AIR COMMANDO JOURNAL

A Professional Publication by the Air Commando Association
Dedicated to Air Commandos Past, Present, & Future

MAYAGUEZ

Chaos at Koh Tang

Mayaguez Memories

Spectre 41 at Mayaquez

NAIL FACs Sort Things Out at Koh Tang

Foreword by Gary Weikel
Colonel, USAF (Ret)

ACA

Vol 7: Issue 1

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Air Commando Association
P.O. Box 7, Mary Esther, FL 32569
Telephone: (850) 581-0099
Fax: (850) 581-8988

Web Site: www.aircommando.org Email: info@aircommando.org

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ON THE COVER

The lithograph "Assault on Koh Tang" created by Mr Ronald Wong, depicts the unexpectedly heavy resistance of Cambodian forces during the initial landings of US helicopters on Koh Tang. (Courtesy of the artist, Ronald Wong)

FOREWORD

It has been over four decades since a little-known battle occurred in the Gulf of Thailand, in the shadow of America's most unpopular war--Vietnam. In May 1975, Cambodian Khmer Rouge gunboats seized the US container ship, *SS Mayaguez*, in international waters. President Ford made the decision to mount a joint military operation to recover the ship and rescue the crew. I was Don Backlund's copilot on Jolly Green 11, a Rescue HH-53C Super Jolly Green Giant. As such, for 14.7 hours I had a front row seat to the extraordinary heroism and selfless dedication of all who put themselves in harm's way that day. Collectively, we relearned hard lessons from the World War II Pacific Campaign as to the extreme difficulty in assaulting heavily defended islands. As a side note, the helicopter Backlund and I flew during Operation EAGLE PULL, the evacuation of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and again on May 15th, 68-10364, was converted to an MH-53J Pave Low during the mid-1980s. That same aircraft was also the one I flew as the 20th SOS commander 14 years later, in 1989, during Operation JUST CAUSE. It was a true "warhorse." MH-53M, 68-10928, now in the Memorial Air Park at Hurlburt Field, was a CH-53, Knife 22, flown by Terry Ohlemeier during the Mayaguez Incident.

This edition of the *Air Commando Journal* keeps alive the memory of those Airmen, Marines, and Sailors who, without question, said, "Send me" when communist Khmer Rouge fighters seized the ship. Between the front and back covers you will find articles that give the history, but more importantly the personal perspectives of those who flew and fought that day. Many of the captains, lieutenants, and young NCOs from the 21st SOS, 40th ARRS, and 16th SOS would go on to form the nucleus of what became Air Force Special Operations Command. Their experiences shaped who we became as Air Commandos, serving at the leading edge of America's efforts to defend itself against those who seek to harm our nation.

The Mayaguez story is also one about the danger of ad hoc joint special operations and the lessons we did not learn before Operation EAGLE CLAW (Desert One) and the creation of US Special Operations Command. Though the battle at Koh Tang island is now almost "ancient history," what happened in 1975 offers lessons that modern Air Commandos can and should learn. They illustrate the value of clear command and control, communications, joint mission planning, teamwork, interoperability, and comprehensive intelligence—all of which we now take for granted but were not common practices then.

So, I invite you to read and enjoy another excellent and important edition of the ACJ.

Gary Weikel, Col, USAF (Ret)
Former 20th SOS Commander
Former AFSOC Deputy Director of
Plans, Programs and Acquisition

CHINDIT CHATTER

In this issue we have something new, two articles from cadets at the USAF Academy. Both authors, C1C Ballard and C2C King, took USAFA's special operations elective, MSS 493. The connection to the Air Commando Association is that a number of our members contributed to the development of that course. We hope that more cadets from the academies and the Reserve Officer Training Corps will follow these cadets' example and offer articles and book reviews for future publication.

Most of our readers are familiar with the SOF Truths: 1) Humans are more important than hardware, 2) Quality is better than quantity, 3) Special Operations Forces cannot be mass produced, 4) Competent Special Operations Forces cannot be created after emergencies occur, and 5) Most special operations will require support from non-SOF. This edition of the *Air Commando Journal* focuses on what is considered the last conflict of the war in Southeast Asia, the Mayaguez Incident. As you read what we consider a great array of articles that recreate that incident, I think that you will agree that the execution of that effort violates at least the first four Truths and validates the fifth one. This in no way diminishes the absolute heroism of the Airmen, Soldiers, Sailors and Marines who carried out the mission. Their heroics are replete in the telling of that story. We are indeed fortunate to have inputs from some of the folks who were there and I think they all agree that there was much to be learned from the planning and execution of this effort.

I don't think it is too large a stretch to say that many of the lessons learned from the more famous effort, Operation EAGLE CLAW (Desert One) were, or more precisely, should have been, learned from the Mayaguez Incident. It is of course readily accepted that the tragic failure at Desert One led to the establishment of the fantastic joint special operations forces that we field today. Air Commandos and their joint SOF partners, prove almost daily through execution of missions often just as complex as Mayaguez or Desert One that the SOF Truths remain relevant. Air Commandos and their joint SOF partners have come a long way since the gallant efforts of May 1975. However, I know that today's Air Commando leaders will not allow these great forces to ever get complacent. It never hurts to review and re-live the problems and issues of times past to ensure we continue to live and breathe the SOF Truths. It is also important to occasionally rehash, and study, the missions that proved the Truths and how they were derived. That is one of the objectives of this edition. Please enjoy.

Any Time - Any Place

Dennis Barnett, Col, USAF (Ret)
ACA President and Editor In Chief

Correction

Vol 6 issue 3 on page 43, photo states that a mule is coaxed into a glider. The actual aircraft is a C-47 and the mules are being loaded through the side doors. The CG-4A glider that was used was loaded through the front with the nose being lifted.

Dale Dahlke
Life Member #L2105
Lorain, OH

Dale,

You are correct! Thank you for bringing this error to our attention, we appreciate our members' keen eyes and attention to detail.

Any Time - Any Place
Jeanette Moore
Media Coordinator

Gooney Bird

To: Editor-in-Chief,

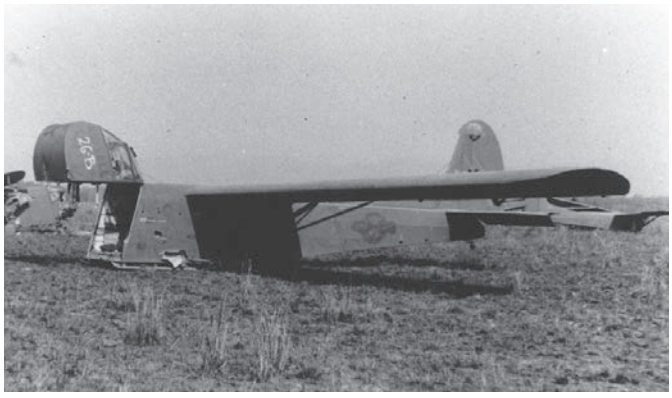
Always enjoy the Journal and wish to thank everyone involved for doing such a great job.

However, I would like to point out a small error on Page 43 of the February issue. The caption mentions a mule being coaxed into a glider sometime in 1944 and that the glider has the encircled question mark of the 319th TCS on the tail.

I am 100 percent sure that the aircraft is not a glider but rather a power-driven C-47 "Gooney Bird." Why am I so sure? I have about 2,000 hours flying time in the C-47. I flew the C-47 in three different Special Operations units from 1968 until 1974.

The answer is in the vertical stabilizer. If you look closely in the picture just between the "d" and the "o" in the word "Commandos" you will notice an area where the rudder has about a 45 degree turn, so to speak. All C-47s have that same shape. Gliders have a different shaped tail.

If you "google" a photo of a C-47 online, you will see what I mean. I have a couple of scale model DC-3's and of



course they have the same shaped tail.

In addition, a mule would not be loaded through the side door on a glider. It would be loaded by tilting the nose of the glider upward, just as jeeps and other cargo was loaded.

Incidentally, during WWII I lived and went to school about 15 miles from the Laurinburg-Maxton Army Airfield (North Carolina) glider training base and remember seeing on a daily basis C-47's towing gliders. Depending on which runway was being used, they would come right over our house.

John L. Scott, Major USAF (Ret)

Maj Scott,
Thanks for pointing this out. We always strive to be as factual as possible and truly appreciate folks like you helping ensure that.

Best regards,
Dennis Barnett

Crew of Woody 27

There was a small article on the crew of Woody 27 in your journal/magazine on August 2011. The crew I served with, from the 9th SOS won the Brigadier Ross G. Hoyt award that year. I was the flight engineer on that crew. I had the article printed out at one time but because of several moves I lost the article. I am now retired and a little more nostalgic than I used to be and was wondering if you could send me the article in digital format.

Please understand that I have searched the internet top to bottom and cannot find the article.

Thank you in advance,
Matt Auble

Dear Matt,
Thank you for reaching out to the ACA regarding the article in the Air Commando Journal. I have emailed a PDF of page 35 of the August 2011 issue and a link to find the all digital versions of the Journal online. Congrats on your retirement!

V/r
Jeanette Moore
Media Coordinator

RIP James 'Jim' Boney

Dear Air Commando Association and Friends,

Thank you so much for the beautiful flower arrangement you sent to Dad's Memorial Service. Dad loved flowers and your arrangement would have put a huge smile on his face. Dad truly loved the ACA and he was so proud to serve as Editor of the ACA Newsletter for all those years. He found true happiness with the work and the friendships he had with the ACA. I know Dad would have been honored by your thoughtfulness and your kindness.

We are forever grateful for all of you and for your love and support during this very difficult time.

Love,
Debbie (Jim's oldest daughter)
and The Jim Boney Family

Hoo-yah Team

Dennis,

My sincere thank you for everything ACA does day-in and day-out. Your daily engagement and support made wing command extremely enjoyable...ACA was always there, any place...any time. Please let all Air Commandos know my deepest and sincerest appreciation for being a great teammate!

All my best, Hoo-yah Team,
Mike Martin, Brig Gen (Sel) USAF
Former 24 SOW Commander

Designing the *Air Commando Journal*

Dear Ms Moore,

Our conversation was most enlightening! Thank you for offering to send a few of the *Air Commando Journal*s. I now recall receiving a couple of them.

Your time and talent to make them possible is a tremendous contribution, worthy of far more recognition than you probably receive. May you know how much honor your effort brings to us 'ole Warriors, Any Time – Any Place!

Sincerely,
Ed Laughary, Mesa, AZ
Life Member #L0632

Dear Jeanette,

I just wanted to drop a line and say I picked up a copy of *Air Commando Journal* and was very impressed with your work. I am a graphic artist myself and appreciate a clean magazine. Nice layout and design.

Jeff Pendleton
AFSOC Public Affairs

Jeffrey,

Thank you for your kind words! I am fortunate to work with a great group of dedicated volunteers who help ensure the Air Commando Journal is the best it can be.

-Jeanette Moore
Graphic Designer, Air Commando Journal

Invaluable Resource

Dennis,

Congratulations on the high caliber publication the *Air Commando Journal* has become. As the SOF Chair here at AU I get a reliable shipment of the magazine and share them with others here at AWC. Just last year I initiated a SOF Air Elective and found that the Air Commando publication to be an invaluable resource. I have also drawn upon its pages for my broader US SOF Enterprise elective. I have a tentative plan to bring some of my students down to Hurlburt in April for the SOF Air Elective.

Best regards,
James A. Rodriguez, Col, USAF
Special Operations Forces Chair to Air University
Air War College/Leadership and Warfighting Department

Submissions can be e-mailed to info@aircommando.org or mailed to Hot Wash c/o Air Commando Association, P.O. Box 7, Mary Esther, FL 32569. ACA reserves the right to eliminate those that are not deemed appropriate. Thank you in advance for your interest in the *Air Commando Journal*.

OPERATION FREQUENT WIND

The Evacuation of Saigon, April 1975

By the Air Commando Journal Staff

On 29 April 1975, the USAF, USMC, and US Army conducted the largest helicopter evacuation ever, the evacuation of Saigon, Republic of South Vietnam (now Ho Chi Minh City, Socialist Republic of Vietnam). Over the course of a day, more than 1,000 Americans and 6,000 "at risk" Vietnamese were airlifted to US Navy ships waiting offshore. This is the story of the final episode of America's War in Vietnam.

Setting the Stage

After the Second World War, the French reasserted themselves as the colonial rulers of Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia). In 1946, the Viet Minh, a national independence front that had fought the Japanese with Allied help during the war, opposed the French re-occupation of their country. During the First Indochina War (1946 – 1954) the Vietnamese fought to expel the French. China supported the Viet Minh with money, supplies, weapons, training, and safe havens. The US supported the French. France's rule in Vietnam ended in May 1954, after the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu.

The Geneva Peace Conference granted independence to Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, but divided Vietnam at the 17th Parallel into the communist North and the democratic South. The division was supposed to be a temporary political expedient until elections could be held to allow the Vietnamese people to determine

21st SOS CH-53 arriving at US Embassy in Saigon. (Photo courtesy USAF)

their future national government in a unified Vietnam. When the promised elections failed to happen, former Viet Minh cadres that had remained in the southern half of Vietnam were re-activated as the National Liberation Front, also known as the Viet Cong, in order to begin a communist-sponsored insurgency.

The Second Indochina War, or the "American War" as the Vietnamese now call it, is generally agreed to have been fought from November 1955 to the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975. Because of Cold War fears about countries falling to communism, one after another like dominos, US presidents beginning with Harry S. Truman began contributing money, arms, equipment, advisors, and sometimes troops, to help threatened nations. In 1950, the US created a Military Advisory and Assistance Group in Vietnam to manage Special Forces advisors helping to train the South Vietnamese Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). It bears noting that also beginning in 1950, the People's Republic of China had advisors helping to train the North Vietnamese People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN).

Throughout the 1960s, successive US presidents affirmed our nation's commitment to South Vietnam with increasing amounts of aid and US troops on the ground. After the August 1964, Gulf of Tonkin Incident, where a US Navy destroyer was attacked by North Vietnamese gunboats, the US expanded its aid and military presence, including air campaigns such as Rolling Thunder and Arc Light. The communist's 1968 Tet Offensive marked the beginning of the end of US involvement in the war. At that point US ground forces began to draw down, although the USAF continued to provide extensive air support to the ARVN. After more than four years of negotiations, the Paris Peace Accords were signed in January 1973.

By August, all US combat troops had left South Vietnam. Although a peace agreement had been signed, the war in Indochina did not end. Two years later, in April 1975, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and Saigon fell to the communists. In December, the capital of Laos, Vientiane, was taken by the communist Pathet Lao.

Even after the last combat soldier and Marine had departed South Vietnam, several thousand US civilian and military personnel remained, most working in the embassy and Defense Attaché's office (DAO) in Saigon or at one of the US consulates in the major cities. In early April 1975, as the PAVN was launching what would become its final conventional offensive of the war, President Ford announced that US cargo aircraft bringing equipment and supplies to assist the ARVN would airlift Vietnamese orphans out of Vietnam on their return flights, in addition to US citizens and their eligible dependents. By mid-April, over 6,000 people, including Vietnamese dependents of US citizens had been flown to the United States. The President also authorized the evacuation of Vietnamese who were not US citizens or dependents but were "at risk" of persecution by the communists because of their long-standing relationships with the US government. By the end of April, the fixed-wing airlift had evacuated more than 45,000 people.

On 29 April 1975, with the PAVN close enough to Saigon to launch rockets and fighter-bomber sorties onto Tan Son Nhut airport, the fixed-wing evacuation was halted. But at the US embassy and the DAO, and in the countryside around Saigon, there were thousands more Americans and eligible Vietnamese needing evacuation. With Saigon surrounded, President Ford gave the execute order for the final, helicopter evacuation — Operation FREQUENT WIND (OFW).

The Evacuation Plan

OFW was not supposed to be an ad hoc evacuation. The contingency plan for the evacuation of Saigon, CONPLAN 5060V, had been worked out, approved, and updated in the years before the execute order was given. Evacuees would be notified to move to predetermined rooftop landing zones (LZs) and ground pickup points throughout Saigon where UH-1 helicopters or buses would transport them to the DAO compound at Tan Son Nhut AB. Larger cargo helicopters, CH-46s and H-53s from the USMC and USAF, would then transport evacuees to US Navy ships waiting offshore in the South China Sea. But panic took over and crowds of civilians blocked the streets and overwhelmed the LZs. At Tan Son Nhut AB, South Vietnamese military officials demanded that they and their families also be evacuated. The official after-action review of OFW noted that the number of people requiring evacuation exceeded the numbers planned for by a factor of more than ten. (Editor's note: Having the number of evacuees far exceed the numbers planned for is not unusual. This phenomenon is also described in *ACJ*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, "Operation ASSURED RESPONSE," the evacuation of Liberia in 1996.)

Over 18 hours on 29 and 30 April, American helicopters would extract almost 7,000 more people from Saigon. While most of the heavy and medium lift helicopters would come from the USMC, on 20 April six CH-53s from the 21st Special Operations Squadron (SOS), call sign Knife, and four HH-53s from the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS), call sign Jolly, were flown from a staging base at U-Tapao AB in Thailand to the *USS Midway* to become part of the helicopter airlift package and to familiarize the USAF aircrews and maintenance personnel with shipboard procedures. On 22 April, Col J.J. Anders, the commander of the 56th Special Operations Wing replaced two of the Jollies aboard the *Midway* with Knives because the special operations CH-53s did not carry the rescue equipment and pararescue specialists (PJs) that the HH-53s did. Thus, the SOF CH-53s could carry more people than the Rescue HH-53s. The two HH-53s remaining on the *Midway* were dual-tasked to provide combat rescue coverage for the air flotilla of USAF and USN fighters, SEAD (suppression of enemy air defenses), and tanker aircraft covering the extraction force and also to support the airlift.

Operation FREQUENT WIND

The 20 April deployment of the Knives and Jollies aboard the *Midway* was the first time a large number of USAF helicopters used an aircraft carrier as a "lily pad." This tactic would become commonplace decades later, but in 1975 it was highly unusual. Lt Col John

Denham, the 21st SOS commander, led the USAF contingent. Maj John "Joe" Guilmartin, was the senior officer from the 40th ARRS.

When the USAF crews arrived, they had to learn Navy customs and language, in addition to operating and maintaining their aircraft from the ship. One AF pilot who had discovered where the weight room was on the ship was politely corrected when briefing the other USAF crews that it was located near the "forecastle" instead of using the naval version, "foc'sle." It was all part of the learning curve and the airmen who served aboard the *Midway* remember the sailors

21st SOS Knives along with Army UH-1s on the *Midway*. (Photo courtesy of Koh Tang Military Veterans Organization)

treating them well and helping them adapt to this new, "foreign" culture. For the next week or so, the Air Force crews flew training sorties off the ship and the maintainers integrated with their Navy counterparts.

One of the issues that came up while learning to operate USAF helicopters off the ship was the amount of clearance required for parking and safe operations. Because the Air Force helicopters did not have folding rotor heads, they were restricted to operating from aircraft carriers, leaving the Marines to fly to and from the smaller amphibious assault ships and the *USS Hancock*, the second aircraft carrier in the primary naval task force, TF-76. For ease of operations, the USAF helicopters would work exclusively with the *USS Midway*. Elsewhere in the South China Sea, TF-77 provided fighter coverage from the *USS Coral Sea* and *USS Enterprise*. It was expected that Navy helicopters would redistribute the evacuees the Air Force brought to the *Midway* to the smaller ships in TF-76.

At 1500 local time on 29 April, the command center on the *Midway* received the launch order to commence the evacuation. Almost immediately, dozens of USMC and USAF helicopters began taking off from the *Midway* and amphibious assault ships in the South China Sea. The first group of CH-53s carried the lead elements of the USMC ground security force (GSF) and two USAF combat controllers (CCTs) into the DAO compound, appropriately nicknamed "The Alamo." Following closely behind was a second group of USMC CH-53s carrying more of GSF into the Alamo, followed by the final GSF element in the third wave of two USMC CH-53s, the eight Knives, and two Jollies. Before departing the DAO compound, each of the helicopters loaded up with civilian evacuees and carried them to the ships waiting off shore.

On most sorties, the aircrews tended to get creative in how they counted the numbers of passengers they took aboard. Because these were scared civilians and not combat-loaded soldiers, the standard rules were bent just a bit. Vietnamese civilians with only the clothes they were wearing did not weigh the same as a fully armed American soldier. At first, three Vietnamese civilians were considered equal in weight to two American soldiers. And, many of the aircrews decided not to count children. It seemed as if every helicopter was carrying almost twice its normal load of passengers. On many occasions the reception parties on the *Midway* unloaded more than 90 people from the Knives and Jollies.

The North Vietnamese had agreed to not interfere with the evacuation and had ordered commanders to not oppose the helicopter flights. That did not stop victory-crazed PAVN and Viet Cong soldiers, or angry ARVN troops from shooting at the helicopters; the threat was real. As the Knives and Jollies flew over the chaotic city and into the Alamo to pick up evacuees, they took fire from small arms, anti-aircraft artillery (AAA), and surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). As the third wave of H-53s began its descent from the initial point and into the DAO compound they were "painted" (tracked) by three different SA-2 Fansong acquisition radars. The SAM batteries never fired, though. Maj Guilmartin, flying Jolly 12, reported receiving the buzzing indications of an SA-2 tracking radar in his headset while still "feet wet," shortly after lifting off from the *Midway*. Because the noise was distracting as he and his crew tried to pick their way through marginal weather, billowing smoke, and dangerous towers, he turned off the radar warning receiver. Luckily, an F-105 Wild Weasel picked up the same SA-2 and destroyed that particular SAM threat with a high speed anti-radiation missile.

The defensive systems used to protect the helicopters from heat-seeking SAMs were a bit more primitive in 1975 than they are today. Back then, crewmembers

would manually fire a signal flare from a Very pistol and hope the SAM tracked the flare instead of the helicopter. Because the seeker heads in those early model, Soviet-supplied SA-7 Grails were designed to track the hottest point in the field of view, the tactic often worked … provided the crewmembers saw the missile in sufficient time to launch the flare. While returning from the DAO compound, heavily overloaded with 97 Vietnamese civilians in the back, the flight mechanic on Jolly 12 saw an SA-7 launch and that it was tracking towards their helicopter. He fired his Very pistol and hoped. Luckily, the missile went to the signal flare and missed the helicopter by about 100 feet.

At 2000 that evening, the last of the DAO personnel began boarding two CH-53s from the 21st SOS for evacuation. Before the helicopters could lift off, however, about 40 South Vietnamese civilians came through a hole in the fence and begged for evacuation. The Knife crews loaded these extra civilians on board and by 2030, the last civilian evacuation flight had departed the Alamo. It was now time to withdraw the ground security forces. Over the next few hours, the Marines destroyed the satellite communications terminal and set thermite and demolition charges in selected buildings. As the last Marine helicopters lifted out of the DAO compound, shortly after midnight, the charges were ignited. Sensitive areas of the compound were destroyed and millions of dollars were set fire.

Beginning at about 1900 local time, as evacuation operations at the Alamo were tapering off, the focus shifted to the US embassy. Earlier that morning, it was estimated that over 10,000 people had gathered outside the embassy. The Marine Security Guard closed and locked the gates, and during the afternoon helicopters brought additional Marines to the embassy to reinforce the defenses. The huge crowds surrounding the embassy prevented any movement by bus to or from the DAO compound. Now unable to travel to the designated evacuation point, Maj Kean, the commander of the Marines, prepared to evacuate civilians from the embassy. Marines and some Seabees began cutting down trees and moving vehicles from the parking lot in order to create a larger LZ able to accept the higher gross weight of the H-53s. This second unplanned LZ would augment the original, smaller LZ on the Chancery rooftop. Maj Kean informed SEVENTH FLEET that the evacuation requirements for the embassy needed to be changed. Where previously the plan was to extract 100 – 150 Americans: Amb Graham Martin, his staff, and the Marine Security Guard, there were now thousands of evacuees needing to be airlifted out. The situation at the embassy had gotten desperate.

The airlift from the embassy was to begin at about sunset, once helicopters working the evacuation from the DAO compound became available. On board the *USS Blue Ridge*, the TF-76 command ship, the decision was made to halt all evacuations from the embassy at dark as a safety precaution. Weather over Saigon was still bad and made worse by smoke and haze from fires blazing throughout the city. With darkness approaching and with nearly all the crews having been in the cockpits flying for hours, the admiral on board the *Blue Ridge* wanted to mitigate the risk. But the crews were willing to keep flying. To keep the airlift going, Maj Kean used cars and trucks to light the parking lot LZ. The order to stop the evacuation was cancelled…for the moment.

The CH-53s started arriving at the parking lot LZ and the smaller CH-46s used the embassy rooftop LZ to pull people out. Despite the intensity and volume of North Vietnamese small arms being fired at the helicopters, the aircrews kept up the evacuation. Helicopters were arriving and departing the two LZs at about one every ten minutes.

About 2130, one of the CH-53 pilots informed Maj Kean that the SEVENTH FLEET commander had ordered all airlift evacuations from the embassy to cease at 2300. It was time for Amb Martin to intervene. The ambassador called President Ford, who allowed the evacuations to continue. And continue they did…for a few more hours.

By midnight, though, the helicopter crews, ground security forces, ships companies, maintainers, and the aircraft were feeling the effects of so many hours of non-stop operations. One of the Marine CH-46s flew into the water while approaching the ship, killing both pilots. Both USAF HH-53s had been grounded, one for a cockpit fire that disabled the pilot's instrument panel and the other for a broken wheel strut, the result of an overloaded landing. Over half of the original 71 USMC and USAF helicopters were down for maintenance.

The following Knives from the 21st SOS flew 68 sorties, including deployment, redeployment, familiarization/training, and cross-decking operations:

- *68-10925 (Knife 31)*
- *68-10926 (Knife 21)*
- *68-10927 (Knife 51)*
- *68-10928 (Knife 22)*
  Mechanical problems, used for cannibalization on USS Midway
- *68-10932 (Knife 32)*
- *68-10933 (Knife 13)*
  Later crashed enroute to Mayaguez, all aboard were killed
- *70-1626 (Knife 52)*
- *70-1627 (Knife 23)*

The Jolly Green Giants from the 40th ARRS flew 14 sorties, including deployment, redeployment, familiarization/ training, and cross-decking operations:

- *68-10364 (Jolly Green 11)*
- *69-5793 (Jolly Green 12)*

One American who was helping control evacuations from the rooftop LZ was so exhausted that he walked right off the edge. Luckily, he only suffered a few broken bones. Still, Amb Martin kept requesting more helicopters.

In Washington, the President was anxious. He was unwilling to accept any more American casualties and needed the evacuation to be over. When, at about midnight, Amb Martin was asked, "How many more," he answered, "726." The number was completely made up and in fact was about 400 people too low. Over the next four hours the squadrons struggled to generate sufficient aircraft and crews to complete the airlift. By 0415, only six more CH-53 sorties had

been able to get the embassy. At that point President Ford gave the order to end the evacuation. Amb Martin was ordered to leave and the aircraft were only allowed to take out any Americans still in embassy. At 0445, the ambassador and his key staff departed the embassy on a CH-46, call sign Lady Ace 09, and were delivered to the *USS Blue Ridge*.

Just before 0800, Maj Kean and the remaining members of the Marine Security Guard were extracted from the rooftop LZ by a Marine CH-53. On the ground, though, were 420 evacuees, pre-formed into loads, patiently waiting for an evacuation that never arrived. They included a German priest, the embassy's Vietnamese firemen, and about 100 Korean businessmen, members of diplomatic corps, and embassy staff. At about 0830 local time, the CH-53 carrying Maj Kean and the security force landed on the *USS Okinawa*, an amphibious assault ship. Operation FREQUENT WIND was over.

Epilogue

Throughout the night and early the morning of 30 April, USAF maintainers worked to get their broken aircraft back into service. By mid-morning the Knives and Jollies were cross-decking (transferring) evacuees from the *USS Midway* to other ships in the naval task force. While all this was going on, over 50 South Vietnamese helicopters, mostly UH-1 Hueys, brought out more refugees. The extraordinary heroism of the Vietnamese pilots trying to get their families to safety is beyond the scope of this article, but is well documented in both print and online. It is worth your time to learn their stories.

During the two days of the helicopter evacuation from Saigon, USAF and USMC helicopters airlifted almost 1,400 Americans and over 5,500 Vietnamese and other international citizens from the DAO compound and the embassy.

On 2 May, the Knives and Jollies flew their last sortie off the *USS Midway*, returning to U-Tapao AB in Thailand. The next day, the 21st SOS was tasked to help remove many of the aircraft South Vietnamese pilots had used to escape their country. The Thai government was officially neutral, and with three of their neighbors falling to the communists in the past few weeks, they did not want to give any excuse to their aggressive neighbors to bring the war to Thailand. The Thais demanded that the South Vietnamese aircraft be removed or destroyed. The 21st SOS was tasked to sling-load 27 Cessna A-37 Dragonfly and 14 Northrup Grumman F-5E Tiger II fighters onto the *Midway* for return to the US. After the dropping two of the aircraft onto the runway, the sling operation was cancelled and the fighters were trucked to the coast for loading onto the *Midway* by crane.

Both squadrons were back to home station at Nakhom Phanom AB by 6 May. Almost a week later, though, they were back in action and preparing to rescue the crew of the *SS Mayaguez*.

SS Mayaguez and the Chaos at Koh Tang

By Dr Richard Newton, Lt Col, USAF (Ret)

The spring of 1975 was not a great time for the United States. The President had resigned the previous summer and the aftermath of the Watergate scandal was still being played out in the courts and in the media. In mid-April, USMC and USAF helicopters and USAF HC-130s combined to evacuate almost 300 US citizens and third-country nationals from the US embassy in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, during Operation EAGLE PULL, as that nation fell to the communist Khmer Rouge. At the end of April, US forces successfully executed Operation FREQUENT WIND, the evacuation of Saigon, signaling the end of US involvement in the Vietnam War.

On 12 May 1975, two weeks after US news reports showed frenzied South Vietnamese struggling to board US helicopters and escape Saigon, the *SS Mayaguez*, a 10,000 ton, US-registered freighter, was seized by Cambodian gunboats while in international waters of the Gulf of Thailand. President Gerald Ford, who nine months earlier had been sworn in as the President of the United States after President Nixon's resignation, did not need another crisis. After the public embarrassments of EAGLE PULL and FREQUENT WIND, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger saw the Mayaguez Incident as an opportunity to show the world that the US still had the power to assert itself when another nation threatened its sovereignty [a ship is considered sovereign territory of whichever nation has registered the ship]. Despite limited intelligence and hampered by the lack of diplomatic relations with the communist government of Cambodia, the President and his advisors designated the capture an act of piracy and committed to rescuing the 38-man crew and recovering the ship.

As the Khmer gunboats seized the *Mayaguez*, the captain managed to broadcast a MAYDAY signal, "Have been fired upon and boarded by Cambodian armed forces at 9° 48' N, 102° 53' E. Ship is being towed to an unknown Cambodian port." Copies of the message were sent to the commander of US forces in the Pacific, and to the White House, the National Military Command Center, the CIA, and the DIA. The national security advisor, Henry Kissinger (at the time he held both positions, Secretary of State and National Security Advisor) woke President Ford with the news, who then ordered a meeting of the National Security Council for later that morning.

At the National Security Council, time was considered the critical factor. There were many in Washington who remembered what happened seven years earlier when the North Koreans had seized the *USS Pueblo*, a US Navy intelligence ship, in 1968. During that incident, the crew was separated from the ship, taken ashore, and tortured. It took 11 months and the US apologizing and admitting to being inside North Korean territorial waters (which it was not) before the crew of the *Pueblo* was repatriated. President Ford and his advisors did not want a replay of the Pueblo Incident and so he directed that no vessels were to leave or approach Koh Tang island until the ship and crew were recovered.

While a joint task force was hastily formed, the aircraft carrier *USS Coral Sea* was directed the into the Gulf of Thailand, but it would not arrive until 15 May. On 13 May, all available USAF heavy-lift helicopters still in Thailand: 14 H-53 helicopters from the 21st SOS, call sign "Knife," and the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS), call sign "Jolly," were deployed to U-Tapao Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB), south of Bangkok. Enroute, one of the 21st SOS CH-53s, Knife 13, crashed, killing the 5-man crew and

Source: *Air Commando Journal*

18 USAF security policemen aboard. In addition, two of the HH-53s from the 40th ARRS were designated as the combat search and rescue element and would have no direct role in the air assault. This left five CH-53s and six HH-53s to conduct the air assault.

On 13 May, USAF reconnaissance aircraft located the *Mayaguez* anchored off Koh Tang about 90 miles southeast of the port of Kompong Som. On the evening of 13 May, AC-130s began nighttime surveillance of the ship, observing the Cambodian gunboats in the area and monitoring the encampment on the northern part of the island. During the day, USAF and USN fighters took over the surveillance duties. On the morning of 14 May, a fishing trawler was seen departing Koh Tang escorted by Cambodian patrol boats. USAF F-4D Phantoms and A-7D Corsairs began firing shots across the ships' bows and dropping tear gas on the boats, trying to stop the boats from leaving the island. Three of the patrol boats turned back and the fourth was sunk by an A-7. The fishing trawler though, continued towards Kompong Som. The A-7 pilot observed "Caucasians on board the trawler," and did not strike the fishing boat. As the pilot's report was inconclusive about the number of *Mayaguez* crewmen being on the fishing boat, the President and his advisors elected to proceed as if the crew was still on the island.

56th Special Operations Wing security police members aboard Knife 13. (Photo courtesy of Koh Tang Military Veterans Organization)

During the day of 14 May, several Cambodian gunboats were sunk, damaged, or run aground by USAF fighters. While the air operations at Koh Tang were ongoing, a few hundred Marines from bases on Okinawa and the Philippines were deployed to U-Tapao RTAFB, against the wishes of the Thai government. Additional US Navy ships, the destroyer escort, *USS Harold E. Holt*, the guided missile destroyer, *USS Henry B. Wilson*, and the frigate, *USS Schofield*, were deployed into the Gulf to help recover the ship and prevent additional Khmer Rouge forces from reinforcing the Cambodian troops on Koh Tang. That night, the AC-130s continued to destroy and damage enemy gunboats.

The plan called for three HH-53s to deliver the boarding force of Marines, Navy explosive ordnance disposal technicians, civilian mariners from Military Sealift Command, and a US Army captain who spoke Cambodian to the *USS Holt*, where they would then recover the *Mayaguez* and any crewmembers on board via surface assault. The other 8 helicopters would land the first wave of 180 Marines on the east and west beaches at the north end of Koh Tang. Once the first wave was on the ground, all 11 helicopters were to fly back to U-Tapao, refuel, and return with the second wave of Marines. The plan was unnecessarily complicated—it assumed that no helicopters would be lost to enemy action or mechanical problems and that the Marines on the beaches could support themselves for the 4½ hours it would take the helicopters to make the round trip to U-Tapao.

Despite the fact that US forces had been operating in and from the Gulf of Thailand for over ten years, there were no maps of Koh Tang and the surrounding islands in the US inventory. Reconnaissance flights over the island failed to produce adequate photographs of the island and the intended landing beaches in time to be useful for the planners. Based upon reports from Thai and Cambodian fishermen who were familiar with the area, intelligence analysts determined there were no more than a few dozen civilians living on the island and no permanent structures or fortifications. As it turned out, a Khmer Rouge battalion of between 200 – 300 well-trained, well-armed soldiers had been stationed on the island out of fear that the Vietnamese, long a traditional enemy of the Cambodians, would try to take control of disputed islands in the Gulf of Thailand after the fall of Saigon. The Cambodians on Koh Tang had created fortified positions with cleared, overlapping fields of fire across the beaches for heavy and light machine guns. The Cambodians also had anti-aircraft

artillery situated to cause the maximum destructive effect. But the American leadership at US Pacific Command in Hawaii and at the Pentagon in Washington, DC, did not know all this at the time.

On the morning of 15 May, the order was given to seize the *Mayaguez* and rescue any crewmembers who had been moved to Koh Tang Island. By 0830, the assault force on the *USS Holt* had secured the *Mayaguez*. While securing the ship, the boarding party discovered that no US crewmen were on board. Unbeknownst to the joint task force or the President, the Cambodian government had made the decision to free the crew and had broadcast that message over the Cambodian national radio two hours before the assault began. As the source was the Khmer Rouge Minister of Propaganda and the report could not be verified, that critical piece of news was set aside. While the Marines were recovering the ship, the *Mayaguez'* crew was back aboard the Thai fishing trawler and headed to Koh Tang. Because of incomplete intelligence, faulty assumptions, and a sense of urgency, the decision was made to proceed with the assault on Koh Tang.

At first light on 15 May, simultaneous insertions of the Marines began on the east and the west beaches. Knife 21 and Knife 22 began their run-ins to the west beach. There was no fire as they approached. But as they touched down and the Marines started exiting from the aft ramp, the Cambodian defenders opened up. Once all the Marines were off the helicopter, Knife 21 attempted to take off, but the aircraft was severely damaged and one engine was inoperative. With Knife 22 laying down suppressive fire, Knife 21 jettisoned its external fuel tanks, started dumping its internal fuel, and executed a minimum power take-off…literally skipping across the water trying to gain flying speed. About a mile from the beach, Knife 21 finally lost power and the pilot, Lt Col John Denham, ditched the aircraft. The pilot and both flight mechanics managed to escape, but the copilot was trapped. SSgt Rumbaugh, one of the flight mechanics, freed the copilot from the helicopter, but did not resurface himself. He was the first casualty. Denham and crew were rescued by Knife 32 as that helicopter proceeded to the west beach with a full load of Marines.

As Knife 32 touched down on the landing zone (LZ), the helicopter was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade. All the Marines safely exited the CH-53 and Knife 32 struggled off the beach with 75 holes in the fuselage, hydraulic system damage, and damaged engines. By the time Knife 32 made it back to U-Tapao, there were only minutes of fuel left in the tanks and the wounded crewmembers were within inches of death. Happily, all survived.

On the eastern side, Knife 23 and Knife 31 were approaching their LZ. Again, the Cambodians held their fire. As Knife 23 approached the LZ it took major damage to the rotor system, lost an engine, and had the tail section shot off. As the pilot, 1Lt John Schramm, wrestled the crippled helicopter to the ground, Knife 31 exploded in a ball of fire. Because Lt Schramm successfully pancaked his CH-53 onto the beach, the 20 Marines and 5 aircrew safely made it out of the helicopter.

In Knife 31, Maj Howard Corson was dealing with heavy machine gun fire and rocket-propelled grenades. The pilot managed to ditch the burning helicopter in waist-deep water, but the entire cockpit had been shot away. The flight mechanics and many of the Marines had managed to escape the wreckage, but some were trapped inside. SSgt Jon Harston, the flight mechanic, went back into the burning wreckage to help the Marines escape and retrieve his rifle. Eighteen of the 26 people on board Knife 31 managed to escape, but most were burned and in shock. The survivors gathered in the water and attempted to move away from the beach despite heavy enemy fire. Four of the 18 were killed or drowned in the 4 hours they spent near the wreckage waiting to be rescued.

Jolly 41, Jolly 42, and Jolly 43 were diverted from their original LZs on the east beach towards the west beach. Jolly 41's first attempt to insert Marines was driven off by heavy fire.

Knife 31 Crew—Left to right: 2Lt Richard Van de Greer, Maj Howard Corson, SSgt Randy Hoffmaster, SSgt Jon Harston on the *USS Midway*. (Photo courtesy of Koh Tang Military Veterans Organization)

Minutes later, Jolly 42 and 43 were also forced to abort their initial attempts due to heavy resistance. On the second try, both Jollies were able to deposit their Marines on the beach. Jolly 42 suffered heavy damage and limped back to U-Tapao. Jolly 41 tried twice more to land, but each time was driven off. Jolly 41 then refueled from the HC-130 overhead. An hour after the assault had started, there were 109 Marines and 5 USAF crewmen on Koh Tang.

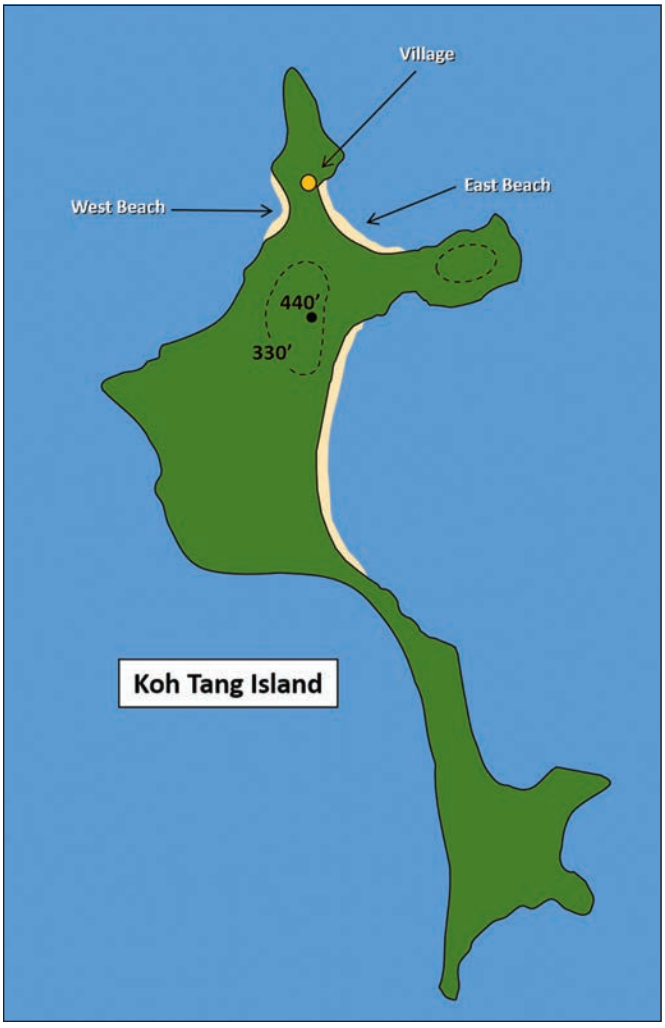
After dropping their Marines on board the *USS Holt*, Jolly 11 and Jolly 12 returned to U-Tapao to pick up the second wave of Marines. Jolly 13 remained in the area as the rescue element. With an A-7 providing fire support and trying to coordinate the overall effort, Jolly 13 flew to the west beach to rescue the Marines and crewmen from Knife 23. Although

Jolly 13 was able to land on the beach, the Cambodians had the 25 survivors pinned down and they could not reach the helicopter. After absorbing tremendous punishment, including fires in the defensive flare case and in the auxiliary fuel tank, Jolly 13 had to abandon the rescue attempt. Meanwhile, Jolly 41 returned from the tanker to try and insert his Marines again.

Overhead, an AC-130H, Spectre 61 from the 16th SOS was able to pinpoint all friendly positions and began providing 20 mm and 40 mm suppressive fires to the attempted insertions, at times coming within 50 meters of the friendly troops. With Spectre 61 supporting, Jolly 41 began another run-in to the west beach. Damage to the rotor system and engines caused him to break off the approach, though. But Marines on the island had seen the enemy positions and the AC-130 used its 105 mm howitzer to destroy the Cambodian fortifications. Jolly 41 came back in for a final try, again with Spectre providing covering fires. As the HH-53 was off-loading the Marines onto the west beach, Cambodian mortars began to range the helicopter. One round landed within 10 feet of the tail rotor. Temporarily aborting the insertion, Jolly 41 came back to deposit the remaining five Marines on the beach. Despite two more attempts, Jolly 41 was never able to deliver the last five Marines and had to limp back to U-Tapao. The initial phase of the assault was over. 131 Marines and 5 USAF crewmen were on Koh Tang. Eight of the nine helicopters that had flown to Koh Tang were destroyed or so badly damaged that they were no longer available for the operation. That left five helicopters available for the second phase.

Back at U-Tapao, Jolly 11, Jolly 12, and Jolly 43 were joined by Knife 51 and Knife 52, two CH-53s that had not been available at the beginning, but were repaired and deployed to participate in the operation. And, while Jolly 41 had been trying to insert the last five Marines onto the west beach, a Thai fishing trawler delivered the crew of the *Mayaguez* to the *USS Wilson*. With ship's crew and the *Mayaguez* now in American hands, the task became the recovery of the 136 Americans still on the island.

The Marines and USAF crewmen were split into three groups: 82 on the western beach, 29 south of the west beach, and 25 on the eastern beach. All five remaining flyable helicopters were already enroute from U-Tapao with another load of Marines to reinforce and stabilize the ground situation before extracting the Americans. On a positive note, word was received that the *USS Coral Sea* was still heading towards Koh Tang and would be close enough to serve as a maritime staging platform by the afternoon—making it possible for the remaining helicopters to conduct multiple, short-duration extractions between the island and the ship, rather than making the round trip to U-Tapao. And, it would bring the fire power of the carrier air wing to bear.



Source: *Air Commando Journal*

Just before 1200 on 15 May, the second wave of Marines began assaulting the island. Knife 52 approached the eastern beach but was shot up and had to abort the insertion. Leaking fuel and without any air refueling capability, Knife 52 headed back to Thailand without delivering the Marines. Knife 51 and Jolly 43 approached the western beach, maintaining near continuous minigun fire at enemy gun flashes from as near as 50 meters from their aircraft. Despite mortar and machine gun attacks, both helicopters were able to successfully deliver their Marines. Dick Brims in Knife 51 evacuated five wounded Marines before leaving the beach. After depositing the Marines on the beach, Jolly 43 departed, went to the HC-130 tanker, and returned to the eastern beach to attempt a rescue of the 25 Americans stranded there.

As Knife 51 and Jolly 43 evacuated the western beach area, Jolly 11 and Jolly 12 began their run-ins. As Jolly 11 turned its tail to the beach to let the Marines exit via the ramp, Jolly 12 hovered offshore to provide covering fire. Once Jolly

SOF CH-53s differed from Rescue HH-53s in a few important areas. The most obvious was that the HH-53s were air-refuellable. In addition, the Rescue HHs had a third minigun mounted on the ramp which the SOF CHs did not. The HHs also had heavier armor than the CHs. Finally, the HH-53s had fire suppressant foam in 450-gallon external fuel tanks, while the SOF CH-53s had 650-gallon external fuel tanks without foam.

US Marines and a PJ race to an HH-53 at Koh Tang Island.
(Photo courtesy of US Naval Institute.)

11's Marines were ashore, Jolly 12 took his place in LZ. As Jolly 12 was about to lift off, the pilot received a radio call from the ground commander, asking him to hold while he evacuated the wounded. With Jolly 11 providing covering fire, Jolly 12 stayed on the beach to accept the wounded Marines. Once loaded, the helicopter sped for U-Tapao. Jolly 11 went to the tanker, King 24, and joined Jolly 43 for rescue duties on the eastern side of the island. With the reinforcements on the island, the Marines on the western side had consolidated and were strong enough to hold their position. But they could not reach the 25 Americans stranded on the eastern beach. Those men would have to be extracted by helicopter. Unfortunately, two of the four serviceable helicopters were headed to Thailand, leaving only Jolly 11 and Jolly 43 to rescue the 25 men huddled on the northern tip of the east beach.

At about 1430, after USAF fighters and naval gunfire had pummeled the eastern beach, A-7s dropped canisters of tear gas to suppress the defenders. Jolly 43 then led the way with Jolly 11 on the wing to provide covering fire. Intense small arms and mortar fires met Jolly 43 as it approached the beach. While in a hover, the miniguns in the doors jammed, the ramp gunner was hit by mortar shrapnel, a fuel line ruptured, and one engines was disabled. With the crew struggling to keep the helicopter in the air, Capt Purser nursed Jolly 43 out of the eastern beach area and headed to the *USS Coral Sea*. He made a single-engine landing on the aircraft carrier, shut down, and got out of the way while the flight mechanic and Navy maintenance personnel began repairing the damaged aircraft.

At about 1600, two OV-10 Broncos from the 23rd Tactical Air Support Squadron finally arrived to take over forward air controller and on-scene commander duties. Their call sign was "Nail." With darkness only a few hours away, extracting the Americans from the eastern beach was now a matter of urgency. Offshore, Jolly 11 was waiting for clearance to attempt the rescue. Maj Bob Undorf in Nail 68 began calling in F-4s, A-7s, and the AC-130 to soften the area around the eastern beach. By this time, Jolly 12 and Knife 51 had returned after delivering wounded to U-Tapao and were available to assist with the recovery.

Jolly 11 made a high-speed run-in to the eastern beach. With the wreckage from Knife 23 fouling the LZ, Jolly 11 could not land so he turned his tail to the trees and dropped the aft ramp on the rocks and beach while the nose gear was still flying. Small groups of Marines began moving to the helicopter. Knife 51, Jolly 12, Spectre 11, and Knife 68 provided constant fires to protect the Marines and Jolly 11. Once the 25 Americans were safely on board, Jolly 11 departed the eastern beach and headed to the Coral Sea. It had taken massive damage and would not fly again that day.

Knife 51 and Jolly 12 diverted their attention to a report of another American who was said to have taken shelter in the wreckage of Knife 23. Jolly 12 established a hover over the wreckage while Knife 51 used its miniguns to suppress the enemy fire coming out of the treeline. Jolly 12 dropped its hoist into the water next to the wreckage of Knife 23 and for over two minutes—a long time to be stationary and exposed to enemy fire—the hoist operator trolled the hoist through the water near Knife 23. On Knife 51, the left side minigun ran out of ammunition so the pilot reversed direction to bring the right-side gun to bear. After determining there were no survivors on Knife 23, a severely damaged Jolly 12 headed to the *USS Coral Sea*, followed by Knife 51. With no major damage to his helicopter, the pilot of Knife 51 returned to the western beach. Jolly 43, which had had its ruptured fuel line

repaired with rubber hose and duct tape on board the *Coral Sea*, and Jolly 44, just entering the operation after being rushed out of maintenance from its home station at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, were available to extract the 200 or so Marines from the west beach.

It was at about this time that five C-130s from the 50th Tactical Airlift Squadron arrived ready to drop BLU-82 "daisy cutters" on the island. Unsure of the tactical value of the BLU-82s at that point in the operation, Nail 68 directed the first one be dropped in the jungle south of the beaches as a way of showing the Cambodians the power of what was possible. After the shock waves of the first bomb rolled across the Marines on the western beach, the ground commander cancelled all further requests for BLU-82s and the "slick" C-130s returned to base without dropping their bombs.

It was now dusk and time to extricate the Marines from the western beach. Just before 1900, Knife 51 was the first helicopter onto the beach. With it nose gear in the water because high tide had covered the beach, and taking blistering fire from the Cambodian defenders, 41 Marines loaded onto the CH-53. As the heavily loaded Knife lifted off a rocket-propelled grenade flew past, narrowly missing the helicopter. With the crew treating the wounded Marines, Knife 51 headed to the *Coral Sea* to offload the survivors and refuel.

By now, Nail 68 was running low on fuel. Worried about the remaining Marines on the beach being overrun, Maj Undorf turned on his landing lights and flew the length of the beach to verify their safety and point out the friendly positions to the pair of newly arrived Nail FACs, Nail 69 and Nail 51. The AC-130 overhead, Spectre 11, used its sensors to confirm the friendlies' location. Nail 68 handed control of the fight over to Nail 69 and headed home.

Jolly 43 and 44 then approached the western beach with the new FAC, Nail 69, marking the enemy mortar position with smoke rockets. But it was now too dark for the fast-movers to see the marking smoke. Rather than delay the extraction to coordinate strikes by the AC-130s or naval gunfire, the decision was made to continue without preparatory fires. Despite a no-moon night, Jolly 43 landed on the beach to take on more Marines. In the darkness, Jolly 44 almost collided with Jolly 43 while trying to land, but the copilot of Jolly 43 flashed the landing light in time for Jolly 44 to go-around. There was not room in the LZ for both helicopters. With 54 Marines on board, Jolly 43 lifted off and headed for the *Coral Sea*. Jolly 44 then made his run-in to the beach. Heavy enemy fire caused him to abort the first attempt, but once the Marines had suppressed the resistance, they cleared Jolly 44 back in.

Jolly 44 hovered across the water, lights off (USAF crews did not fly with night vision goggles then), guided only by the verbal instructions from his crew. Once safely onto the beach, the Marines closed their perimeter down to 50 meters from the LZ. Nail 69 began strafing the treeline and calling in fires from the AC-130 overhead. Fully loaded, Jolly 44 took off and headed to the *Coral Sea*. But with 73 Marines still on the island and badly outnumbered and out-gunned, time was critical. Jolly 44 made the decision to divert to the *USS Holt* which was much closer to the beach and drop the Marines there. But the landing area of the destroyer escort was tiny and not stressed for an H-53. Also, the HH-53's landing lights had been shot out. Jolly 44 placed his nose gear on the ship's landing pad, with the tail and main gear flying off the back of the ship. The Marines exited through the forward door, after which Jolly 44 headed back to the beach.

With the situation on the ground getting dangerous, the ground commander gave the word to, "Go for broke," and Nail 69 cleared Spectre 11 to start laying down fires "danger close" to the Marines. In total blackness, Jolly 44 returned to the beach, guided only by a Marine onshore turning his flashlight

on and off. Jolly 44 then loaded 34 of the 73 remaining Marines onto the helicopter. As it lifted off, the engines began losing power because of all the salt water they had ingested. A return to the *USS Holt* was out of the question because salt build-up on the engines turbine blades heightened the threat of compressor stall. The *Holt's* tiny helipad left the pilot no margin for error and so, with degraded engines Jolly 44 was forced to go to the *Coral Sea*. With 39 Marines still on the beach, the situation was desperate. At that moment, there were no helicopters available to pull the Marines off the island. Air power would have to hold the enemy off until Knife 51 was refueled and available.

Nail 69 then got a call from the ground commander, "We need to get off this beach in 15 minutes or we don't get off at all." Knife 51 was finally refueled and enroute to the west beach, but smoke, haze, darkness, and salt spray severely restricted visibility and complicated the landing approaches. After three attempts, the pilot, 1Lt Dick Brims, finally dropped the aft ramp of the CH-53 onto the beach and the remaining Marines clambered aboard. For over ten minutes, Brims' helicopter remained on the beach while the crew and the Marines ensured there were no more survivors remaining on the island. The pararescue specialist (PJ) on board, TSgt Wayne Fisk, left the safety of the helicopter and ran to the treeline to search for any Marines that may have been left behind in the darkness. At the edge of the trees Fisk found two Marines and all three returned to the helicopter. After confirming with the ground commander that all Marines were accounted for, Knife 51 lifted off and headed to the *Coral Sea*. Nail 69 then had the AC-130 scan the beaches with the infrared and low-light-level television sensors to confirm there were no Americans still on Koh Tang. Spectre reported not seeing anyone. The Mayaguez Incident had ended.

Reunion of the crew of Knife 51, the last helicopter off Koh Tang, at Nakhon Phanom Air Base, Thailand, 17 May. From left to right: 1st Lt Dick Brims, aircraft commander, in cap and sunglasses; SSgt Marion Riley, flight mechanic/gunner; and Pararescueman TSgt Wayne Fisk, in camouflaged fatigues. (Source: A Very Short War, by John Guilmartin, Jr., page 139)

That night the ground commander discovered three Marines had been inadvertently left behind. The next morning the *USS Wilson* initiated a search, but at 1000 the Pentagon directed all US forces to depart Cambodian waters. Without hard evidence to support the possibility of surviving Marines still on the island, the ships departed. The three Marines were initially classified as Missing in Action and in July 1976, they were declared Killed in Action. Years later, it was discovered they had been captured and executed by the Khmer Rouge.

AFTERMATH:

The chain of command for the operation was convoluted. The overall command of the operation was delegated to Lt Gen Burns, USAF, the commander of the US Support Activities Group in Thailand, who in turn designated Col Anders, 56th SOW, as the joint task force commander. Although Col Anders requested Nail FACs be included in the task force to provide on-scene command (OSC), Gen Burns denied the request, saying that the A-7 flight leaders were FAC-qualified. While true, the A-7s high speed and short loiter time meant that the OSC duties changed 14 times among 10 different aircraft before Nail 68 and his wingman arrived. Four of these OSC changes happened during the first assault wave.

Because of the perceived sense of urgency at the national level, the joint task force was hastily cobbled together, and the diverse elements had no time to prepare, plan, and rehearse. For an operation of this complexity, hindsight showed that to be a disastrous decision. Further complicating matters was the direct involvement in the tactical decision making by the President and the National Security Council. Constant requests for information and situational updates from higher headquarters elements meant that the tactical frequencies were often jammed with distracting and needless communications.

Poor planning based on incomplete intelligence and faulty assumptions caused leaders to compound a tragic situation with bad decisions. During the 14-hour battle at Koh Tang, it was personal courage and initiative that prevented a tactical defeat that would have had strategic implications for the President. The problems of joint command and control, faulty intelligence, and national meddling were not unique to the Mayaguez Incident—these challenges would be repeated at Grenada (Operation URGENT FURY) and Iran (Operation EAGLE CLAW), until finally forcing the Congress to act and create US Special Operations Command and a national-level capability to address contingencies such as these.

MAYAGUEZ ME

By Richard Comer, Maj Gen, USAF (Ret)

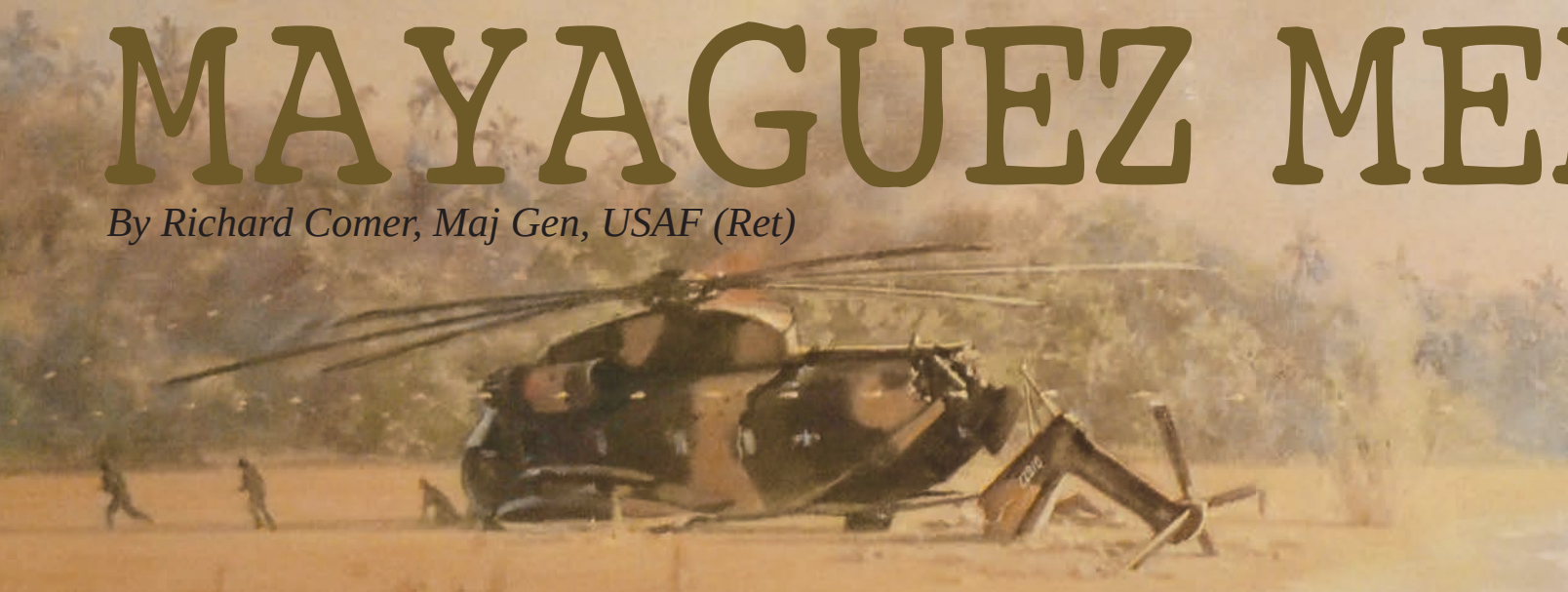
In 1975, I was a 2Lt in the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS), which is what the rescue squadrons were called back then. We were assigned to Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai AFB (RTAFB) and flew Sikorsky HH-53Cs under the "Jolly Green" call sign. The rescue squadrons belonged to Military Airlift Command—now Air Mobility Command, and were nearly always tenant units on other commands' bases. Nakhon Phanom, NKP for short, was no different. All the bases in Thailand and Vietnam belonged to Pacific Air Forces (PACAF).

The other helicopter squadron at NKP also flew the H-53. The 21st Special Operations Squadron (SOS), call sign "Knife," flew the CH-53, and although similar to the Rescue HH-53s, had some important differences. The SOF CH-53s did not have air refueling capability and only carried two miniguns where the HH-53s had a third one mounted on the aft ramp. The 21st SOS was assigned to the 56th Special Operations Wing, part of PACAF.

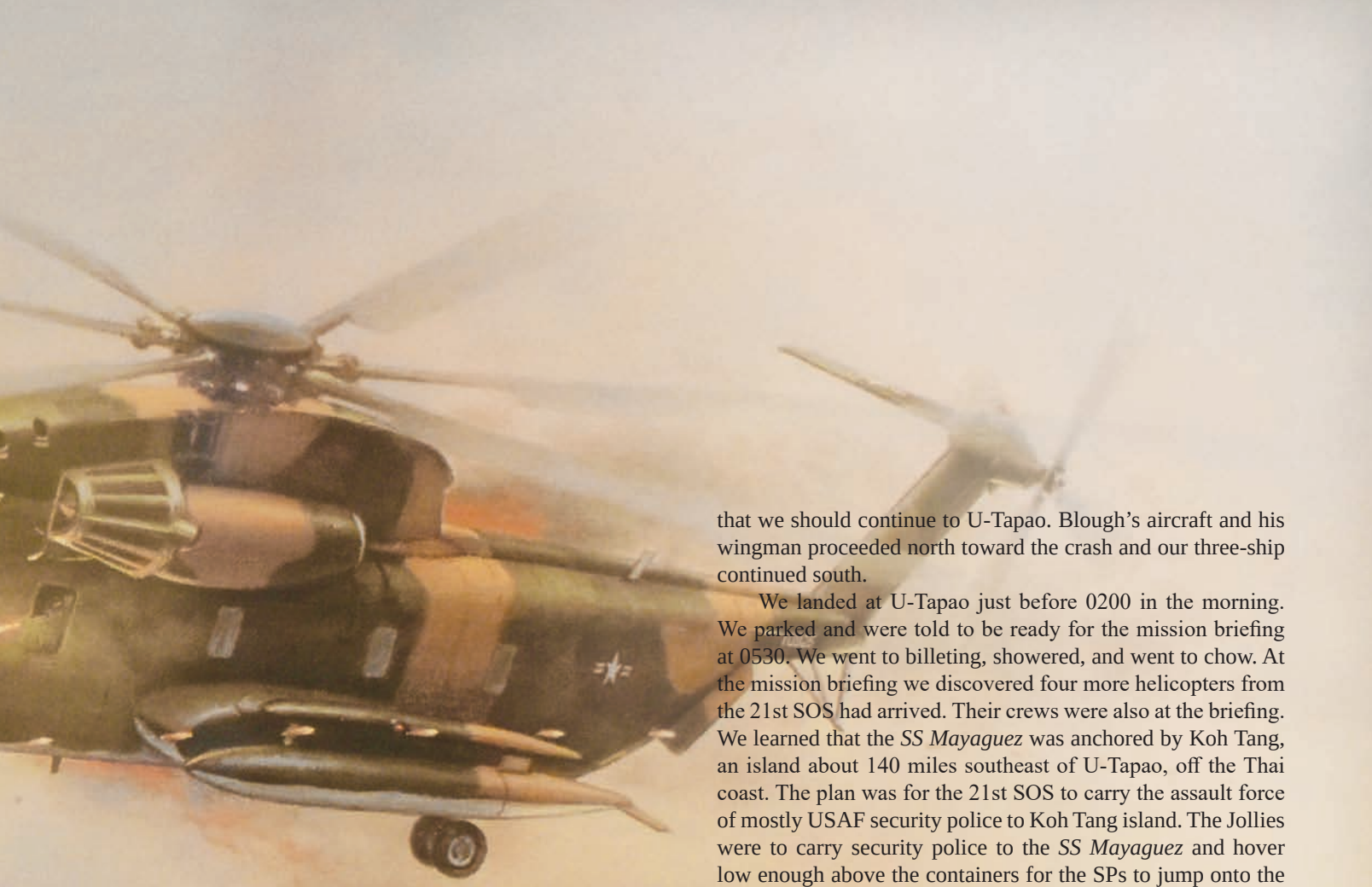
In April 1975, both helicopter squadrons had participated in two very big missions, EAGLE PULL, the evacuation of the US embassy in Phenom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, and later that month FREQUENT WIND, the evacuation of Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam. The capture of Saigon by the North Vietnamese army on 30 April 1975 marked the end of the Vietnam War. We all expected to rotate home very soon and close the US bases in Thailand.

We didn't take much notice of the news about what was happening to the *SS Mayaguez* on 13 May 1975, as far as can I recall. The new communist, Khmer Rouge government in Cambodia was flexing its muscle and thumbing its nose at the defeated Americans. At NKP it was a regular day. My crew, with Capt Barry Walls as the aircraft commander, had tried to get airborne all afternoon for a scheduled training sortie. Our bird was broken and the maintainers seemed to be moving very slowly. At that point in the war, nothing seemed that important. We had lost the war and were awaiting the call to head home.

All of our training sorties cancelled that day – there was nothing flyable. At about 1730, Barry, who was the chief of flight scheduling, said everything was cancelled and we should go back to our hootches (quarters). Just as we arrived at the hootches the phone rang. Barry was calling to bring us back to Ops. When we got there, the squadron commander said we were going to send three aircraft and crews to U-Tapao AB on the southern shore of Thailand to be part of a joint task force to



"Assault on Koh Tang" created by Mr Ronald Wong, depicts the unexpectedly heavy resistance of Cambodian forces during the initial landings of US helicopters on Koh Tang. On the eastern beach both Knife 23, piloted by Lt John Schramm and Knife 31, piloted by Major Howard Corson were quickly hit and disabled. Knife 23 crashed first but the aircrew and Marines on board were able to get to the cover of the tree line. Knife 31, in flames, returned fire with its guns while trying to turn back toward the sea but was hit again and crashed in the water, resulting in many casualties. 2Lt Richard Vandegeer, the copilot of Knife 31, was killed while firing back with his rifle out of the window of his burning helicopter. *(Courtesy of the artist and Col (Ret) Paul Harmon)*



MORIES

recover the *SS Mayaguez* and its crew. The 40th ARRS was to be the combat search and rescue (CSAR) force to back up the assault force carried by the 21st SOS. Our Jollies were to launch and go to U-Tapao where we would receive further instructions. The three crews chosen to go were Wall's crew, Wayne Purser's crew, and Joe Gilbert's. We were excited as none of these crews had flown the earlier missions at Phnom Penh and Saigon, and we now we were getting our chance. When we got to the flightline the maintainers now had six or seven Jollies ready to fly.

We took off at about 2145. As we overflew Korat RTAFB, a little over two hours from NKP, we saw the two Jolly Greens on rescue alert taking off. I called them on squadron common frequency and Hank Mason, the copilot on Bob Blough's crew, told me that one of the Knives had crashed when leaving NKP and they were heading north to help out. We discussed what was going on and figured that there were plenty of helicopters going toward the crash and that we should continue to U-Tapao. Blough's aircraft and his wingman proceeded north toward the crash and our three-ship continued south.

We landed at U-Tapao just before 0200 in the morning. We parked and were told to be ready for the mission briefing at 0530. We went to billeting, showered, and went to chow. At the mission briefing we discovered four more helicopters from the 21st SOS had arrived. Their crews were also at the briefing. We learned that the *SS Mayaguez* was anchored by Koh Tang, an island about 140 miles southeast of U-Tapao, off the Thai coast. The plan was for the 21st SOS to carry the assault force of mostly USAF security police to Koh Tang island. The Jollies were to carry security police to the *SS Mayaguez* and hover low enough above the containers for the SPs to jump onto the vessel. Little resistance was expected at either place. After inserting the SPs, the Jollies were to provide an airborne CSAR alert capability, refueling off the HC-130 tankers.

The launch was planned for 0730. After pre-flighting the helicopters and briefing the SPs, we waited in the cockpits ready to crank engines for Capt Vern Sheffield, the assistant operations officer, to give us the "go" signal. A little after 0730, Vern came out, but he gave us the cut sign across the throat, telling us the mission was on hold and we would have to wait.

We waited for the next seven hours. By 0800, the ramp at U-Tapao was scorching hot. After sitting in the cockpits for a while, we got out to avoid the heat from the sun coming in through the cockpit windows. The auxiliary fuel tank on the right side of our helicopter became my shade. I managed some short naps, using my helmet bag as a pillow.

It was about noon when I noticed that C-141 airlifters had arrived and parked near the helicopters. There were troops getting out of the transports. A group of them were led to our aircraft and told this was their ride. The SPs who had been there all morning were told they were relieved of the mission and the assault would be done by the Marines. I talked with one of the Marines, a lieutenant, and told him what we had been told to do during the mission briefing. He didn't say what he had heard about their mission, but said he needed to go over to one of the other helicopters to talk with his captain. I went back to sleep.

During the afternoon, more and more H-53s from both squadrons arrived. Bob Blough's flight from Korat arrived,

refueled, and flew to the *Mayaguez*. We were directed to wait with our Marines. It was about 1500 when Lt Don Backlund and his crew came to our aircraft with their flight gear. They informed us that due to a need for a fresh crew on the aircraft we were replaced. The mission and aircraft were now theirs to fly. Col Hall was with them and he confirmed the order that we should leave the aircraft and go get some rest. About 30 minutes later, all the helicopter crews showed up at billeting with orders to rest and be ready to brief for the mission at 0400 the next morning. I remember telling Barry that if everybody was now resting, then we should get our aircraft back and be returned to the mission. He said, "Go to sleep."

The phone in our room rang to wake us up. Vern was telling us to get to the flightline. When we arrived he told us that the *Mayaguez* recovery had become a small war. He said several of the helicopters that had gone to Koh Tang had been shot down. There were people in the water and on shore who needed to be rescued and evacuated. He said we should stay close by while he found replacement PJs for our crew. The PJs originally assigned to our crew were now on a 21st SOS helicopter that had launched out to help.

I went from one position to another in the operations building, listening to what was being said and beginning to learn what was going on. The mission was essentially the same as had been briefed the day before. Helicopters had inserted a large group of Marines onto Koh Tang and a smaller group onto a Navy destroyer. The destroyer then went to the *SS Mayaguez* and took the ship back from the Cambodians.

Lt Col John Denham came walking into the operations building a couple of hours after I got there. He was the commander of the 21st SOS. We knew each other from our time as students in the H-53 transition course. Col Denham had been shot down off Koh Tang just three hours earlier. I learned later that day that his flight mechanic, Woody Rumbaugh, had gone down at sea with the helicopter. Col Denham and the other two crew members had been hoisted from the water by another 21st SOS aircraft and had just arrived back at U-Tapao. We spoke briefly. I said I was glad to see him alive. Until that moment, I had not heard that he had been picked up. He put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. Then he went over to the desk which was assigned to his squadron and started tracking where all of his people were. He had several dead, including all on the crew which had crashed on the first night.

Aircraft from the 21st SOS were cycling in and were loading more Marines, refueling, and heading back out. I needed a flyable Jolly Green helicopter. About 1100, Vern assigned three PJs to our crew and told us to get ready to go. He said one of the Jollies was returning and, if it was flyable, he would have us relieve the crew who had been on the bird since 0300 that morning. The aircraft coming in was Phil Pacini's crew. I took flight gear and went out to the ramp to meet the helicopter as it taxied in. It looked good to me, but the maintainers who were talking to the crew began to point at the sides of the aircraft and at the left side auxiliary fuel tank. I saw one of them put his finger into a couple of bullet holes. Bob Dube, the copilot, told me they had taken a good bit of fire, puncturing both aux tanks. They also had some flight control problems that they thought needed to be fixed. Their judgment was that the aircraft was not flyable. The maintenance guys did not have any spare aux tanks to hang on the aircraft either. This news hurt.

An hour later, Vern said another Jolly was coming in and the pilot said his bird was in good shape. We got together and learned we were to take some maintenance guys and Joe Gilbert's crew to the *USS Coral Sea*, an aircraft carrier that had arrived to support the operation. Then we were to join the helicopters extracting people from the island. No more Marines were to be placed on the island and those on shore had to be extracted. Aircraft carrying troops toward the island were turning around and coming back.

Paul Jacobs and his crew landed and parked a perfectly flyable HH-53 at about 1300. It was refueled by the maintenance guys who were going with us to the *Coral Sea*. Our flight mechanic, Sgt Jesus "Jesse" DeJesus, did a quick preflight and we took off with a large load of people sometime after 1400. We tracked outbound from the U-Tapao TACAN on the radial directly towards Koh Tang. Barry briefed the crew through the combat ingress checklist. Barry wasn't long on briefings of this type. He said he assumed everybody was competent in their jobs and knew their procedures. "Stick to them," he said, "and concentrate on getting the right things done and that's how we'll best be able to help out."

I got all the radio frequencies up and about 50 miles out of U-Tapao, I switched to the *Coral Sea's* TACAN frequency. About 100 miles from U-Tapao we had good radio reception and locked on to the ship's TACAN about 35 miles further out. We made contact and told them we had some helicopter maintenance and extra crew members to drop off on their deck. They told us that they would "hot pump" us when we landed. Barry made the landing. It was the first time on a Navy deck for any of us. We had gotten a briefing on the deck procedures and made our way through them. There were two other H-53s, shut down on the deck when we got there.

After dropping off the maintainers and Gilbert's crew, and topping off our fuel tanks, we took off and headed toward the island. We got up on the right frequencies and heard Don Backlund, in Jolly 11, talking to the airborne Forward Air Controller (FAC). The FACs had not been part of the original plan but had been called up from Korat when the first wave of helicopters had encountered strong resistance. Backlund was telling the FAC, Nail 68, that the Marines and surviving crew members on the beaches were under fire and needed to get off the island. Several attempts to pick up wounded during the day had resulted in battle damage, which had put other helicopters out of commission. The two or three helicopters still flying would not last long if previous mistakes were repeated. Backlund was really laying things out and said that it would soon be dark and the chances of successfully getting everybody off the island would be greatly reduced. Barry knew the FAC by name and mentioned that he was a major named Bob Undorf. Lt Backlund challenged him to make things happen and quickly. or else he would be known as the On Scene Commander of a miserable failure.

During that conversation, we joined on Jolly 11's wing and

were now a formation of two Jollies. There was also Knife 51, Dick Brims and his crew, orbiting nearby and ready to work together, but not in the same formation. Different squadrons from different major commands did not fly formation with the same procedures. We were one formation, but loosely so.

Nail 68 went to work, talking to the Marines on the beach, identifying their exact positions, and lining up the strike assets. He called in an F-4 to drop a couple of bombs. The bombs went badly, with one falling short of the island and the second landing long. Both bombs were closer to the Marines than to the enemy. Undorf sent the F-4s home and asked who could hit a target. He then called in the AC-130 to hit some of the spots near the Marines on the east beach.

Finally, it was time for the helicopters to go back in. The FAC called in Backlund's helicopter to land on the east beach and to pick up the Marines remaining there. We went in with them and Brims followed. As Backlund slowed and turned his helicopter to point the tail toward the trees, we set up a slow circle over and around his helicopter. Backlund's two side guns were both blazing away as they set down. I saw Brims' helicopter on the other side of the circle we were making over Jolly 11 and his guns were also blazing. Our guns shot out a couple of bursts but just short ones. TSgt Patterson was the lead PJ on board and he had the gun on the left side. Sgt Rinehart was on the tail, Sgt Styer was on the right. We took a few rounds, a good number up the belly of the cabin, but I saw no damage on the flight instruments. I remember thinking it was starting to get dark and I reached down into my helmet bag on the left of my seat and got out my flashlight. When I did that, I saw my "chicken plate," the ceramic body armor. I had forgotten to put it on under my shoulder straps and suddenly felt very vulnerable. I wondered if this was the mistake which would get me killed. Stupid me. Getting these things right was my only job and I had left out something important.

We took a couple of rounds through the cockpit and I could hear impacts into the fuselage. Undorf was on the radio calling out fire.

Backlund's helicopter came out of the LZ and he called that he had wounded on board, that the east beach was clear of friendlies, and he was heading to the *Coral Sea*. We returned to our holding pattern about 4 to 5 miles off the island. Undorf told us to prepare for a hoist pick-up. There was one person left on the east beach and he was in one of the shot down helicopters. We had seen the hulks on the first run and had gotten a good look at them. One was sitting upright with the tail broken off and the other was further out in the water lying on its side. Nail 68 told us the American was in the one lying on its side. He called the AC-130 back in and cleared them to shoot everything on the beach. The AC seemed to cover it well with sparkling rounds hitting all along the east beach.

Barry had given me the flight controls in the holding pattern and I had the primary radio. I told the FAC, "Request you expedite." Since it was now getting to be really dark. I imagined it was going to be a tough hover in the dark out over the water. I figured we needed to get all the fuel we could into the main tanks because if the auxiliaries were punctured we could not pressurize them. I began a fuel transfer to the mains. Jesse had gotten out of the flight mechanic's seat to run the hoist, which would also mean the right-side gun would have to be swung out of the way and not used during a hoist. Styer, the PJ, put on his swim gear in case he needed to get into the water to help the survivor.

The AC-130 finished its work and Undorf called us to go in for the hoist pickup. I reached down to get my chicken plate and tried to get it under my shoulder straps while still flying. Barry was briefing the crew on all that he could foresee. The chicken plate slipped and fell on my cyclic (right) hand. Barry looked over and gave me "the look." I put the chicken plate back down on the floor. We were now getting close and I began the approach. Barry took the controls at just that moment and did a steep turn while slowing to put the tail toward the places where we thought the enemy positions were. Rinehart began firing the tail gun. It jammed. He said the gun was shot. That was a literal statement as we learned later that an enemy round had hit our mini-gun in the feeder and made it useless.

We took a couple of rounds through the cockpit and I could hear impacts into the fuselage. Undorf was on the radio calling out fire. I scanned the engine instruments and they looked okay. I felt more rounds hit us and looked toward Barry. He was hovering and moving the helicopter to the left as called for by Patterson. The downed helicopter was about 100 feet to our left as we came to a hover. My seat had an armor wing on its left side, toward the enemy shore. All the formerly Marine foxholes were now full of angry Cambodians shooting at us. I felt myself sitting up straighter and even tucked in my chin a bit to put myself more behind that armor wing. I checked Barry and he was OK, but I kept thinking that if he got shot I had to be ready to take the controls. My job was to stay alive in case Barry did not. I saw Knife 51 come into the lagoon and hover just about 200 yards away and level with us. Their crew had knocked out all the cabin windows on one side and crew members, to include our former PJs were shooting at the shore with their personal weapons. They were putting out a lot of bullets all over that beach.

Jesse went "hot mike" and began directing Barry over the hulk. He said the hoist was out the door and on its way down. After a bit he said the hoist was in the water and it was by the downed aircraft. Jesse grunted loudly in the middle of his hover calls. Barry asked Jesse if he was okay, but Jesse kept giving directions for about 20 more seconds. Then, Jesse

seemed surprised, saying, "I've been shot, I've been shot. My leg, my leg." Styer was on the floor by him and looking for a survivor. There was not one that anyone could see. Styer pulled Jesse from the door and unplugged Jesse's intercom. Barry began the takeoff from a hover and somebody got the hoist coming back up and brought it inside. I made the radio call that we had one crew member wounded and were coming out from the beach. Barry asked what heading to fly and I said we could go to the *USS Holt*, which had been near our former holding pattern. The *Holt* lit up and said they were ready to receive us. Rinehart and Patterson said we were badly damaged and they thought we were losing fuel. I scanned the gauges and it looked to me like the aux tanks were losing fuel. Barry said the *Holt's* helipad was too small for us to park on and we would need to go to the *Coral Sea*, where we could park and shut down. I made the radio call to the *Holt* that we were aborting the approach due to battle damage and would go to the carrier instead.

Barry was talking to the PJs about how badly Jesse was hurt. I told Barry the heading to the carrier based on my memory of where it had been in relation to the island. I checked the TACAN and saw that the needle which should have pointed to the carrier was spinning around, indicating that we had no lock on the carrier's transmitter. I used my flashlight to look at the TACAN control panel, and to verify it was on the correct channel, but it wasn't working. I assumed it was damaged. Barry was still flying and talking with the guys in back. I changed the UHF to the carrier's air traffic control channel. Barry asked me again what direction to fly toward the carrier. I told him we were going in the right direction. He said we were going away from Thailand, not toward it, and he thought we were going completely wrong. I told him it was the right direction. He told me to tune up the TACAN. I told him it was not working, but it was set on the right channel. He told me to set the TACAN and he cussed some. He cussed a lot.

He told me to fly the helicopter, so he could check things. I called the *Coral Sea* for landing direction and said we were damaged with one wounded aboard. The ocean lit up with the ship about five miles directly in front of us. Barry told me to make the landing. I made the approach to a hover beside the ship and followed directions to slide sideways and park between the two H-53s already shut down on the deck. It was challenging from the left seat, but it felt good to be the one landing. We tipped some to the right as we settled on the landing gear, learning then that the strut on the right was collapsed and the tires were flat. As we shut down and hit the rotor brake, sailors were already carrying Jesse off the helicopter to take him to the ship's hospital. After we got out of the seat, I looked at some of the bullet holes in the cabin. Both of the aux tanks had holes in them and there was some damage up around the rotor head. After about 10 minutes, our maintenance guys were all over the helicopter, saying they had to get it configured to go down the elevator or the Navy would push it over the side. They wanted to take off the rotor blades. Barry told them to go ahead and said the rest of us were going to the hospital to see Jesse.

We had a short visit with Jesse. The doctor said the leg had taken the punishment fairly well and the bone hadn't been damaged. Jesse was groggy but awake. As we went back to the flight deck we met Joe Gilbert. He said we were to take Backlund's aircraft and fly back to U-Tapao. Barry said we had no flight mechanic and Joe told us to take Backlund's crew with us and to put his flight mechanic, Harry Cash, in the seat. We did that and took off in about 15 minutes, flying the helicopter we had originally taken to U-Tapao two days before.

Right after takeoff, we heard Knife 51 saying he was going in to the west beach to get the last of the Marines. We were immediately confused, asking one another why we were going to U-Tapao when the operation was not over yet. I told Barry we should return to the carrier and drop off all but the crew and go back to the island. Gary Weikel, Backlund's co-pilot, asked over the intercom what we would do? If Knife 51 was getting the last Marines, what was left to do? Brims said the copilot of the helicopter down on the east beach, Johnny Lucas, was still there and someone had to get him. Weikel said that Johnny had gotten on Jolly 11 when they picked up the Marines from the eastern beach and he was safely aboard the *USS Coral Sea*. We passed that to Brims and then heard Jolly 44 say they were up from the *Holt* where they had deposited the Marines they had just picked up from the west beach. Jolly 44 was Bob Blough and crew, who had gotten on a helicopter from NKP that afternoon. They arrived to join Knife 51 just as we were sorting out Johnny Lucas. At that point, Knife 51 said they were airborne off the west beach with the last of the Marines and that Jolly 11 and 44 could head for U-Tapao. Thinking that the mission was finally over, and after a long, often confusing, and stressful day, we headed north, back to U-Tapao.

When the three helicopters arrived back at U-Tapao, we heard from the operations center that there was a report that some Marines were still on the island. Our leadership, the crews, and the maintainers were all ready to turn around and go back to try and find those men. But, the commander told us to get some rest. There was nothing that could be done at that moment and the joint task force was working to sort things out. We went to bed expecting to launch at first light. Through the night, the maintenance troops fixed what they could and by morning had three HH-53s ready to go. There was no shortage of aircrews volunteering to go back to Koh Tang, but by mid-morning we were told that all survivors had been accounted for. The squadrons were directed to stand down. The Mayaguez Incident, as it became known, was officially over.

(Editor's note: Years later, it was discovered that three Marines, Pvt Danny Marshall, PFC Gary Hall, and LCpl Joseph Hargrove were inadvertently left on West Beach. The Khmer Rouge captured and executed the Marines.)

About the Author: Maj Gen (ret) Richard Comer is a 1973 graduate of the USAF Academy. He completed undergraduate helicopter training and HH-53 weapon systems training in 1974. He has served as a special operations and combat rescue H-53 pilot, instructor pilot, flight examiner, operations officer, and squadron commander. Gen Comer is the former commander of the 16th Special Operations Wing and the AFSOC Vice Commander. He is a command pilot with more than 3,400 flying hours.

NAIL FACs

Sort Things Out at Koh Tang

Narrative provided by Koh Tang/ Mayaguez Veterans Organization

OV-10 shown with the drop tank used in SEA, rocket pod on the right sponson and a flare dispenser on the left sponson. (Photo courtesy of Jim Richmond, Nail #37)

As Knife 23 and 31 from the 21st SOS approached Koh Tang island's east beach with Lt Michael Cicere and his platoon of Marines, the disciplined Khmer Rouge fighters held their fire. Once Knife 23 touched down, though, the enemy opened up. The CH-53 took heavy fire in the main rotors, engines, and tail boom. Feeling the nose of the helicopter tuck down and to the right after the loss of the tail section, the pilot, 1Lt John Schramm, did his best to get the badly damaged and spinning helicopter safely onto the beach. All 20 Marines, the 4 aircrew, and the USAF combat photographer all escaped the ruined helicopter and made it onto the beach. Knife 31 did not fare as well, though.

Before Maj Howard Corson, the pilot of Knife 31, could deposit his load of 23 Marines and 2 Navy corpsmen onto the east beach, the aircraft was struck by a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG). Unfortunately, this was just after Khmer Rouge rounds had opened holes in the CH-53's fuel tanks. The RPG ignited the leaking fuel and the aircraft was engulfed in flames. As the pilot struggled to get airborne and away from the island, the crew and Marines dealt with the fire. Then things got worse. A second mortar or RPG struck the cockpit and killed the copilot, 2Lt Richard Vandegeer. Somehow, Maj Corson was able to maintain enough aircraft control to set the crippled helicopter down in waist-deep water. Thirteen burned and injured passengers and crewmembers were able to escape the destroyed helicopter.

Among the survivors was 1Lt Terry Tonkin, a Marine forward air controller (FAC). Although he had lost his radios during the crash, he had the presence of mind to get Maj Corson's survival radio and try to bring a bit of order to the situation. Fearing that the antenna from the survival radio would attract Khmer Rouge gunners' attention, Lt Tonkin swam away from the other survivors. Now, for the first time in the battle, there was a qualified FAC on the ground directing air strikes onto Khmer Rouge battle positions. Controlled fires from the A-7D Corsairs allowed the survivors in the water to get away. On shore, Knife 23's copilot, 1Lt John Lucas, with Lt Cicere's Marines, followed Tonkin's example and began using his own survival radio to direct the supporting fires from the fighters. The *USS Wilson* recovered the Knife 31 survivors after four hours in the water. Lt Lucas with his survival radio was the only remaining "voice" on the island able to talk to any airborne FACs.

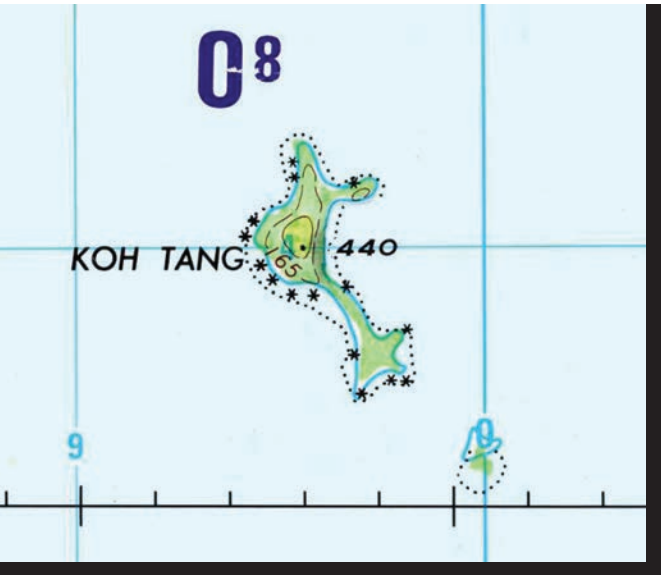
Up to this point, fire support during the battle had been ad hoc at best. During the initial planning, both the Marines and Col Anders, the joint task force commander, had requested that OV-10 Bronco FACs, call sign Nail, be included in the force package. In Thailand, Lt Gen Burns had denied the request and directed that FAC-qualified A-7 pilots take on that responsibility. When the FAC duty officer in the command post at Nakhon Phanom suggested during the early stage of the battle that the situation might benefit from some Nail FACs controlling the fight, Gen Burns refused. For most of the day the A-7 FACs were assigned as the on-scene controllers, shuttling over a dozen different pilots and aircraft from the tanker, to the island, and their home station at Korat RTAFB, Thailand, to maintain near-continuous coverage. Despite the A-7 FACs' best efforts, their attack jets were the wrong aircraft for this situation—dug-in troops in a dense jungle environment. The Corsairs were too fast, had limited visibility, and a very

short loiter time.

At about 1400 local time, Gen Burns finally gave the order to launch the Nail FACs from the 23rd Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS). Four OV-10s led by Capt Greg Wilson, Nail 69, deployed from Nakhom Phanom to U-Tapao. Maj Bob Undorf, Nail 68, and Capt Rick Roehrkasse, Nail 47, who had been deployed a week earlier to Korat RTAFB, launched to join the fight. Two hours later, and almost 10 hours after the first helicopter assaults onto Koh Tang, Nail 68 and Nail 47 arrived on scene. (Editor's note: FACs used individual call signs whereas the helicopters' call signs were assigned to the aircraft.)

Nail FACs normally worked in pairs with the high FAC, in this case, Nail 47, receiving the available strike aircraft while sorting out weapons loads and available "play time." The low FAC, Nail 68 at Koh Tang, controlled the strikes and maintained close surveillance of the battlefield.

After being briefed and accepting the hand-off from the A-7 Fast FAC, Maj Undorf determined that a partially sunken Khmer Rouge gunboat off of the east beach was the immediate and most dangerous threat to the helicopters.



Although the A-7s had strafed the gunboat repeatedly, they were unable to destroy it. Nail 68 called in naval gunfire from the *USS Wilson*. A direct hit from the *Wilson's* 5-inch gun eliminated any further threats from the enemy gunboat.

While Nail 68 dealt with the enemy gunboat, Capt Wilson and his flight of four Nails arrived at U-Tapao RTAFB. When they went into base operations and asked for a briefing on the tactical situation, the intelligence and target materials were decidedly lacking. The only available charts were 1:1,000,000 Operational Navigation Charts. At that resolution, Koh Tang was about the size of a thumbnail. Luckily, some reconnaissance photographs of the island's east and west beaches were available. The intelligence briefers knew there were helicopters down and fouling the beaches, but they did not know exactly where. Worse, they also continued to insist there were only a few dozen enemy soldiers on the island.

At about 1530, with Nail 68, Undorf, and 47, Roehrkasse, having been airborne for about an hour and a half, Capt Wilson, Nail 69, and his wingman, 1Lt Will Carroll, Nail 51, took off for the 90-minute flight to Koh Tang.

Meanwhile, back at Koh Tang, Nail 68 had his hands full. The next order of business was to get Lt Cicere's stranded Marines and the crew of Knife 23 off the east beach. Talking to Lt Lucas on the survival radio, Undorf got a reasonable idea of where the friendly positions were located. With night approaching, time was critical. Nail 68 told the Americans to keep their heads down as he fired a white phosphorous rocket to mark their position. Then, Undorf called in strike aircraft to take out enemy weapons in the encampment area. Just before 1700, a series of fighter strikes onto the fortified huts suppressed that threat. With the area supposedly ready, Nail 68 called in the helicopters for the extraction.

Lt Don Backlund and the crew of Jolly 11 began their flight to the east beach with Nail 68 orbiting overhead. Spectre 11, an AC-130, provided supporting fires. The Spectre was the only aircraft able and willing to lay down suppressive fire "danger close" to the Marines and Knife 23 survivors – sometimes only 50 meters from the friendlies. With the wreckage of Knife 23 fouling the landing area, Jolly 11 maintained a low hover above the ravine where the Americans were hiding. The Marines and airmen were able to make a break for the helicopter, all the while firing their rifles and emptying their magazines into the tree line to stem the advancing Cambodian troops.

As Jolly 11 touched down on the sand, Jolly 12 and Knife 51 were overhead, flying up and down the beach to provide additional fire support. Nail 68 made half a dozen strafing runs on Khmer positions as he struggled for situational awareness and controlled the extraction from the beach. Once all the Americans were safely on board, Jolly 11 departed the east beach and headed to the *USS Coral Sea*. Undorf then brought in Spectre 11 to take out the enemy positions that had been identified during the extraction, followed by more fighter strikes. At that point, the Nail FAC shifted Jolly 12 and Knife 51 to search for a possible survivor, a wounded Marine, thought to be in the wreckage of Knife 23. Jolly 12, with Knife 51 providing covering fire, hovered over the wreckage for a few minutes, but found no survivors. During the search he took severe damage and limped back to the *Coral Sea.* 1Lt Brims and the crew of Knife 51 then shifted their attention to the West Beach.

With darkness almost upon them, Nails 68 and 47 were low on fuel and had to return to base. Spectre 11 was also running low on fuel and was replaced by Spectre 21. On-scene control passed to Nail 69 and 51. The FACs had not trained for night operations, but there were Marines stranded on the beach who needed to come home. Nail 69 and his wingman proceeded to figure things out.

After taking the handover briefing from Nail 68, Capt Wilson, flying as Nail 69, began to organize the forces to extract 200 Marines still on the west beach. Knife 51 was in relatively good shape. Navy maintainers on board the *Coral Sea* had done a magnificent, field expedient repair of Jolly 43's ruptured fuel line, so that helicopter was again available for duty. Jolly 44, which had been kept out of the fight due to mechanical problems was now repaired and ready to contribute.

Capt Wilson had three good helicopters available to get the Marines off the island.

The sun was setting as Knife 51 approached Koh Tang. The Cambodians used mortar-launched flares to enable their gunners to see and fire on the helicopter. Nail 69 cleared Spectre 21 hot to suppress any enemy forces they observed. Despite the withering enemy fire, Lt Brims and his crew managed to take on 41 Marines, well above the CH-53's maximum load. Low on fuel, Knife 51 took the Marines to the *Coral Sea* and refueled there. At this point, Nail 51, who had been the high FAC, reported he was low on fuel and needed to head home. Nail 69 was now the sole remaining FAC at Koh Tang.

Next, Nail 69 cleared the two Jolly Greens onto the west beach. As the helicopters began their approach to the beach, Nail 69 marked the enemy mortar position with a rocket and called for a fighter strike. But, it was too dark for an airstrike that close to friendly troops. In the darkness, Jolly 43 and 44 avoided a near miss while approaching the beach when quick thinking by Jolly 43's copilot, 1Lt Robert Gradle, flashed the helicopter's landing lights. 1Lt Bob Blough, the pilot of Jolly 44, went around and Jolly 43 continued to the beach. Upon landing Jolly 43 took on 54 Marines, more than double the allowable combat load. With a damaged and overloaded helicopter, Capt Rowland Purser, the pilot of Jolly 43, coaxed the HH-53 out of the landing zone. Struggling to gain airspeed and altitude, he nursed the helicopter towards the *Coral Sea.*

Now it was Jolly 44's turn. Lt Blough, the pilot, was guided to the beach by his crewmembers hanging out the door and ramp to talk him in. Once the Jolly was on the beach, Nail 69 started strafing the enemy positions, trying to protect the vulnerable helicopter. Finally, with 34 more Marines on board, Jolly 44 lifted off. There were still 73 Marines remaining on the island in a significantly reduced defensive perimeter. Instead of going to the *Coral Sea,* though, Blough headed to the much closer *USS Holt* in order to cut his turnaround time in half. While Jolly 44 was depositing its Marines on the *Holt,* Spectre 21 fired danger close to protect the Marines still on Koh Tang. Nail 69 flew low over the Marines with his landing lights on to determine their exact positions.

The Nail FAC began coordinating to get the last Marines off the island. Just 14 minutes after leaving West Beach, Jolly 44 had deposited his load of Marines onto the *Holt* and was headed back to Koh Tang. In the dark, Jolly 44 had lost track of the island and requested Nail 69 to mark the West Beach LZ, expecting that the FAC would use a white phosphorous rocket. Instead, Nail 69 said, "Follow my tracers." When the OV-10 let loose with its four M-60 machine guns, the tracers appeared in a near vertical angle of attack at what looked like an impossibly low altitude for the Nail FAC to recover. For a few seconds, Jolly 44 thought they would be adding the FAC to their next load of survivors from the island. But, Capt Wilson pulled the OV-10 out of the dive and continued to control the fight. With Spectre 21 providing covering fires, Blough and the crew of Jolly 44 picked up another 44 Marines. The constant flying in salty air had degraded the efficiency of Jolly 44's engines and reduced the power available. Rather than a second high risk landing on the *Holt's* small landing pad, Blough headed to the safety *Coral Sea's* larger deck with the Marines. Jolly 44 was done for the night.

The remaining 29 Marines were now the responsibility of Knife 51. The combination of smoke, darkness, and flares reflecting off the surf forced Knife 51 to abort its first three landing attempts. On the fourth try, Lt Brims turned on his landing lights. Nail 69 shot his remaining white phosphorous rockets and Spectre 21 put down a constant barrage of 40 mm. Upon landing, the remaining Marines clambered aboard the helicopter. After a quick check of the beach area and tree line by pararescueman TSgt Wayne Fisk and Marines Capt Davis and GySgt McNemar to ensure no one was left behind, the last three American boarded the helicopter. At about 2000 hours, Knife 51 lifted off and headed to the *Coral Sea*. The fight was over and in the quiet darkness of the Gulf of Thailand, Nail 69 headed home.

In the aftermath of the battle, Adm Steele, the Commander of SEVENTHFLT, sent a message to Col Anders, the 56th SOW commander, describing the 23rd TASS's contributions. The admiral's report concluded with,

The outstanding professional performance of 'Nail 68' and 'Nail 69' in determining the situation existing at the time of their arrival, coordinating and supporting fire, and culminating in the successful extraction of the GSF from Koh Tang island demonstrated

outstanding professional competence. Their performance is all the more impressive in light of the severely restricted command and control capabilities existing in their small aircraft and the complexity of the task facing them. The successful completion of the extraction under difficult conditions, finally concluding after dark is testimony to their outstanding performance and positive leadership. There can be no doubt that directly due to their expertise, professional performance, vigilance, tenacity, and desire to succeed they were instrumental in successfully recovering the GSF and coincidentally saved the lives of many Marines who were extracted. Their performance brings great credit to their service and was in the highest traditions of the United States Armed Forces.

The Air Commando Journal staff has learned Greg "Growth" Wilson, Nail 69, died peacefully in his sleep on the morning of 22 April 2018. He was a great American airman and made everyone who knew him proud to call him friend...RIP

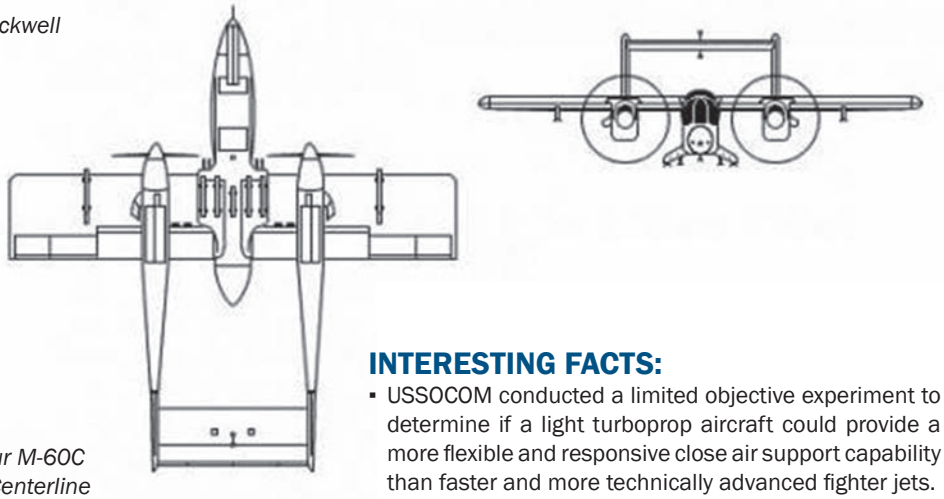
North American OV-10 Bronco

Famous Fliers: Maj Robert Undorf, Nail 68, was awarded the USAF Mackay Trophy in 1975 for his gallantry and meritorious actions during the Mayaguez Incident.

OV-10 on display in Hurlburt Field Air Park
Photo by Paul Harmon

IN BRIEF:

- *Designed and Built by North American Rockwell*
- *First Flight Jul 1965*
- *Crew of 1 or 2*
- *Capacity 5 Paratroopers, 2 Litters and a Medic, or 3,200 Pounds of Cargo*
- *Two Garrett T76-G-410 Turboprop Engines Delivering 715 Shp ea*
- *Max Speed 281 mph*
- *Cruise Speed 223 mph*
- *Max Range 1200 Nautical Miles with 150 gal External Fuel Tank*
- *Max Weight 14,444 lbs*
- *Length 41 ft 7 in*
- *Height 15 ft 2 in*
- *Width 40 ft*
- *Armament 7 External Stores Stations, Four M-60C Machine Guns in Fuselage Sponsons, a Centerline Station for 20 mm Gun Pod or External Fuel Tank, and 2 Wing Stations for a Mix of Air-to-Surface Rocket Pods in 7 or 19-Shot Launchers or 2 Aim-9 Sidewinder Air-To-Air Missiles ▪ Service Ceiling 26,000 ft*



The USAF OV-10s arrived in Vietnam in Jul 1968 for operational test and evaluation as part of Project COMBAT BRONCO. The OT&E ended in October and the USAF began assigning OV-10s to the 19th, 20th, and 23rd Tactical Air Support Squadrons in Vietnam and Thailand. In 1971, under Project PAVE NAIL, the 23rd TASS's OV-10s were modified with laser target designators, a night periscope, and LORAN navigation equipment for operations along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. In 1974, the aircraft were de-modified back to the basic OV-10 configuration. During the 1980s, the the Air Force began to replace the OV-10s with OA-37 Dragonfly and OA-10 Warthog jets, thinking the Bronco was too slow and underpowered to survive on a modern battlefield. The final USAF OV-10s were retired in Sep 1991.

INTERESTING FACTS:

- USSOCOM conducted a limited objective experiment to determine if a light turboprop aircraft could provide a more flexible and responsive close air support capability than faster and more technically advanced fighter jets.
- Under Project COMBAT DRAGON II, the US Navy modified two OV-10 aircraft with glass cockpits, modern sensors, helmet-mounted cueing, laser range finder and designator, datalinks, defensive systems, and an advanced communication suite.
- In an emergency the OV-10 can use high octane aviation or automotive fuel with minor degradation in power.
- The OV-10 is designed to be maintained with common hand tools.
- Requires no external ground equipment for starting
- The USMC flew OV-10 Broncos during Operation DESERT STORM.
- OV-10s have been flown by 8 nations: USA, Colombia, Germany, Indonesia, Morocco, Philipppines, Thailand, and Venezuela.
- The Philippines, and Venezuela contine to fly their Broncos in combat operations.

THE MAYAGUEZ INCIDENT

A Crew Chief's Perspective

Airmen on board the *USS Midway* during Operation FREQUENT WIND. The author is front row, second from the left.

As told to ACJ staff by Raymond "Jack" Armstrong

One of my assignments as an HH-53C crew chief (40th ARRS) was at Nakhon Phanom (NKP), Thailand from September 1974 to 1975. My aircraft was HH-53C, 68-10358. April and May of 1975, was a very busy time for us Jolly Green maintainers. First, there was the evacuation of the US embassy in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in mid-April. Then came the US evacuation from Saigon, Vietnam in late April. During that operation, I was flown out to the aircraft carrier *USS Midway* so the 40th ARRS and 21st SOS helicopters could support the evacuation of the ambassador, his staff, and others from the embassy.

A few weeks after the evacuation of Saigon, the cargo ship, *SS Mayaguez*, was hijacked by Cambodian forces. We were at NKP, but quickly moved down to U-Tapao (about 300 miles south) with our rescue birds so we could support the operation and get the *Mayaguez* crew back. As I recall, another carrier, *USS Coral Sea*, was used for this mission in much the same way the *Midway* was during the Saigon evacuation—provide close medical support and an emergency deck for the evacuated Marines.

The leadership directed the move of aircraft from NKP to U-Tapao in order to stage for the planned Koh Tang assault operation on or about 13 May 1975. One of the 21st SOS helicopters (68-10933, call sign Knife 13) had maintenance problems, either an engine or a main rotor blade, and delayed their departure with the main force. A few hours later after they completed ground runs and maintenance checks they took off and flew to U-Tapao as a single ship. Besides the four-man crew and crew chief, they had 18 security police from the 56th Special Operations Wing onboard. They crashed a short time after takeoff, about 35 miles from the base. Unfortunately, there were no survivors.

A team was sent out to the site on my bird. We heard the remains of the helicopter were scattered over a large area and the largest piece was the melted-down main gear box (MGB). They brought a bunch of the parts back to NKP on 358. I knew several of the guys on board. I worked with the crew chief, Sgt Paul Raber, at Hill AFB before we were assigned to NKP. Paul went to the 21st SOS and I was assigned to the 40th ARRS. One of the flight mechanics, Sgt Bob Weldon, and I were in Tech School together at Shepherd AFB two years before. The second flight mechanic, TSgt George McMullen, and I had a beer the night before the crash. It was a sad time, but we didn't have a lot of time to process what had happened because a few hours later the rest of us maintainers hopped on a C-130 headed for U-Tapao.

At U-Tapao, we met up with the helicopters and aircrews and got right to work. By 0300 on the 15th, we were ready to launch our birds. None of us guys on the flight line actually knew the real plan other than they were taking a bunch of Marines. There was the usual confusion and scuttle butt; some of the Marines thought they were going to guard some gold and kept asking us where they were going. We didn't know, we just did our jobs making sure the Jollies were ready to go Koh Tang

The first wave of helicopters from the 40th ARRS and 21st SOS launched at about 0415. Then we began our wait like maintainers usually do when the birds are out flying. For the first couple of hours, as far as we knew everything was going according to plan—air support, naval support, and the rescue were all going fine.

At around noon time, we started to hear that things were going to hell. A couple of the 21st SOS aircraft crashed on the beach and a third one went down in the water a short distance from the beach. Jolly 13 (794), limped back to land and put down in a rice paddy near the Thai/Cambodian border not far from U-Tapao. Four of us mechanics (TSgt Trenholm, Sgt Rick Henry, AIC Carl Richards, and myself) grabbed a bunch of parts and the only rotor blade we had in country and took a flatbed truck out to try and fix her. A Security Police Tiger Flight came with us for security.

We got there at about 1400 and 794 was a mess! The crew was 1Lt Chuck Greer, 1Lt Charlie Brown, SSgt King with PJs: SSgt Froehlich and Sgts Lundrigan and Lemmin. They did one

A1C Raymond 'Jack' Armstrong

hell of a job getting her back to Thailand. Both tip tanks had caught fire and failed to eject because the gull wings, squibs, and manual releases were all shot up. They had to eject the flare cases because of a fire. All six rotor blades were really torn up. Several blade pockets were missing and there were some holes and dings in the leading edge spars. The oil cooler, MGB, and drive shafts all had damage. I counted close to 200 rounds in the brake housings, windshields, and fuselage. Fortunately, the hydraulic flight control systems did not appear to be damaged. The utility system and damper accumulator on the rotor head needed servicing. We replaced the most damaged blade with the one we brought with us. We didn't have a crane, so we (the mechanics, aircrew, and PJs) used the rice paddy dike and we were able to wrestle the blade up to the rotor head and bolt it on. For all the other damage, we just used basic crew chief ingenuity—a lot of duct tape and bubble gum—to make the Jolly airworthy (a relative term under the conditions).

We needed a hydraulic cart to service the utility system and rotor head, so we called back and an H-43 Pedro was tasked to bring one out to us. While we waited for the Pedro, some villagers came out to see what we were doing. They brought us cowpot (food), drinks, and they wired up some lights so we could see in the dark. In the meantime, we kept working and poured oil into the MGB. We purposely over-serviced it because we knew it was going to leak.

When the Pedro finally arrived with the hydraulic cart we finished up servicing the utility system and rotor head. When we were done with all we could do we buttoned her up, climbed on board, and took off for U-Tapao in the dark. Man, that bird was "shake, rattle and rollin". The caution and advisory panel was lit up like a Christmas tree. We had multiple gear box chip lights and the MGB temperature light was on. The bird was shaking so badly that we all stood on the ramp with our parachutes on. We knew there would be oil leaks and sure enough we could see it in the slip stream by the glow of the anti-collision lights. As we approached U-Tapao, Lt Greer made a power on descent to rolling landing. As he lowered the collective to taxi, the MGB began to grind and eat itself up right there on the taxiway…at least we made it back in one piece.

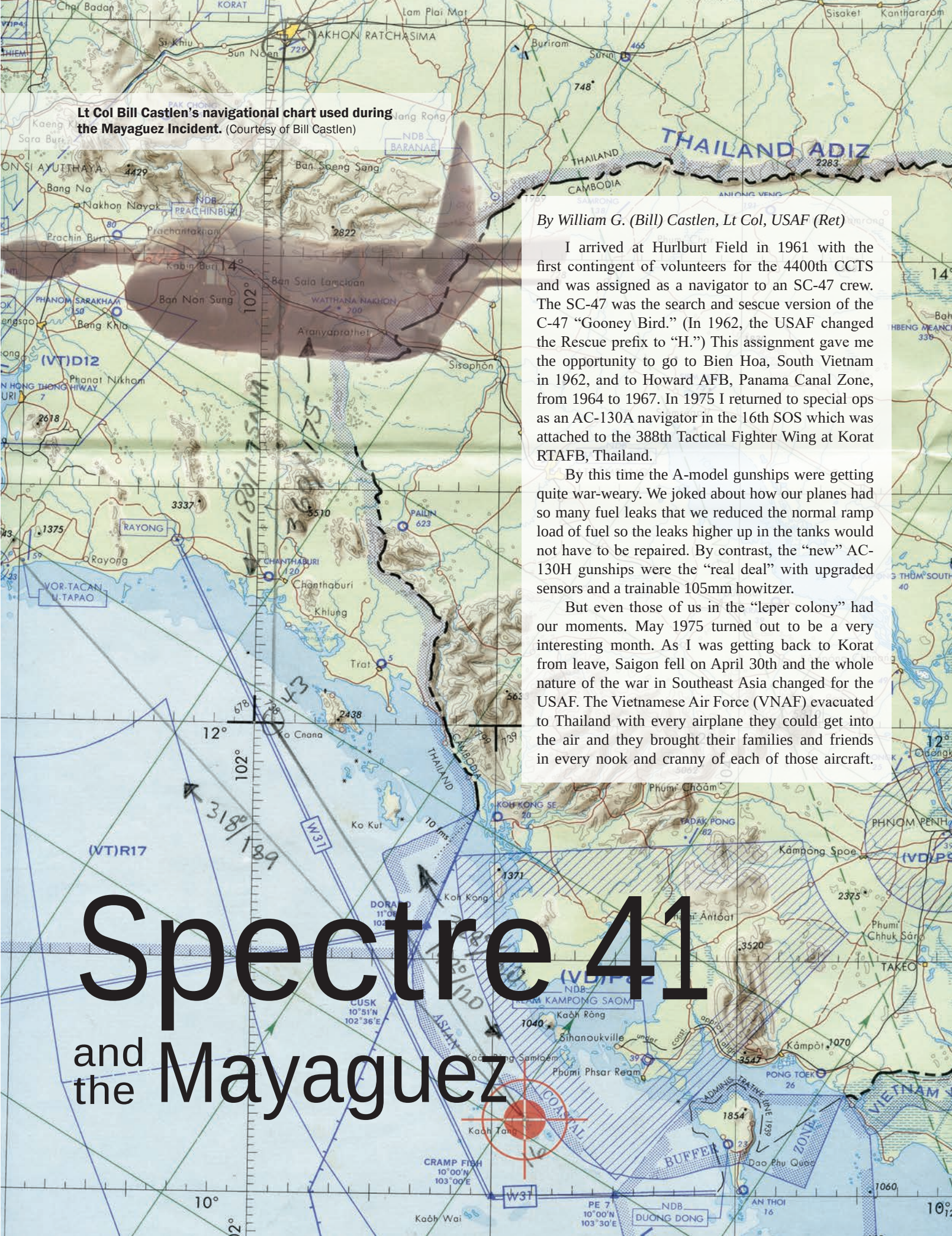
By the time we got back to U-Tapao some of the other birds were limping back. We heard 793 landed on the *USS Coral Sea* with severe battle damage and wasn't coming back that night. The rumor was the Navy guys wanted to saw the blades off and toss them over the side so they could put her down in the hangar bay to keep the deck clear for operations and any rough weather. We found out later that the second crew on 793 took some 40th ARRS maintainers out to the *Coral Sea* while we were out fixing 794 and they removed the blades, folded the tail and got her below decks. After the operation the *Coral Sea* made her way to the Philippines and off loaded 793 at NAS Cubi Point near the big Subic Bay Naval Base.

As the rest of helicopters returned to U-Tapao, we went over each with a fine tooth comb. Over the next couple of days, we inspected them, replaced components, did minor sheet metal work, and made repairs to other safety of flight items before we flew them back north to NKP. The 21st SOS Knife birds were in really bad shape; they lost four birds in a 72-hour period! Jolly 794, the one we pulled out of the field, was so badly damaged that the leadership determined it needed to go back to the States for major overhaul, so it stayed at U-Tapao waiting on C-5 airlift.

A few weeks after the Koh Tang operation several of us maintainers (MSgt Al Reed NCOIC, SSgt Tony Reyes, and myself) were told to take a C-5 a flight over to Cubi Point to prepare Jolly 793 for transport. After we loaded her onto the C-5, we boarded and were off to U-Tapao to collect 794 for the ride back to the States. Seeing those two war birds sitting in the belly of the C-5 was truly a sight to behold.

In September, I rotated back to the States and Hill AFB. I served another 18 years in the Air Force as a maintainer, as a flight engineer on H-3s, and as a First Sergeant. Those years were filled lots of memories, but my time at NKP in 1975 during the embassy evacuations and the Mayaguez Incident are the most vivid. It was truly an honor to have served with those who also serve... "That Others May Live".

MSgt (Ret) Raymond "Jack" Armstrong served his 20 year career in multiple assignments as a crew chief, instructor flight mechanic/engineer, and as a First Sergeant. During his second career he worked for several companies as maintenance/ logistics professional/supervisor on the Sikorsky S-64 and S-61 helicopters in the US and Middle East. Armstrong owns Table Rock Ranch, in Oregon and breeds, trains, shows, and sells Foundation Appaloosa horses.



Lt Col Bill Castlen's navigational chart used during the Mayaguez Incident. (Courtesy of Bill Castlen)

Spectre 41 and the Mayaguez

By William G. (Bill) Castlen, Lt Col, USAF (Ret)

I arrived at Hurlburt Field in 1961 with the first contingent of volunteers for the 4400th CCTS and was assigned as a navigator to an SC-47 crew. The SC-47 was the search and sescue version of the C-47 "Gooney Bird." (In 1962, the USAF changed the Rescue prefix to "H.") This assignment gave me the opportunity to go to Bien Hoa, South Vietnam in 1962, and to Howard AFB, Panama Canal Zone, from 1964 to 1967. In 1975 I returned to special ops as an AC-130A navigator in the 16th SOS which was attached to the 388th Tactical Fighter Wing at Korat RTAFB, Thailand.

By this time the A-model gunships were getting quite war-weary. We joked about how our planes had so many fuel leaks that we reduced the normal ramp load of fuel so the leaks higher up in the tanks would not have to be repaired. By contrast, the "new" AC-130H gunships were the "real deal" with upgraded sensors and a trainable 105mm howitzer.

But even those of us in the "leper colony" had our moments. May 1975 turned out to be a very interesting month. As I was getting back to Korat from leave, Saigon fell on April 30th and the whole nature of the war in Southeast Asia changed for the USAF. The Vietnamese Air Force (VNAF) evacuated to Thailand with every airplane they could get into the air and they brought their families and friends in every nook and cranny of each of those aircraft.

USAF decal being applied after VNAF markings have been sprayed out. (Photo courtesy of Bill Castlen)

Author standing next to the completed paint job.
(Photo courtesy of Bill Castlen)

They brought 3 or 4 people in their single seat fighters and crammed so many people into their C-130s and other cargo planes that most were standing up and just holding on to each other and to cargo straps. Most of the planes landed at U-Tapao RTAFB, near Bangkok.

The VNAF C-130s were all A-models and our squadron at Korat was the only USAF A-model C-130 unit in that part of the world. On Thursday, 1 May 1975, a group of us left Korat for U-Tapao to pickup eight VNAF C-130s and were told to stay there overnight to await other aircraft for a formation flight. The VNAF airplanes were a diplomatic embarrassment to the Thai government so there was a sense of urgency to get the planes to the nearest US soil. That meant Anderson AFB, Guam. Our USAF ground crews first spray-painted the over VNAF star and then put the Air Force star decal in its place.

The Intelligence folks added a little drama by advising us to check the planes carefully for booby traps. When we left Thailand, they had us fly well out over international waters because the North Vietnamese had a bunch of former VNAF F-5s at Saigon. None of those problems materialized, but we came close to doing ourselves in.

We took off from U-Tapao in a 3-ship formation and climbed through some thick and tall clouds and lost sight of one another. When we got on top, we were in a different order than when we started so no telling how close we came to a mid-air collision.

Then in mid-May, the Cambodian Khmer Rouge seized the container ship, *SS Mayaguez*, in international waters and moved it to Koh Tang island about 50 miles off the southern

coast of Cambodia. President Gerald Ford couldn't let this stand and a fairly significant military effort was mounted to secure the release of the *Mayaguez* and her crew.

The following is my recollection of our flight the night of 14 – 15 May 1975.

Chronology of Spectre 41
14 - 15 May 1975

2010L/14 May. We were originally scheduled to take off as Spectre 31. Low RPM on engines 2 and 3 (85%) was diagnosed by the aircraft commander (A/C) as air in the fuel system. We advised Mildew, the local command post, to launch the backup gunship. We taxied back and changed to the replacement aircraft.

2150L/14 May. We finally took off as Spectre 41 after aggressive resolution of the maintenance problem and assumption of control of the tactical flow. Although the aircraft was degraded due to engine performance and flying at the maximum load, the A/C made the decision to go. Because we were 35 minutes late taking off as Spectre 41, we elected to climb on course and align the sensor in the target area. We flew the shortest tactically sound and diplomatically acceptable route.

Enroute, the navigator established contact with 7th AF Command Center, call sign "Blue Chip," on the high frequency (HF) radio. Back then it was normal for the Nav to handle non-air traffic control communications. Once we had established comms with Blue Chip we were contacted by the *USS Coral Sea*, call sign "Jehovah," that was attempting to get a message through to Blue Chip, but was not able to establish contact. HF communications were especially difficult. We often had to ask for words to be repeated twice in order to make the relay happen. I have to admit, it was a real kick to talk to and actually hear Jehovah. We relayed to Blue Chip that Jehovah wanted the frag order for their tactical aircraft via Flash message. This was approximately 10 hours prior to the planned naval air strikes.

The chart I used that night is shown here. Note the "M" and dot where I positioned the Mayaguez. Also note that the mainland Cambodian airport of Kampong Saom is 27 nautical miles to the northeast. (Chart courtesy of Bill Castlen)

2310L/14 May. We arrived in the target area. We established contact with "Cricket," the EC-130 Airborne Command and Control Center (ABCCC). The Nav got the area target briefing from Spectre 21 as he was leaving the target area. Spectre 31 was held on "Mother" (the *SS Mayaguez*) due to one sensor being inoperative, and we in Spectre 41 were sent to investigate target #1, 179 deg/2.5 nm from Mother.

2320L/14 May. Spectre 41 arrived over target #1 and identified it as a small island - no boats around. We performed our sensor alignment on the rocks. Cricket requested Spectre 41 to check out another target (#2) at 080 deg/3 nm from Mother.

2345L/14 May. Arrived in the vicinity of target #2 and began search. No joy on any boat; found another small island (rock pile).

0005L/15 May. Spectre 31 reported bingo fuel. Cricket sent Spectre 41 back to Mother. We searched the area around Mother to keep it clear of any boats. None were seen on the sensors. The ship was searched intensively for activity and condition. No activity was seen and the good condition was reported to Cricket.

0050L/15 May. Nav picked up target on the APN-59 weather radar at 100 deg/5 nm from Mother. It appeared to be a vessel heading towards Mother. The AC-130's weather radar was not intended for target acquisition and tracking, but it did show good land-water contrast. We were able to "see" lots of small islands near the coast of Koh Tang. We then saw one of the "islands" moving. Cricket had another aircraft drop a flare and identified the target as a gunboat headed towards Mother.

0055L/15 May. Cricket gave Spectre 41 clearance to sink the gunboat. The Nav vectored Spectre 41 to the target by using the weather radar.

0057L/15 May. Commenced firing using the infrared (IR) sensor and the #3 gun. The boat was moving at about 25-30 knots.

I have often thought about the crew of that Cambodian gunboat. With the noise of their engine and the water spraying

because of the speed, they could not possibly have known we were there until the shells started landing. Their defense then was to make hard turns left and right--jinking. This was totally different from trucks on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. If a truck jinked off the trail, that usually stopped him. In this situation, it was virtually impossible for the sensor operators to track all the boat's hard turns. Since there had been no wet bore sight, the tweak was very difficult for the Fire Control Officer (FCO). The A/C got a direct hit on the bow of the boat with 40 mm mish-metal. The boat began going in a right circle.

0105L-0120L/15 May. Hard jinking by the boat caused the sensors to lose the target three times. The Nav vectored the aircraft back onto the target via radar each time. The #3 gun had five instances of "no fire." We switched to TV and #4 gun and continued firing. Subsequently, the gunners cleared #3 gun and we switched back to it.

0122L/15 May. We got a secondary explosion in the stern of the boat using IR and #3 gun. The boat was within 100 meters of Mother when the secondary explosion happened, so it headed for the beach.

0126L/15 May. The gunboat ran aground about 150 meters from the beach. Six persons were observed going ashore through the surf. We continued firing until 0130L.

0130L/15 May. Bingo fuel. The A/C had held Spectre 41 in the target area until we reached the minimum fuel needed to fly to the closest base. We departed for U-Tapao RTAFB after passing the battle damage assessment to Cricket and coordinating the target handover with Spectre 51 who had arrived on station at 0105L.

0240L/15 May. Spectre 41 landed at U-Tapao: Mission complete.

The crew of Spectre 41 that night was:

A/C	Markulis, Henry J.	Capt
P	Kistler, Frank D.	1Lt
TN	Castlen, William G.	Lt Col
TV	Douglas, Charles K.	1Lt
IR	Holt, Mark A.	1Lt
BC	Back, George	Maj
FCO	Barber, Ronald L.	1Lt
FE	Kolb, Charles R. Jr.	SSgt
IO	Kennedy, Leslie C.	Sgt
AG	Osborn, Gary L.	SSgt
AG	Ashley, Stephen R.	A1C
AG	Hiett, Joe M.	Sgt
AG	Schiemeyer, David L.	Sgt
AG	Coons, Raymond L.	Sgt

Retrospective

We took off on the *Mayaguez* mission with the normal AC-130A combat load of a mix of high explosive (HE) and Misch-metal rounds. The latter rounds had a special alloy liner that increased the incendiary effects making it quite good for killing trucks on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Unfortunately, the Misch-metal round had little effect on the armored gunboat. After we used up all the HE, the best the Misch-metal rounds could do was round off the corners on the boat, although we did get a couple of effective hits that caused the gunboat crew to alter course and head for the beach.

It is interesting to note that we fired fairly continually for about 30 minutes, expended about 180 rounds and we had more than that many rounds left when we had to head for U-Tapao for fuel. In self-depreciating humor, we joked about having fired 178 rounds across the bow and then used two rounds to sink the gunboat. One lesson from this mission could be that we would have been more effective if the load had been tailored for the mission: less ammunition and more fuel, plus less Misch-metal and more high explosive and armor piercing rounds.

Aftermath

In June, with the US military commitment to Vietnam officially over, the Air Force began redeploying its people, aircraft, and equipment as it closed the Thailand bases. At the end of June a group of AC-130As headed east, returning to northwest Florida. We delivered our A-models to Duke Field where the 711th Tactical Airlift Squadron was converting to become the 711th SOS. In July 1975, the 711th completed its transition.

Most of the time, navigating the AC-130 was interesting, fun, and relaxing. (Photo courtesy of Bill Castlen)

About the Author: Lt Col (Ret) Bill Castlen arrived at Hurlburt Field in May 1961 and participated in standing up the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron. He was in the second group to deploy to Bien Hoa, SVN, in January 1962. In 1964, he was transferred to the 605th SOS at Howard AFB, Canal Zone. After getting his M.S. in Aerospace Engineering at the Air Force Institute of Technology he returned to special ops as a Table Navigator on the AC-130A Gunship at Korat AB, Thailand. Bill currently lives in Dothan, AL, and continues to enjoy flying as a Master Certificated Flight Instructor, FAA Master Pilot, Cirrus Standardized Instructor Pilot, and owner and operator of a Cirrus SR-22.

Mayaguez: A Tactical Failure Produces Strategic Success

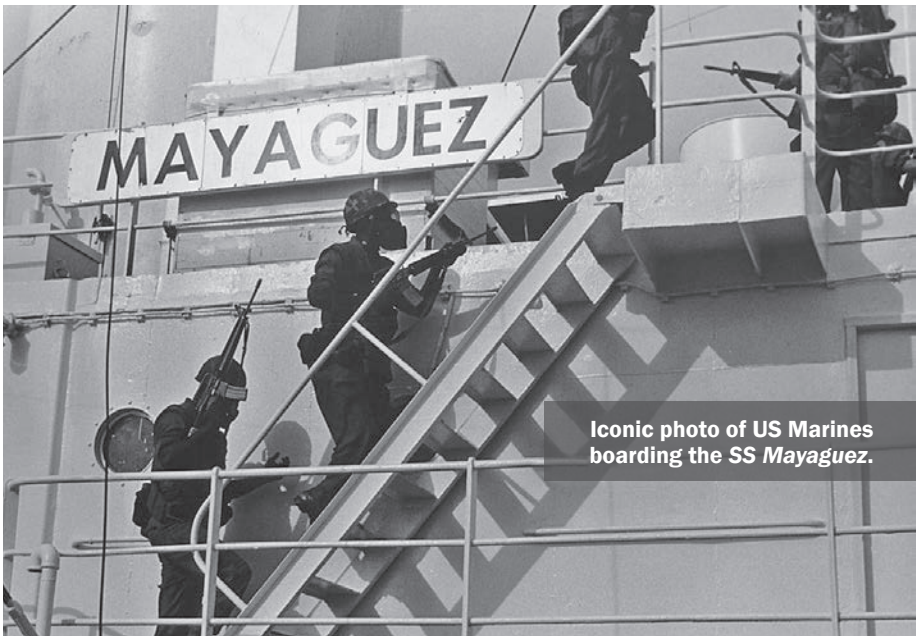
By C1C Charles Ballard

Editor's note: This essay was submitted by Cadet 1st Class Ballard as part of his course requirements for the Special Operations Forces elective at the USAF Academy.

The United States needed to make a statement. President Ford wanted to let the world know that even after a disastrous Vietnam campaign, the United States was not to be taken lightly, and recovering the crew of the *SS Mayaguez* was the perfect opportunity to do so. It was 1975, and the United States had ultimately failed in its mission to fight off communism in Southeast Asia. As a result, all American forces were evacuated in April of 1975 from Cambodia with the largely successful Operation EAGLE PULL and from Vietnam with Operation FREQUENT WIND. While some forces were maintained throughout Southeast Asia, Thailand in particular, the war in Vietnam was over. However, communism in Cambodia would come back to haunt United States decision makers. Phnom Penh, the capitol of Cambodia, fell to a violent, yet highly-organized communist group known as the Khmer Rouge. After taking control, the newly established government quickly began to assert its dominance by capturing ships within its "territorial waters" on suspicion that they were engaging in espionage activities. One of the ships captured was the *Mayaguez*, an American merchant vessel. This capture prompted President Ford to take swift and aggressive action. Decision makers scrambled to put together a team of Marine Corps and Air Force assets that would eventually be responsible for the tactical failure known today as the Mayaguez Incident.

A Brief History

The *Mayaguez* was seized some six-and-one-half miles off the Poulo Wait Islands near Cambodia on 12 May 1975. The Cambodian claim was that they only wanted to know the reason for its coming and to warn it against violating its territorial waters again. Based on the reports from Cambodian officials at the time, and some crew members of the *Mayaguez*, there really were no violent intentions in regards to capturing the ship. However, all President Ford knew at the moment was that US officials received a message from the ship stating the following: "Have been fired upon and boarded by Cambodian armed forces. Ship being towed to unknown Cambodian port." Taken out of context, the decisions made by American policy makers may seem incredibly rash, but the eerie similarity to the Pueblo Crisis must be considered.



Iconic photo of US Marines boarding the *SS Mayaguez*.

In 1968, an intelligence gathering ship, the *USS Pueblo*, was seized by North Korea. The Johnson administration hesitated to employ naval and air forces within the region and as a result the North Koreans were able to secure the vessel in port, remove the crew, and render effective military intervention impossible. The Ford administration was unwilling to make the same mistake, especially after suffering a strategic defeat in the region. They needed to recover the crew of the *Mayaguez* as soon as possible and make a strong statement to the world while doing so. Decision makers hastily organized a special operation in an attempt to intercept and rescue the crew prior to it being taken the Cambodian mainland. The result was a simultaneous joint helicopter assault on Koh Tang, where the crew was believed to be held, and a ship-based recapture of the *Mayaguez*. Due to an overwhelming failure to effectively apply special operations doctrine and thought, the mission resulted in a spectacular tactical disaster. The crew was returned of Cambodia's own volition, and America achieved strategic victory through pure luck alone. Had the mission been properly planned to include key special operations elements, they might have been able to achieve tactical

success and ensure strategic and political victory through military means.

Special or Conventional Operation

Today, there may be some question as to whether or not the assault on Koh Tang and the overall Mayaguez operation truly was a special operation forces (SOF) mission. As defined in J*oint Publication 3-05*, special operations "require unique modes of employment, tactics, techniques, procedures, and equipment." The doctrine also states that "they are often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically" sensitive environments. There are a variety of qualifiers that describe a SOF mission but ultimately, special operations are conducted at a tactical level to achieve strategic results.

Members of Golf Company, 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines, run from Knife 22 toward a waiting Jolly Green after their forced landing, shortly after 7:00 A.M., 15 May, several miles west of Trat, Thailand. (Source: A Very Short War, by John Guilmartin, Jr., page 134)

The plan was to use Air Force helicopters to insert Marines for an assault on Koh Tang and drop Air Force Police onto the *Mayaguez* to retake the ship. All the while Air Force assets would work with Marine Forward Air Controllers (FACs) to provide close air support. The Navy would even come into play when it provided fire support from off the coast of Koh Tang. While this seems like a standard joint operation by today's criteria, this level of inter-service cohesion was unheard of in 1975. Essentially, this assault was being conducted in a hostile environment with unusual assets at a tactical level to achieve a strategic outcome. Therefore, it certainly seems to meet our modern criteria for a special operation.

The bulk of the assault force being used for the mission came from a Marine Corps Battalion Landing Team. The Marines were accustomed to helicopter assaults. However, the Air Force assets to be used were not only unconventional in nature, but they were also being used in a ways foreign to their usual modus operandi. Unfortunately, Marine Corps helicopters could not be brought into the region within the short mission timeline. As a result, the operation would hinge on the CH-53s of the 21st Special Operations Squadron (SOS) and HH-53s of the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS), both based out of Nakhon Phanom in Thailand. The 21st SOS, operating with the call sign Knife, and the 40th ARRS, operating with the call sign Jolly, were two very different entities. The 21st was an Air Force Special Operations unit that operated with lightly armored CH-53s and was accustomed to clandestine missions covered by night. In contrast, the 40th were used to flying bold broad-daylight rescue missions into highly contested areas, so they flew with heavily armored HH-53s. While neither unit used their helicopters for direct air support, both units had their aircraft equipped with 7.62 mm six barrel machine guns. Already, one can determine that the two units were both unfamiliar with each other's mission style in addition to the completely foreign tactic of helicopter-borne air assaults.

Prior to this mission, the Air Force was rarely used for inserting conventional infantry troops. Pilots from both units had only received minimal training in tactical approaches and formation flying, so this was clearly a realm in which all Air Force personnel were incredibly inexperienced. Not only this, but in the original plan a Knife unit would also be carrying members from the 656th Security Police Squadron to serve as the boarding party to recapture the *Mayaguez*. Ultimately, all involved would find themselves quite out of their element in regards to this special mission.

Analysis

An effective assessment of the Mayaguez Incident can be accomplished by using Admiral William McRaven's theory on relative superiority and several of his six principles of special operations as a framework for analysis. Relative superiority, as defined by McRaven, is a "condition that exists when an attacking force, generally smaller, gains a decisive advantage over a larger or well-defended enemy." McRaven uses this concept of relative superiority to explain how SOF can attain victory even in the face of incredible odds. His six principles of special operations are simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, speed, and purpose. He argues that these principles dominate every successful mission. In order to gain relative superiority, all principles must be abided by, for the inability to meet even one will most likely result in failure. The assault on Koh Tang Island failed to meet the majority of the six principles and as a result, US forces never truly gained relative superiority.

There are three elements critical to assuring simplicity within a mission according to McRaven: limiting the

number of objectives, good intelligence, and innovation. From the beginning, planners struggled with this concept, seeing as they failed to obtain quality intelligence. The night prior to the assault, there was still confusion as to whether the crew was on Koh Tang Island, the *Mayaguez*, or on the Cambodian mainland. The two intelligence reports from the Intelligence Center, Pacific (IPAC) and Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) regarding the number of forces on Koh Tang Island were completely ignored. As a result, the assault force was expecting to come in contact with 18 to 30 irregulars when in reality there were over 100 organized troops on the island. The Ford administration, unsure of where the crew was being held, opted for a simultaneous attack on both Koh Tang and the *Mayaguez*. It is apparent that the first two elements of simplicity, limited objectives and good intelligence, were violated from the very start.

Unsurprisingly however, the airmen involved with the assault managed to create a force package fairly suitable for the mission criteria with the limited time they had. The CH-53s used by the 21st were fitted with large external tanks so that they would be capable of actually traversing the 190 nautical miles between U-Tapao Air Base and Koh Tang Island. The HH-53s flown by the 40th would utilize the HC-130 tankers in the area to perform multiple aerial refuelings throughout the mission. Flirting with these fuel limits added a level of complexity and danger to the mission, but one certainly has to applaud the innovation applied by the crews managing the Air Force assets.

Surprise would most likely be achieved, but repetition was the largest obstacle in the way of the Air Force crews effectively accomplishing the mission. With the fast-paced timeline they had, there was simply no room for the assault force to practice to the point in which they could flawlessly execute the mission. The Marine Battalion Landing Team assigned to the mission was underprepared and relatively inexperienced, but at least they had trained for helicopter assaults. The Jolly Greens were familiar with landing in hot areas, and the Knives were familiar with transporting small groups behind enemy lines. But when it came down to it, neither of the Air Force units were practiced in the large scale assault approach that this offensive demanded. This new territory provided several hidden challenges that would only be uncovered once the operation was underway.

At its core, a massive problem existed because an inter-service agreement with the Army and Marine Corps prohibited Air Force helicopters from inserting infantry into combat. Ideally, this operation would have either included Marine Corps helicopter pilots trained in vertical assault tactics or allotted time for the joint force to experience the scenario until it was perfected. Unfortunately, time did not allow military planners either luxury. It should also be mentioned that the Security Police who volunteered for the aerial boarding of the *Mayaguez* had absolutely no practice whatsoever in vertical assaults let alone recapturing a ship. Ultimately, through good communication between all planning elements it was decided that Marines would be used for both the land assault and ship recapture. This decision was reinforced after the 656th lost eighteen security policemen when Knife 13 crashed the night before the assault.

All assault force crews and commanders left U-Tapao for Koh Tang and the *Mayaguez* at 0415 on 15 May 1975. The plan was to have the first wave arrive at both targets right at sunrise, unload the Marines, and quickly take the island with the help of AC-130s, A-7s, and F-4s. All operations would managed by a single Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center (ABCCC) aboard a specially modified EC-130. The initial wave consisted of four Knife aircraft trailed by one more Knife and three Jolly Greens. Upon approaching Koh Tang all hell broke loose. Two of the Knives had to put their helicopters down, one aborted sustaining heavy damage, and Knife 31 exploded in a ball of flames. The east side of the island was far too hot.

As if to add insult to injury, Knife 31 contained all of the Marine Forward Air Control team to be used during the mission. Fortunately, there were several Marines that survived the crash and would be able to control fire support missions throughout the day. Despite the chaos, the Air Force pilots still managed to unload two Marine teams on the west side of the island and another team on the east.

Speed is another component of special operations that McRaven claims is absolutely essential. The longer an operation takes, the more vulnerable a smaller attacking force becomes. This is particularly true of air missions, especially when it involves unloading troops in a hostile environment. The ABCCC had to account for the situation on ground and time was not on their side. After a quick exchange with the remaining helicopters in the area, the approach plan was modified. The Jolly Greens avoided disaster and altered their approach to target the west side of the island. Although the mission was finally underway, the assault force soon found that taking Koh Tang Island would not be as quick as they originally anticipated.

Most planners imagined that the Marines would have moved well past the tree line into the center of the island by noon. It became quite apparent to the ABCCC that this conflict would not be nearly as short as they previously anticipated. It could be argued that at this point relative superiority was either dangerously close to being lost, or was already gone. In an effort to tip the scale back in favor of the attacking force the ABCCC began to pull in all air assets within the region to include Spectre 61, an AC-130 that would prove to save several lives throughout the course of the day.

As the assault continued it became glaringly obvious that the second wave of forces was not only desired, but necessary to salvage what was left of an already disastrous mission. To add to the problem, there was a large language barrier between the Marine Corps FACs on Koh Tang and the Air Force assets attempting to provide accurate fire support. The two Services had developed different FAC techniques throughout the years and the Marines did not have the radios required to speak with certain air assets. Even if the Marines were equipped with the proper communications radios and spoke a common language with the planes providing close air support, they

would not be able to pinpoint targets due to the thick tree line hiding the enemy. To counter this issue, two slow moving Air Force OV-10s were launched at 1047 from U-Tapao. These OV-10s, codenamed Nail 68 and 47, would use techniques perfected in Vietnam to act as FACs and control fire from the overhead AC-130, A-7s. A-6s, and F-4s. The OV-10s also had the VHF/FM radios necessary to properly communicate with the Marines on the island. Once this two-ship was on site, they were able to effectively bring some order to what was a chaotic situation. After evaluating the situation as a whole, Nail 68 determined that a helicopter extraction was necessary to get all assault components safely off the island.

"Thai fishing boat which carried the *Mayaguez* crew ties up along side the *USS Wilson*.
(Photo source: Airwar-Vietnam, page 329, Arno Press, Inc. Copyright 1978)

It should be noted that by 1000, the entire crew of the *Mayaguez* had already been sent out in a small boat from Kompong Som in Cambodia. They were safely recovered by a US Navy vessel in the area, and technically the mission objective was completed. However, this information was not passed to the assault force by the ABCCC.

Despite being swamped with more information and orders than they could deal with, this was a serious oversight. As a result the battle raged on until 1840 that evening when decision makers finally made the call to extract all forces. Nail 68 was also put in charge of the evacuation so that there was a direct commander in the area and so that no time was wasted.

McRaven defines purpose as "understanding and then executing the prime objective of the mission regardless of emerging obstacles or opportunities." For many of the assault force components, the purpose was ambiguous due to the lack of intelligence throughout the mission. However, a reason why Nail 68 was so successful in accomplishing its objective might be because he had a clearly defined purpose: monitor the area and manage the exfiltration of all assets as quickly as possible. Thus began a hectic extraction using both Jolly Green and Knife assets launched from the nearby *USS Coral Sea*. From 1840 to 2010 there was a continuous exchange of fire as the Air Force helicopters swept into the landing zone on the west beach of Koh Tang. The majority of these evacuations were only possible due to the incredible ability of the H-53 pilots to operate in nighttime environments, seeing as the sun had been set for some time. In addition to providing general evacuation control to the H-53s from both units, the OV-10s also managed close air support to suppress fire coming from the tree line only 50 yards away from the LZ.

Ultimately due to the bravery and sheer willpower of the Air Force H-53 crews, the surviving assault force was extracted with the exception of three missing Marines. One can clearly see that the assault on Koh Tang failed in regards to the majority of McRaven's six principles. The areas of failure in particular were simplicity (primarily due to lack of solid intelligence) and repetition. As a result, the assault force was unable to achieve relative superiority and failed to accomplish its tactical objective of taking the island. In order to achieve said superiority against a well-prepared force, the assault would have to look much different.

Overall, planners did what they could with the timeframe they were given, but it was not cohesive enough of a plan to be a successful special operation.

Conclusion

Examining the operation using McRaven's framework provides significant insight as to why this mission was a tactical disaster. This case is particularly interesting in that it still managed to be a strategic success. The *Mayaguez* crew was indeed recovered, even if it was only because the Cambodians decided to return them. Yet the battle raged on at Koh Tang Island, partly because of President Ford's fear of embarrassment and also because of a failure to disseminate pertinent information. Yes, technically the political and strategic objectives were met; but make no mistake, this was a blunder in terms of military planning and joint operations. However, despite all that went wrong, one has to applaud the ingenuity, courage, and boldness displayed by the airmen involved in a situation for which they were totally unprepared.

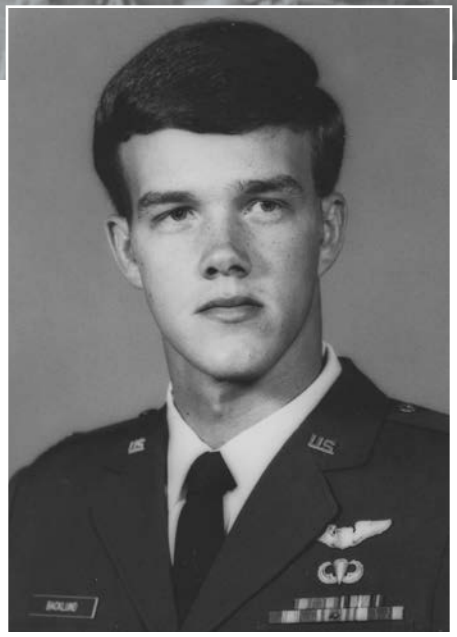
About the Author: Lt. Ballard graduated from the Air Force Academy with a degree in Military Strategic Studies in 2016. He moved on to Specialized Undergraduate Pilot Training at Vance AFB where he flew the T-6 and T-38C. He will serve as a First Assignment Instructor Pilot in the T-6 with the 8th Flying Training Squadron.

Extraordinary Heroism at Koh Tang Island

Four Air Force Crosses Awarded that Day

By Scott McIntosh, Lt Col, USAF (Ret)

The Air Force Cross is the second highest award that may be given to a member of the US Air Force and is awarded for extraordinary bravery while engaging an enemy of the United States that does not justify the award of the Congressional Medal of Honor. The Air Force Cross was created in 1960 to replace the Distinguished Service Cross (Air Force) after the USAF became a separate Service. Approximately 200 AF Crosses have been awarded in the 70 year history of the US Air Force.



Donald R. Backlund

Aircraft Commander of Jolly 11

Donald Backlund was born on 20 November 1949, in Kenosha, WI. He graduated from the USAF Academy and was commissioned a 2Lt in Jun 1971. Following graduation he attended Indiana University from June 1971 to January 1972 where he completed a masters degree in history. He then attended Undergraduate Pilot Training-Helicopter at Ft Rucker, AL, earning his pilot wings in October 1972 as the top graduate in his class. In May 1973, following weapons systems training in the Sikorsky HH-53C Super Jolly Green Giant, Lt Backlund was assigned to the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (ARRS) at Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai AFB, Thailand. During his two years at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, May 1973 to June 1975, he went from copilot to flight examiner, and participated in the evacuation of Saigon, Operation FREQUENT WIND; the evacuation of Phnom Pehn, Operation EAGLE PULL; and the Mayguez Incident.

Upon his return to the US, Backlund served as an HH-53C instructor pilot and flight examiner with the 1551st Flying Training Squadron (now 551st FTS). In April 1978, Capt Backlund attended the fixed-wing transition course at Sheppard AFB, TX, again graduating as the top graduate, and then to Davis-Monthan AFB, AZ, for A-10A Thunderbolt II training in preparation for his next assignment to the 91st Tactical Fighter Squadron at RAF Bentwaters, UK. On 29 April 1979, Capt Backlund was killed during a training mission at the Gila Bend Gunnery Range, AZ. He was posthumously promoted to major in September 1979, and is buried at the USAF Academy, CO.

In recogntion of his actions on 15

The PEOPLE
The AIRCRAFT
The SPIRIT of the AIR COMMANDO

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Submit files electronically to: info@aircommando.org. We use MS-Word. We also appreciate accompanying photos. Photos should be high resolution (300 dpi) and must indicate the source, have a release for use, and a brief description. If your submission is copyrighted, we will indicate that on the article.

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May at Koh Tang island, the USAF Academy awarded Capt Backlund the 1975 Jabara Award, recognizing his outstanding airmanship. Also, in 1976 the Air Force Association awarded him the David C. Schilling Award for leadership and airmanship. In July 1980, Building 1019, now part of the 58th SOW at Kirtland AFB, was named in Backlund's honor.

His Air Force Cross citation reads:

"The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the Air Force Cross to Donald R. Backlund, First Lieutenant, US Air Force, for extraordinary heroism in military operations against an opposing armed force as a Helicopter Aircraft Commander of an HH-53 Helicopter of the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron, Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand, SEVENTH Air Force, in action on 15 May 1975 at Koh Tang Island, Cambodia. On that date, while engaged in the recovery of the *SS Mayaguez* and crew, Lieutenant Backlund, exhibiting superb airmanship, placed a contingent of United States Marines aboard the destroyer escort, *USS Holt*. He then successfully landed several United States Marines on Koh Tang Island despite intense ground fire. After escorting his wingman to the *USS Coral Sea*, Lieutenant Backlund then returned to Koh Tang and successfully recovered a group of United States Marines and airmen although encountering heavy, consistent ground fire. Through his extraordinary heroism, superb airmanship, and aggressiveness in the face of hostile forces, Lieutenant Backlund reflected the highest credit upon himself and the United States Air Force."

Air Force display of life ring from the *SS Mayaguez* and the repaired fuel line from Jolly 43.

Richard C. Brims

Aircraft Commander of Knife 51

Richard "Dick" Brims was born on 27 December 1945, in Texas. After graduation from Maryvale HS in Phoenix, AZ, he enlisted in the US Air Force. In 1967, Brims entered the USAF Academy and was commissioned a 2Lt upon graduation in June 1971. He attended Undergraduate Pilot Training-Helicopter at Ft Rucker, AL, and was awarded his pilot wings in August 1972. Following combat crew training in the UH-1, Brims was assigned to the 48th ARRS at Fairchild AFB, WA, from August 1972 to August 1973. He then transitioned to the CH-53 and was assigned to the 21st SOS at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB in 1974.

In 1978, Capt Brims attended fixed-wing transition training at Sheppard AFB, TX, becoming a Lockheed C-141 Starlifter pilot in the 14th Airlift Squadron. In 1981, he came back to the CH-53 at the 601st Tactical Air Support Squadron at Sembach AB, Germany, and then to HH-53H Pave Low at Hurlburt Field, FL, in 1984.

Lt Col Brims was killed in an HH-53H Pave Low accident on 21 May 1986, while participating in exercise ELATED CYCLONE. He is buried at the USAF Academy, CO. In June 1991, Building 953, part of the 58th SOW at Kirtland AFB, NM, was named Brims Hall to honor his sacrifice and service.

His Air Force Cross citation reads:

"The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the Air Force Cross to Richard C. Brims, First Lieutenant, US Air Force, for extraordinary heroism in military operations against an opposing armed force as a CH-53 Helicopter Aircraft Commander of the 21st Special Operations Squadron, Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand, SEVENTH Air Force, in action on 15 May 1975, at Koh Tang Island, Cambodia. On that date, while engaged in the recovery of the *SS Mayaguez* and crew, Lieutenant Brims successfully landed United States Marines on Koh Tang Island despite overwhelming ground fire. Prior to leaving the island, Lieutenant Brims held his position against heavy ground fire and managed to extract five seriously wounded Marines. He then twice flew his aircraft into intense ground fire, successfully removing remaining groups of United States Marines. Through his extraordinary heroism, superb airmanship, and aggressiveness in the face of hostile forces, Lieutenant Brims reflected the highest credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.

Jon D. Harston

Flight Mechanic of Knife 31

Jon Harston was born on 29 July 1948, in Newport News, VA. He enlisted in the US Air Force in 1966, and was trained as an aircraft mechanic, where he served at Travis AFB, CA, from 1966 to 1968. In 1968, he retrained as a helicopter mechanic and hoist operator on the HH-43B Pedro. In 1969, he was assigned to Det 1, 38th ARRS at Phan Rang AB, Republic of Vietnam. His second Vietnam assignment was from 1971 to 1972, in the Central Highlands as a door gunner on UH-1Ns with the Green Hornets of the 20th SOS. He then served as a flight mechanic on UH-1Fs at Grand Forks AFB, ND. In 1974, he volunteered for a third SEA assignment and was assigned as a CH-53 flight mechanic in the 21st SOS at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB, Thailand. During his service with the 21st SOS, he participated in Operation EAGLE PULL, Operation FREQUENT WIND, and the Mayaguez Incident.

In August 1975, he left helicopters and became a flight engineer on C-141 Starlifters at Charleston AFB, SC, in the 15th Airlift Squadron. From 1989 to 1992, he served with the 344th Air Refueling Squadron at Seymour Johnson AFB, NC, flying McDonnell Douglas KC-10 Extenders. After retiring from the Air Force in 1994, Jon Harston continued to serve as a KC-10 flight engineer instructor at McGuire AFB, NJ. He fully retired in November 2010.

His Air Force Cross citation reads:

"The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the Air Force Cross to Jon D. Harston, Staff Sergeant, US Air Force, for extraordinary heroism in military operations against an opposing armed force as a Helicopter Flight Mechanic on board a CH-53 helicopter of the 21st Special Operations Squadron, Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand, SEVENTH Air Force, in action on 15 May 1975, at Koh Tang Island, Cambodia. On that date, while engaged in the rescue of the crew and recovery of the *SS Mayaguez*, Staff Sergeant Harston's helicopter encountered extremely heavy hostile fire and crashed at the shoreline of Koh Tang Island. Although wounded in the leg, Sergeant Harston reentered the burning aircraft and led three Marines to safety. As the survivors of the crash swam away from the beach, Sergeant Harston provided covering fire. He returned to the wrecked helicopter again to pull out another wounded Marine. He then kept himself and two wounded Marines afloat with his damaged life preserver until they were rescued by a navy destroyer approximately three hours later. Through his extraordinary heroism and willpower, in the face of the enemy, Staff Sergeant Harston reflected the highest credit upon himself and the United States Air Force."

Rowland W. Purser

Aircraft Commander of Jolly 43

Rowland "Wayne" Purser was commissioned a 2Lt in the US Air Force on 10 September 1970. After commissioning he attended Undergraduate Pilot Training at Vance AFB, OK, and was awarded his wings is September 1971. After graduation, he served as a First Assignment Instructor Pilot with the 25th Flying Training Squadron, flying T-38 Talons. In 1974, he attended helicopter pilot transition training at Ft Rucker, AL, eventually ending up as an HH-53C Super Jolly Green Giant pilot. From September 1974 to September 1975 he was assigned to the 40th ARRS at Nakhon Phanom RTAFB and Korat RTAFB.

Capt Purser served in a number of operations and staff assignments at HQ Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service and HQ USAF upon his return to the United States. In July 1982, Maj Purser was assigned as the commander of Det 6, 37th ARRS at McConnell AFB, KS, flying UH-1s. In June 1984, Maj Purser reported to the 33rd ARRS at Kadena AB, Japan, where he served as a combat rescue pilot. Lt Col Purser was assigned to the 321st Security Police Squadron at Grand Forks AFB, ND from September 1985 to July 1987, followed by service as the commander of the 8th Security Police Squadron at Kunsan AB, Republic of Korea, from August 1987 to July 1988. After attending Air War College, Col Purser commanded the 341st Missile Security Group at Malmstrom AFB, MT, followed by staff assignments in Washington, DC, and Langley AFB, VA. Col Purser retired from the Air Force in October 2000.

His Air Force Cross citation reads:

"The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the Air Force Cross to Rowland W. Purser, Captain, US Air Force, for extraordinary heroism in military operations against an opposing armed force as an HH-53 Helicopter Pilot of the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron, Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand, SEVENTH Air Force, in action on 15 May 1975 at Koh Tang Island, Cambodia. On that date, Captain Purser made two tries under heavy fire before landing 29 Marines on the island. He picked up another group of Marines in Thailand and returned to Koh Tang Island. In the evacuation of the Marines from Koh Tang Island, Captain Purser's helicopter was severely damaged and he had to return to the *USS Coral Sea*, which was nearby. Getting his helicopter repaired, he returned to the island to pick up 54 Marines and return them safely to the *Coral Sea.* Through his extraordinary heroism, superb airmanship, and aggressiveness in the face of hostile forces, Captain Purser reflected the highest credit upon himself and the United States Air Force."

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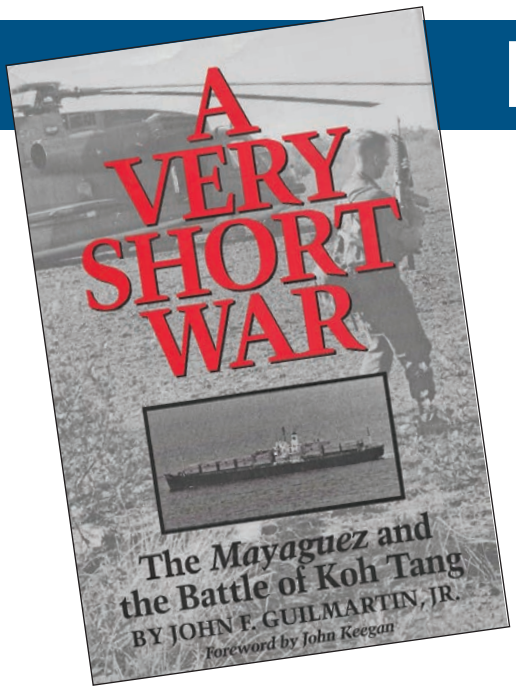

Book Review

By Cadet Richard King

A Very Short War: The Mayaguez and the Battle of Koh Tang Island

By John F. Guilmartin, Jr.

Texas A&M University Press, 2011, 268 pages

John "Joe" Guilmartin's book, *A Very Short War: The Mayaguez and the Battle of Koh Tang*, details a notable, yet often overlooked US engagement in Southeast Asia. Guilmartin, who earned two Silver Stars as a rescue helicopter pilot in Vietnam, writes from the perspective of a military historian close to those involved in the conflict. While also detailing the political context of the Mayaguez Incident, the book's true value lies in its application to leadership at the tactical level. Throughout the text, the author constantly refocuses on how decisions made at that particular level resulted in strategic success, providing a useful case-study to introduce young leaders to the fog and friction of warfare.

On the morning of 12 May 1975, only a few days after the fall of Saigon to the North Vietnamese Army, the Cambodian Khmer Rouge seized the US containership *SS Mayaguez* in international waters, taking the ship and its crew hostage. US Navy P-3 Orion patrol aircraft located the vessel early the next day docked at the island of Koh Tang. President Ford quickly ordered the use of military force to recapture the ship and demonstrate continued US military resolve following the withdrawal from Vietnam.

An ad-hoc force, assembled from nearby units, gathered at U-Tapao, Thailand, approximately 300 miles from Koh Tang. While overhead aircraft prevented additional boats from traveling to and from the island, military planners organized a rescue mission. Combat commenced on 15 May with a three-pronged attack, including an assault on the island, a ship-to-ship boarding of the *Mayaguez*, and the bombardment of military targets on the Cambodian mainland. For reasons unknown, the Khmer Rouge allowed the crew of the *Mayaguez* to depart Koh Tang in a fishing boat flying a white flag. After confirming the identity of the crew, US forces on the island conducted a nighttime withdrawal. In total, 41 servicemen perished during the incident, including three Marines left behind during the withdrawal. The three were executed by the Khmer Rouge, and their deaths mark the final names on the granite walls of the Vietnam Memorial.

The *Mayaguez* Incident had clear strategic implications, as it marked the conclusion of US involvement in Southeast Asia and demonstrated US military resolve following the fall of Saigon. Guilmartin, however, chooses to emphasize the role of tactical leadership, rather than strategic decisions. He notes how the combination of radios and satellites allowed almost real-time information flow between senior political leaders and the Marines on Koh Tang. Guilmartin warns against the information saturation that resulted from this, as tactical leadership on the island found themselves devoting time to answering irrelevant questions from senior leaders. He underlines this point by devoting an entire appendix solely to tactical communication.

Through this warning, the author illustrates for young officers and NCOs the overwhelming stress and confusion they must prepare for on the battlefield. For example, the Marines on Koh Tang faced an extreme number of uncertainties, including a lack of maps and channels for communication with air support. Guilmartin also emphasizes the importance of making effective tactical decisions. The outcomes of a battle do not necessarily depend on large-scale decisions; rather, the combination of individual actions can determine the end result. The Mayaguez Incident involved a high amount of strategic risk, but good decisions at the tactical level allowed the friendly forces to overcome the fog and friction involved in the battle.

A Very Short War lends itself well to young officers and NCOs preparing to lead in the confusion associated with warfare – particularly those in the AFSOF community, given the dual tactical and strategic nature of special operations missions. By using the Mayaguez Incident described in Guilmartin's book as an example, leaders can better understand their role in conflict and the importance of leadership at the lowest levels.

About the Author: C2C Richard King is a third-year cadet at the USAF Academy and is majoring in Military and Strategic Studies. Upon graduation in 2019, he hopes to attend the Intelligence Officer Initial Skills course at Goodfellow AFB, TX, and then serve as an intelligence officer.

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AC-130 SPECTRES AND THE RECOVERY OF THE *SS MAYAGUEZ*

By Bill Walter, CMSgt, USAF (Ret)

On the afternoon of 12 May, Khmer Rouge gunboats intercepted the US merchant ship *SS Mayaguez* and its crew near the Cambodian island of Paulo Wai. Though the ship was transporting consumer goods for the PX, a Khmer Rouge officer believed the ship was transporting military weapons. The ship's captain, Charles Miller, was directed to set a course for the Cambodian port of Kompong Som, some 90 miles away on the *Cambodian* mainland. The skipper realized his ship and commercial cargo would be gone forever if it reached the mainland, so he convinced his captors that the ship's radar was defective and he could not safely bring the ship to port in the darkness. Accepting the captain's ruse, the Khmer Rouge directed the *Mayaguez* to drop anchor for the night. The next morning, Captain Miller was ordered to proceed, but he stalled as long as he could with the hope that a rescue force was on the way. Unsure of the ship's status, the Khmer Rouge directed the *Mayaguez* be sailed within a mile and a half of the shoreline and drop anchor near the Cambodian island of Koh Tang.

The first US military action was aerial and naval reconnaissance intended to locate the *Mayaguez* and its crew. At 1600 on 13 May, a Khmer Rouge official ordered the *Mayaguez* crew to board two fishing boats tied up alongside the *Mayaguez*. A US Navy P-3 Orion maritime patrol aircraft reported more than 30 people boarding the fishing boats. The boats were then escorted by several Khmer Rouge gunboats to a small cove near Koh Tang. At about the same time, the President, through the Commander-in-Chief Pacific (CINCPAC), code name Blue Chip, alerted the 16th SOS to provide fire support for a yet-to-be-defined rescue and recovery operation.

According to Lt Col David Mets, then the 16th SOS Operations Officer,

> Our job was to be ready to maintain surveillance and halt waterborne traffic through the night, with no idea how many flights would be involved. It took over an hour to fly down to Koh Tang and each aircraft could remain on scene for about four hours before coming back. Neither the AC-130A nor AC-130H were capable of aerial refueling. The gunship was, therefore, a limited resource and would have to be conserved if it was to be the sole source of surveillance and firepower in the hours of darkness.

Fighters and reconnaissance aircraft overflew the *Mayaguez* and searched for signs of the crew during daylight, but they had very little night-time capability unless using LUU-2 illumination flares. Our AC-130 gunships were tasked with night missions to take advantage of the unique capabilities of our infrared (IR) and low light level television (LLLTV) systems. The gunships also carried LUU-2 flares to assist fighters and forward air controllers (FACs) when needed.

The first AC-130, Spectre 11, took off from Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base (RTAFB), Thailand, at 1710 hours, commanded by Capt Edward Burns III. Upon arrival at the working area Spectre 11 contacted the EC-130 Airborne Battlefield Command, Control, and Communications (ABCCC) aircraft, call sign Cricket, for instructions. Cricket directed them to search for boat traffic with their IR and LLLTV sensors. The *Mayaguez*, code name Mother Ship, appeared dead in the water with no activity onboard. Spectre 11 detected the cluster of Khmer Rouge patrol boats surrounding the two fishing boats in the Koh Tang cove and patrol boats shuttling supplies from the cove to an encampment near the center of the eastern beach.

After about 30 minutes, Cricket directed Spectre 11 to two islands about 15 miles south of Koh Tang. Activity on both islands appeared to be quiet, so Spectre returned to Koh Tang. After rolling into orbit at 6500 feet, Spectre 11 began to receive .50 caliber fire that fell short of their altitude. Though

the gunship had the anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) in their sights, they were not authorized to return fire since it was unknown where the *Mayaguez* crew was being held. Cricket re-directed the gunship back to the *Mayaguez* where it orbited for about 45 minutes, monitoring boat activity in the cove.

When Spectre 11 ran low on fuel, Spectre 21, commanded by Capt Michael Mueller, arrived to continue surveillance operations. The crew remained overhead for 3 hours and 20 minutes, locating and reporting multiple gun sites in the area surrounding the Khmer Rouge encampment. Gunship crews noted increased boat traffic as the night wore on. When Spectre 21 ran low on fuel, Spectre 31 replaced them.

Gunship crews flew blacked out as a matter of routine, so when an RF-4 Phantom II tactical reconnaissance aircraft unexpectedly flew over the island dispensing photo-flash cartridges it was more than a little surprising. SSgt Joe Percivalle, the Illumination Operator on Spectre 31 remembered, "I was hanging off the ramp when out of nowhere an RF-4 flew from 7 to 4 o'clock shooting out a line of very bright flares. It being pitch dark and not knowing they were coming scared the crap out of me. He was close."

At about 0400 on 14 May, Spectre 41 detected a patrol boat leaving the cove and heading towards the mainland. Cricket cleared the gunship to fire warning shots in front of the boat to stop it or cause it to turn around. The gunship fired 40mm rounds in front of the boat for about an hour, every time it headed for the mainland. Ultimately the patrol boat appeared to run aground.

Just before sunrise, CINCPAC authorized Spectre 51, commanded by Capt Gregory Kirkland, to fire warning shots near three patrol boats attempting to leave the area. The boats were initially turned back, but two made another run for the mainland. Fires from the gunship and F-111s turned the boats around. Two secured alongside the *Mayaguez*, but the third broke for the mainland. A-7s Corsair IIs dropped tear gas in front of the boat, but still it continued. Since it did not appear the *Mayaguez* crew was on the boat, it was sunk by 20mm gunfire from the A-7.

Later that morning, a loaded fishing boat left the cove heading towards the Cambodian mainland. Aircrews reported a number of people huddled on into the bow of the vessel and there were concerns the people could be the *Mayaguez* crew. Fighters strafed, bombed, and dropped CS gas in front of the boat in an attempt to stop it, but the boat evaded fire and continued on course. By 1000 hours, the boat successfully made it to Kampong Som. It was unclear if the fishing boat transported any of the entire *Mayaguez* crew. Without confirmation of crew whereabouts, the US assumed there was still a strong possibility some, if not all, were held captive on Koh Tang.

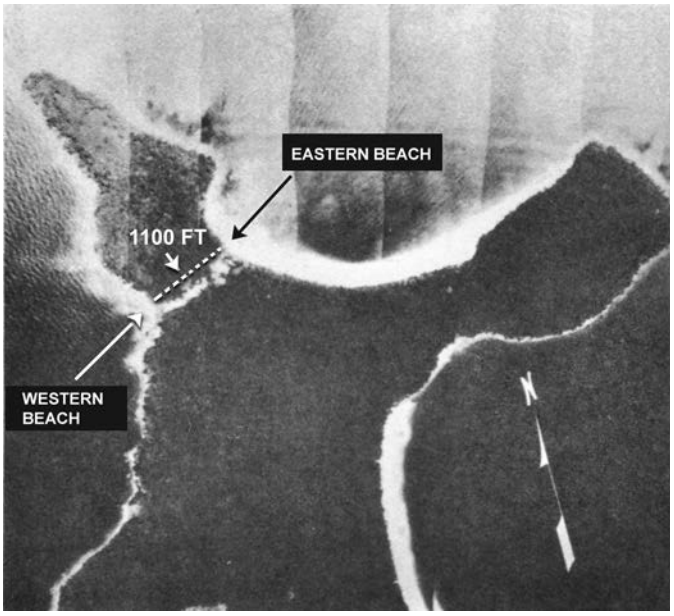
By mid-day on the 14th, the operation entered a new phase that allowed direct strikes on gunboats, or any boat that did not appear to be capable of holding passengers. Tactical aircraft bombed and strafed boats, sinking or damaging several. Near midnight, Spectre 41, commanded by Capt Henry Markulis, observed a boat heading towards the *Mayaguez* and was cleared to fire on it. Spectre 41 fired 192 rounds of 40mm and stopped the gunboat only 200 yards from the *Mayaguez*. A few hours later, Spectre 61, commanded by Major J. Cobble, replaced Spectre 41 and performed overhead surveillance until low on fuel, then diverted to U-Tapao to refuel and return to the island.

As the situation evolved, the President made the decision to mount a full-scale military operation to rescue the *Mayaguez* crew by force. Fire support for the operation would be provided by USAF fighters: F-4s, A-7s, and F-111s, and by AC-130 gunships. Forward air control was to be provided by the A-7 flight leads. That proved to be a mistake and later OV-10 Bronco FACs, call sign Nail, were called in to direct fires.

The guided missile destroyer, *USS Henry B. Wilson*, call sign Black Velvet, would also provide fire support once it arrived in the battle area.

The rapid pace of events, unreliable intelligence, and overlapping chains of command that extended all the way back to the White House caused more than a few problems. Working with extremely limited tactical information and no exact confirmation of the *Mayaguez* crew's location, mission planners assumed that Khmer Rouge guards would put up only token resistance before releasing the crew. Also unknown to US mission planners and undetectable by aerial reconnaissance methods, was that the landing zones (LZs) on East and West Beaches bracketed a heavily fortified encampment of well-trained and dug-in Khmer Rouge soldiers.

By now, Khmer Rouge commanders at Phnom Penh realized the situation had rapidly grown out of hand. They wanted to end it, but since there were no diplomatic relations established with the US, they could not communicate their intentions. At the same time, Captain Miller had established a dialogue through an English-speaking interpreter with



The east beach and west beach landing zones on Koh Tang were separated by a short strip of land in which the majority of Khmer Rouge soldiers fought from dug in fighting positions. The remainder of the island was covered with heavy jungle growth.

the commander at Kampong Som. The commander ordered the release of Capt Miller, his chief engineer, and seven other crewmembers. These individuals were to return to the *Mayaguez* to light the boilers and radio Bangkok to tell the US to cease military operations. Unfortunately, the decision was reached after dark, so they decided wait until daylight to sail back to the *Mayaguez*.

During the early morning hours of the 15th, the National Security Council met to discuss options. Since there was no diplomatic response from the Khmer Rouge government regarding the US request to release the ship and crew, President Ford ordered military action.

At first light on 15 May, Capt Miller and his partial crew boarded a fishing boat to return to the *Mayaguez*. About the same time, 250 Marines boarded 8 CH-53 and HH-53 helicopters to assault Koh Tang. Three more helicopters loaded a boarding party to be delivered to the *USS Holt* to recover the *Mayaguez*. Spectre 61 and Spectre 11 escorted the helicopter formation to the LZs at the north end of Koh Tang. Spectre crews searched both beach LZs and observed the gun sites that had been identified on 13 and 14 May. But, the situation appeared quiet. The first four helicopters approached the island to begin simultaneous landings on the East and West beaches. Knife 21 and Knife 22 approached the western beach without opposition, but as Knife 21 touched down, heavy fire erupted from entrenched Khmer Rouge positions. All 20 Marines on the helicopter exited while under fire.

Landing attempts on the eastern beach were no less dangerous. As Knife 23 and Knife 31 approached the LZ, Khmer Rouge guns remained silent until both helicopters entered a hover, then opened fire. Knife 23 was just a few feet above the HLZ when it was hit, losing its tail rotor. The aircraft spun out of control and crashed onto the beach. Remarkably, 20 Marines led by 2nd Lt John Cicere, a USAF combat photographer, and the entire crew survived the crash. Within seconds of arriving over the LZ, Knife 31's left external fuel tank caught fire, followed almost immediately by a rocket propelled grenade hit to the cockpit. The helicopter crashed into the surf less than 100 feet from the shoreline, directly in front of a Khmer Rouge gun position. Remarkably, 18 of the 26 onboard survived the crash, but were fired upon as they swam out to sea. Among the survivors was the battalion forward air controller (FAC), 1Lt Terry Tonkin, who used a survival radio to call for fire support as he swam out to sea and eventual rescue by the *USS Wilson*, along with 12 other survivors.

Mission commanders were surprised by the level of resistance, and the loss of 3 helicopters and 13 personnel in less than 30 minutes was a major shock. Since radios had been lost or destroyed during the initial insertions, communications between Marines on the island and the USAF A-7D Fast FACs was largely ineffective. The A-7s could not accurately pinpoint Khmer Rouge positions in the dense foliage. Gunships, though, were orbiting nearby in frustration since they had reported the gun sites' locations to intelligence two days earlier. For unknown reasons the information was not passed to the FACs. Coincidentally, gunship crews had the Khmer Rouge positions in their sights that morning but neither Blue Chip, Cricket, nor the FAC would clear the AC-130s to fire, instead favoring the fast jets. Tragically, many of the fighter strikes were complete failures with a high percentage of bombs totally missing the island.

By 1000 on the 14th, the *USS Holt* was towing the *Mayaguez* away from Koh Tang. Just after noon, a fishing boat flying white flags approached the *USS Wilson*. The skipper of the *Mayaguez* and his engineers were released and the fishing boat turned around to retrieve the rest of the *Mayaguez* crew. Coincidentally, the captured Thai fishing boat and crew was the same vessel that escaped the gauntlet of fire as it headed for the mainland two days earlier. Although the *Mayaguez*

crew had been released, the operation was far from being over.

When Spectre 61 returned to Koh Tang, it contacted Cricket for tasking and was handed over to the Search and Rescue (SAR) coordinator, call sign Rotor for tasking. Spectre 61 located the survivors and the enemy that were firing on the survivors, and passed the coordinates to Rotor. Even though Spectre 61 was ready to provide fire support, he did not get clearance to fire because there were fast movers on scene. After the fighters had expended their ordnance, Rotor cleared Spectre 61 to fire. After shooting 8 – 10 rounds of 40mm, Spectre was requested to break off because there were more fast movers to bring in.

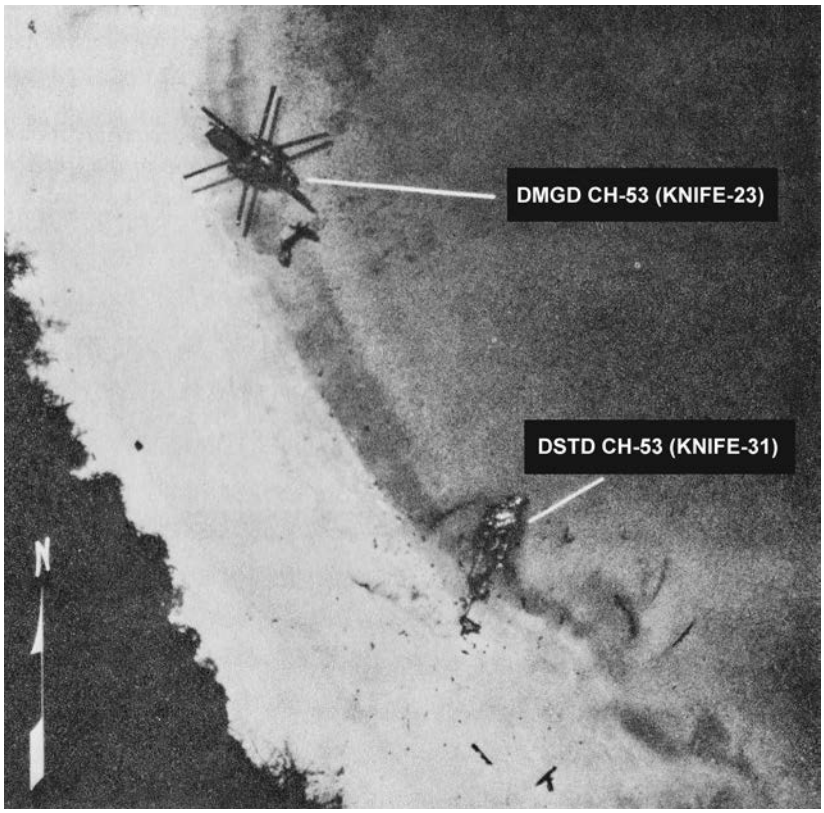
A short time later, while the fast-moving strike aircraft attempted to identify and hit targets with little success, Spectre 61 was directed by Cricket to return to base. Five minutes later Spectre 61 was recalled to support two Marine elements which were trying to link up. The two commanders were separated and did not know each other's location. Plus, they needed the gunship to suppress enemy ground fire. Cricket cleared Spectre 61 to fire on any targets requested by the Marine commanders.

Spectre 61 put down suppressive fire on enemy positions while Jolly 41 made a low pass over the western LZ. Jolly 41 identified Khmer Rouge positions and passed the locations to the gunship crew. Then, Spectre 61 fired 105mm rounds directly on the heavy machine gun positions. Jolly 41 landed while Spectre 61 continued to lay down suppressive fire.

At 1430, the helicopters attempted to extract the 25 Marines from the east beach. Before the helicopters began their approach, an A-7 dropped riot control agent near the beach but a strong wind blew the tear gas out to sea.

they could see the impacts and accurately aim their weapons.

Spectre 11 fired its 40mm gun almost continuously after that, with only two short breaks to drop flares. When the storage barrel for expended 40mm brass was full, the crew fired two long bursts of 20mm high-explosive incendiary (HEI) rounds while the storage barrel was being emptied. All the



Knife 23 and Knife 31 crash sites on the Eastern beach and a destroyed Khmer Rouge patrol boat in the shallow surf.

With time running out for the remaining Marines on Koh Tang and the *USS Holt* nearby, 1Lt Robert Blough, the pilot of Jolly 44, flew directly to Koh Tang, picked up a load of Marines and unloaded them on the nearby *USS Holt*. Since the HH-53 was too heavy to land on the destroyer, Blough hovered just above the ship and the Marines jumped onto the deck. Jolly 44 then returned to Koh Tang, made several unsuccessful approaches in the smoky darkness, but finally landed while under fire to extract another load of Marines. A short time later, Knife 51 circled the LZ in complete darkness while Nail 69, Capt Greg Wilson, cycled his aircraft landing lights on and off to guide Knife 51 into the LZ. Meanwhile, Nail 69 kept Spectre 11 in a holding orbit southeast of the island while fighters dropped their ordnance with mixed results. Finally, unsatisfied with the fighter strikes, Nail 69 directed Spectre 11 into position over Koh Tang. The gunship crew began firing as directed, initially shooting 105mm high explosive rounds, but the heavy jungle canopy proved to be a challenge. Spectre 11's sensor operator, Lt Don Raatz remembers not being able to clearly see the rounds' impacts because of the dense jungle canopy. Switching to 40mm Misch Metal made all the difference. At that point while, after three aborted landing attempts, Capt Richard Brims landed Knife 51 on the West Beach while Spectre 11 laid down constant 20mm and 40mm suppressive fire on nearby Khmer Rouge positions.

The intensity of the engaged firefight was such that the Marines, their attention directed outwards at the hostile fire positions barely noticed the newly arrived helicopter. When several seconds passed, and none of the Marines made an effort to disengage and withdraw into the helicopter, TSgt Wayne Fisk, a pararescueman on Knife 51 disembarked and fired several rifle rounds into the air to get their attention. An orderly extraction began until 29 Marines were aboard Knife 51. Unsure if all Marines were accounted for, TSgt Fisk signaled the flight mechanic, SSgt Marion Riley, that he would perform a final sweep of the beachhead. No sooner had he departed the helicopter than he began taking enemy fire. Maneuvering down the beach in the dark, illuminated only by overhead flares and the muzzle flashes, TSgt Fisk was nearly bracketed by advancing Khmer Rouge soldiers. Spectre 11 unleashed a long burst of 20mm HEI fire. According to Fisk, it was

…a magnificently violent, shimmering curtain of red,

orange, and yellow death. It began as a single red line descending from my right and grew, like the Aurora Borealis, across the front of me to my left, then it went back and forth. It was like a huge protective curtain being drawn in front of me; and I knew I was safe, but everything in it was dying. I felt omnipotent.

After Spectre 11's strike, Fisk searched the beachhead for remaining Marines and the body of LCpl Ashton Looney, which he had seen earlier that afternoon. Unable to locate any Marines or Looney, he reboarded Knife 51 and they flew to the *USS Coral Sea*. The mission was over.

Epilogue:

The 16th SOS Commander's After-action Report (AAR) detailed positive and negative aspects of AC-130 involvement in the *Mayaguez* Incident. Gunship crews reported difficulties working with command and control and the FACs in particular. The AAR observed that leadership and mission planners did not know how to effectively employ the gunships, and therefore sacrificed needed and helpful capabilities.

The recovery of the *Mayaguez* was an operation ideally suited to the special qualities of the AC-130 gunship. While the gunships did make significant contributions to the mission, it is also true that they could have done a good deal more to ensure success and minimize the costs. The 16th SOS was extensively trained for troops-in-contact situation and Koh Tang island was almost a classic example of such a situation. While the AC-130s did provide close air support for the assault force and suppressive fire for the helicopters, they also could have helped locate survivors and guide the helicopters to the exact location of the ground forces being extracted.

DATE	TO TIME/DURATION	CALL SIGN	AIRCRAFT COMMANDER
13 May	1710/5.8	Spectre 11	Capt Edward Burns III
13 May	2005/5.6	Spectre 21	Capt Robert Hilb
13 May	2158/5.3	Spectre 31	Capt Peter King
13 May	2328/7.2	Spectre 41	UNK
14 May	0137/7.5	Spectre 51	Capt Gregory Kirkland
14 May	1600/5.6	Spectre 11	Lt Col David Mets
14 May	1805/6.5	Spectre 21	Capt Michael Mueller
14 May	2030/5.4	Spectre 31	Capt Robert Hilb
14 May	2150/5.8	Spectre 41	Capt Henry J. Markulis
14 May	2325/6.6	Spectre 51	Capt Edward Perry
15 May	0117/10.3	Spectre 61	Maj John Coble
15 May	0117/5.9	Spectre 11	Lt Col J Daughtry
15 May	1607/5.9	Spectre 21	Capt Terry Talbot
15 May	1905/5.3	Spectre 31	Capt Warren Knouff(CP)
15 May	2025/0.7	Spectre 41	Capt Henry J. Markulis

The *Mayaguez* operation was considered the last action of the Vietnam War, thus ending the AC-130's combat role in Southeast Asia. By early summer of 1975, the AC-130A fleet began to depart Korat for Duke Field, FL. After reaching the US they reconstituted as the 711th SOS, under the 919th Special Operations Group (now wing).

About the Author: CMSgt (ret) Bill Walter is a former AC-130 Gunner. He is currently the Spectre Association Historian.

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Steven Schmauss,
Texas Tech, C/O 2017

Steven is the son of Air Force SSgt. Mark J. Schmauss, who lost his life in Kuwait in 1991.

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