguez Crisis*. Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 1989.
- Nesson, Ron. *It Sure Looks Different from the Inside*. Chicago: Playboy Press, 1978.
- "New Test For U.S. Why Ford Moved So Fast." *U.S. New and World Report*, 19 May 1975, 19-22.
- Rodgers, J. Michael. "'Mayday' for the *Mayaguez*: The Guided-Missile Destroyer's Skipper." *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, November, 1976, 100-104.
- Rowan Roy. *The Four Days of Mayaguez*. New York: Norton & Co, 1975.
- Vandenbrouke, Lucien S. *Perilous Options. Special Operations as an Instrument of Foreign Policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Wood, Walter J. "'Mayday' for the *Mayaguez*: The Company Commander." *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, November, 1976, 100-104.

U.S. Congress, House, Subcommittee, on International Relations. *Seizure of the Mayaguez*. Hearings before the Committee on International Relations and its Subcommittee on International Political and Military Affairs. 94th Cong., 1st sess., 1975

U.S. Congress, House, Subcommittee on International Political and Military Affairs, Committee on International Relations, *Seizure of the Mayaguez*, Hearings on the *Mayaguez* Incident, pt.4, *Report of the Comptroller General of the United States*, 94th Cong., 2d sess., October 4, 1976.