

# VAN DE GEER, RICHARD

**Remains Returned 5 December 1995; Identified 23 June 2000**

Name:	.Richard Van de Geer	NO Picture Available
Rank/Branch:	2nd Lieutenant/US Air Force	
Unit:	C21st Special Operations Squadron Nakhon Phanom, Thailand	
Date of Birth:	11 January 1948	
Home of Record:	Columbus, OH	
Date of Loss:	.15 May 1975	
Country of Loss:	Cambodia/Over Water	
Loss Coordinates:	<a href="#">101800N 1030830E (TS965400)</a> <a href="#">Click coordinates to view maps</a>	
Status in 1973:	Killed/Body Not Recovered	
Category:	3	
Aircraft/Vehicle/Ground:	<a href="#">CH53A "Super Jolly Green Giant"</a>	
Other Personnel In Incident:	Daniel A. Benedett; Lynn Blessing; Walter Boyd; Gregory S. Copenhaver; Andres Garcia; Bernard Gause Jr., James J. Jacques; Ronald J. Manning; James R. Maxwell; Richard W. Rivenburgh; Antonio R. Sandoval and Kelton R. Turner (Knife 31); Elwood E. Rumbaugh (Knife 21); Ashton N. Loney (Knife 23); Gary L. Hall, Joseph N. Hargrove and Danny G. Marshall (machinegun crew) - (all missing)	

## REMARKS: 750515 MAYAGUEZ INCIDENT LOSS

**SYNOPSIS:** The Sikorsky HH53 Super Jolly Green Giant was the largest, fastest and most powerful heavy lift helicopter in the US Air Force's inventory. In 1967, a program to develop a night rescue capability was initiated. By late 1970 the program successfully installed night recovery systems aboard five HH53C Super Jolly helicopters in Southeast Asia. These helicopters were used in such vital operations as the US raid on the San Tay Prison Camp near Hanoi in November 1970 and the assault mission to free the Mayaguez crew in Cambodia in May 1975.

On 12 May 1975, the SS Mayaguez, a merchant ship owned by Sea-Land Corporation of Menlo Park, NJ was en route from Hong Kong to Sattahip, Thailand. It was carrying a shipment of non-arms military supplies and commercial goods stored in 274 35-foot cargo containers for a number of military bases in Thailand. The Mayaguez carried a civilian crew of 39 including Capt. Charles T. Miller. Shortly before the Mayaguez entered normal international waters, the Cambodian government arbitrarily claimed additional territorial waters extending 90 miles into the Gulf of Thailand instead of the standard 3-mile limit.

At 1121 hours, the ship was hijacked by Khmer Rouge naval forces when the ship was approximately 60 miles off the coast of Cambodia and 8 miles from the Poulo Wai Islands, which are a small group of rocky islets claimed by both Cambodia and South Vietnam. The unarmed crew was removed from the Mayaguez and taken by fishing boat first to Koh Tang Island. Shortly thereafter they were taken to the mainland Cambodian City of Kompong Song, then to Rong San Lem Island. US intelligence tracked the merchant ship's crew movements and when intelligence personnel observed an unusual amount of activity in two coves in the northern tip of Koh Tang Island, they thought there was an excellent chance that some or all of the hostages had been taken back there. Koh Tang Island is 5 miles long running north to south and is nearly a mile wide at its broadest point. It is located in

the Gulf of Thailand approximately 31 miles southwest of the major mainland coastal city of Kampong Saom.

When informed of the ship's seizure, President Gerald Ford called it "an act of piracy," demanded its immediate release and warned the Cambodians "failure to do so would have the most serious consequences." Early in the crisis, President Ford ordered a carrier battle group, comprised of the aircraft carrier USS Coral Sea with guided missile destroyer escorts USS Harold E. Holt and the USS Henry B. Wilson into the Gulf of Thailand. In addition, the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines deployed to Utapao, Thailand as part of a 1,100-Marine assault force. The Air Force also prepared aircraft for a possible strike/rescue mission. When 3 days of intense negotiations between the two governments completely broke down, President Ford ordered a military rescue operation. At the time the rescue plan was initiated, US intelligence personnel believed some or all of the Mayaguez crew had been taken back to Koh Tang Island. Intelligence personnel also estimated there were only 20 to 40 lightly armed Khmer troops on the island.

On 15 May 1975, the Marines assigned to Operation Mayaguez arrived at the staging area at 0230 hours and were lifting off the ground by 0415 hours in 8 Air Force HH53A Super Jolly Green Giant helicopters. Due to limited air assets, the first wave of the landing force consisted of only 179 Marines from Company G (reinforced). However, the first wave did include a section of 81mm mortars and a small command group. By 0615 hours, shortly after dawn on that clear and bright morning, Lt. Col. John Denham, aircraft commander; 1st Lt. Karl W. Poulsen, pilot; SSgt. Elwood E. Rumbaugh, flight engineer; and a second flight engineer; comprised the crew of the lead HH53A, Call sign "Knife 21," were attempting to land the first wave of Marines on Koh Tang Island's narrow west beach LZ. This LZ was located approximately 500 feet behind the compound where the hostages were believed held. However, instead of finding a small contingent of troops, the Marines found some 150 to 200 heavily armed soldiers in a heretofore unknown extensive set of fortifications that ringed the beaches, including well-entrenched machinegun pits, bunker complexes and trenches that were all interlocking. This complex allowed enemy troops to attack the American aircraft and ground personnel at will.

Also on the morning of 15 May, a ship-seizure team from the USS Harold E. Holt assaulted the Mayaguez while it was anchored near Koh Tang Island only to find the ship deserted. The team took control of the ship and sailed it to a safe location. At the same time the ship-seizure team secured the ship, a helicopter assault of Koh Tang Island was initiated. As the first wave of the rescue operation was underway, the communists pulled a major surprise by releasing the entire crew from another island where they had spent the night. After release, the hostages were in the process of boarding the fishing trawler once again when crewmen from the destroyer USS Henry B. Wilson took control of the hostages.

Lt. Col. Denham successfully reached the west beach, discharged his passengers and attempted to escape the Khmer barrage being leveled at them by turning Knife 21 seaward and racing toward safety. However, it took a direct hit from a RPG round and crashed into the Gulf of Thailand approximately 1 mile west of the island. Lt. Col. Denham and the second flight engineer successfully escaped the Super Jolly. Karl Poulsen and Elwood Rumbaugh were trapped in the aircraft when it rolled on its side, then upside down before sinking. SSgt. Rumbaugh managed to free 1st Lt. Poulsen, then fought his way to the surface dragging the co-pilot with him. As attempts were made to rescue Karl Poulsen, Elwood Rumbaugh disappeared underwater and could not be located. Later a nearby Navy ship rescued the three Air Force survivors. Elwood Rumbaugh was immediately listed Missing in Action. Two days later, his status was changed to Killed in Action/Body Not Recovered based on survivor reports.

Simultaneously, as the Marines were being inserted onto the west beach, 2 CH53A Super Jolly helicopters raced at full speed toward the east beach. 1st Lt. John H. Shamm, aircraft commander; 1st Lt. John P. Lucas, pilot; and 2 door gunners; comprised the crew of the lead Super Jolly, call sign "Knife 23." Also on board were 20 US Marines, including LCpl. Ashton N. Loney, and an Air Force photographer, all of whom were strapped into webbed seats in the cargo compartment.

Major Howard A. Corson, aircraft commander; 2nd Lt. Richard Van de Geer, pilot; SSgt. Jon D. Harston and Sgt. Randy Hoffmaster, both flight engineers; comprised the crew of the #2 aircraft, call sign "Knife 31." Also on board Major Corson's helicopter were 22 U.S. Marines including PFC Daniel Bennett, PFC Lynn Blessing, Pvt. Walter Boyd, LCpl. Richard Copenhaver, PFC Andres Garcia, Pvt. James Jacques, PFC James Maxwell, PFC Richard Rivenburgh, PFC Antonio Sandoval, and PFC Kelton Turner, along with 2 U.S. Navy corpsmen, HM5 Bernard Gause and HM3 Ronald Manning.

As the flight approached the beach, the communists opened fire with a withering barrage of heavy weapons and rocket propelled grenades (RPGs). A deadly moving grid of tracers crisscrossed the designated landing zone (LZ). 1st Lt. Shamm's aircraft was closest to shore when it sustained several hits that crippled its rotor system and caused severe vibrations to shake his aircraft. He ordered the tail ramp lowered as he nursed the Super Jolly toward the beach. Luckily he reached the beach just as the tail section was torn off. All of Knife 23's crew and passengers, most of whom had been wounded by enemy ground fire while it was still in the air, successfully exited the Super Jolly and made it to the protection of the treeline.

As the two-aircraft flight approached the island, Major Corson's helicopter was positioned to the left of 1st Lt. Shamm's. It was also hit by ground fire during the initial barrage including a direct hit by a RPG in the left fuel tank that exploded causing a frightening ball of fire. Major Corson fought to keep the helicopter in the air as it came to a hover just offshore. SSgt. Harston and Sgt. Hoffmaster fired their miniguns at enemy positions from inside the cabin inferno. At the same time 1st Lt. Van de Geer fired an M-16 out his open cockpit window as fire burst through the cabin sidewall. Dazed and wounded, with plexiglas and instrument panel ripped away from their mounts in front of them by another RPG round, the flight crew rode their aircraft into the surf 10 meters from the shore. Inside, the men unbuckled their seatbelts and attempted to douse the flames. Ammunition began exploding and the helicopter's magnesium rotor head caught fire. One Marine punched at a window until SSgt. Harston, who had already sustained second and third degree burns, appeared from the submerged forward hatch to lead some of the dazed and wounded Marines out. Three of them rushed toward shore firing their weapons as they splashed through waist-deep water. All three were hit by ground fire and fell forward into the bullet-churned surf. Others who escaped from Knife 31 swam seaward and were rescued 3 hours later by the USS Henry B. Wilson. Of the 28 men on board Knife 31, all but 13 were recovered either alive or dead. Those 13 men were immediately listed Killed in Action/Body Not Recovered.

Lt. Terry Tonkin, the Forward Air Controller (FAC) who was one of the Marines who swam seaward, lost his radio in the explosion inside the crippled aircraft. While continuing to swim away from the island, he borrowed Major Corson's survival radio. After making 3 initial "Mayday" calls, Lt. Tonkin settled down in the water and brought in the Navy A-7 Corsairs to strafe and bomb the Khmer positions.

As the chaos of battle raged in the air and on the two beaches, the LZs on the east beach were closed to further insertions. Additional helicopters safely disembarked the remainder of the first wave on the west beach LZs #1 and #2. Shortly thereafter it was learned that the hostages had been successfully recovered. The second wave of Marines began landing at approximately 1230 hours on the west LZs including PFC Gary L. Hall, LCpl. Joseph N. Hargrove and Pvt. Danny G. Marshall from 3rd Platoon, Company E. Later a third LZ located some 1200 meters to the south was established when the 5th Super Jolly bringing in the second wave and carrying the Command Group and mortars, accidentally landed there. This LZ was henceforth called "LZ X-Ray." Shortly thereafter, the arduous task of withdrawing US ground forces from the heavily defended island began. For the next 14 hours the Americans lay pinned down on the two beaches.

Elements of Companies E and G set up, then expanded, their perimeters around both beaches. The Command Group worked its way north along the shore in an effort to link up with the landing force located on the east beach. The 81mm mortars were employed to fire on enemy positions located in close proximity to Company G's perimeter. The link up was accomplished by roughly 1300 hours. After linking up, the remainder of the afternoon was spent consolidating their positions, destroying captured enemy stores and directing airstrikes by Navy A-7 aircraft from the USS Coral Sea. At the same time, a machinegun crew comprised of PFC Gary L. Hall, LCpl. Joseph N. Hargrove and Pvt. Danny G. Marshall was sent south from the western LZs to defend the exposed right flank. The Marines successfully stopped enemy troops from advancing closer. Further, at 1700 hours, all 3 Marines were known to be alive, but beginning to run low on ammunition.

Meanwhile, there was a very small pocket of Americans who were in the initial landing force from Knife 23 still pinned down on the eastern shore. Commanded by 2nd Lt. M. A. Cicere, the 22 Marines, including LCpl. Loney, and a corpsman remained pinned down all day by extremely heavy and accurate enemy fire. During the early hours of fighting on the east beach, LCpl. Ashton Loney was struck by enemy gunfire and believed killed. Because of the location in which he fell, his body could not be recovered. Throughout the day, the survivors of Knife 23 continued under siege by well-armed Khmer forces that were hidden in the concealed bunker complex.

At 1800 hours, the evacuation of Koh Tang Island was approved and initiated on very short notice. Just before

dark, the survivors of Knife 23 were the first to be extracted. Half an hour later, the wounded that had been collected in a makeshift medical aid station, along with fire support personnel and the command group, departed on the first wave from the west beach. The perimeter was progressively tightened during the chaotic evacuation that continued under intense enemy fire. Unfortunately, under the circumstances, no one was able to identify those Americans who were actually extracted and who were not. As the last helicopter approached the beach, Major John Hendricks, who headed the command group still on the ground, watched it weather "an almost unbelievable hail of small arms and automatic weapons fire. Tracers streamed into the perimeter and bounced around like popcorn." Minutes later the helicopter completed loading the last of the Americans. As the aircraft lifted off, Major Hendricks looked back at the island and later reported, "The last thing I saw was the half circle of the perimeter blazing away at the larger circle of fire surrounding it."

Finally, the last of the total force of 231 Marines, Airmen and Sailors who landed on Koh Tang Island were withdrawn by helicopter at 2000 hours in one of the most dramatic wartime rescues ever conducted. By the time Operation Mayaguez was over, 3 helicopters had been shot down, 6 received severe damage, 3 others were heavily damaged and only one was still flyable. 18 men were unaccounted for and at least 3 of them were known alive on the ground earlier in the day. Because the landing force was transferred piecemeal to the three ships that comprised the battle group; it was not learned until the next day that Gary Hall, Danny Marshall and Joseph Hargrove were not among the evacuees. Further, once the mission commanders' realized the three men were inadvertently left on the island, they also learned the three were alive and uninjured when last seen late in the late afternoon. At the time the military determined that the machinegun crew had in fact been abandoned on Koh Tang Island, Danny Marshall, Gary Hall and Joseph Hargrove were listed Missing in Action.

In 1988 a Cambodian source related that "a Marine had been wounded 10 days after the Koh Tang Island assault. The Marine was captured while apparently scavenging for food or water near the edge of the Khmer encampment. The Khmer Deputy Commander had been called. He arrived and summarily executed the Marine." The source provided unusually specific details regarding the Marine's burial including that the body was located "close to a stream, on the eastern side of the island between a well and two Sone trees." Also in 1988, the communist government of Cambodia announced that it wished to return the remains of several dozen Americans to the United States. However, because the US did not officially recognize the Cambodian government, it refused to respond directly to the Cambodians regarding the remains they offered.

In 1995, the first of three teams from the Joint Task Force for Full Accounting (JTFFA) was allowed onto Koh Tang Island to search for the remains of the 18 Americans who lost their lives or were listed Missing in Action in Operation Mayaguez. As part of the JTFFA contingent, a salvage crew from the USS Brunswick, the first US military vessel allowed to penetrate Cambodian waters since the end of the war, began pulling pieces of Knife 31 to the shore. Over the recovery site, the team placed 8 feet by 16 feet open boxes made of steel plates to stabilize the search area and to prevent outside sand and other material from backfilling the recovery site. On the surface two work boats containing diesel engines connected to 10-inch suction hoses drew layer of debris from beneath the steel boxes and deposited the material onto screening tables set up on makeshift barges. From inside and under sections of the helicopter came teeth along with arm, leg, finger, rib and jaw bones - 161 specimens in all, plus 144 personal items and 101 pieces of equipment mixed in with live and exploded ammunition. One recovered thighbone had shattered 6 inches below the hip and the injury occurred before or at the time of death. According to JTFFA members, that single bone forcefully and painfully brought home the level of suffering these men endured in the last moments before Knife 31 slipped below the shallow water just off the east beach landing zone.

Once the team was assured they recovered everything possible from Knife 31, the search effort shifted to the waters off the west beach for the wreckage of Knife 21 and the remains of SSgt. Rumbaugh. US Navy divers from the USS Brunswick searched the deep water approximately 1 mile to the west of the west beach where Knife 23 was lost. Over the next three hours the divers searched the area, but found no trace of the aircraft or the missing flight engineer. At the time the divers' air supply was depleted, the formal search for Elwood Rumbaugh was terminated.

The last phase of the JTFFA search effort was to locate the well where the Cambodian source reported the remains of an American Marine were buried. The team found the brick-lined well partly covered in thick weeds right where the witness indicated it was. During the excavation, the team recovered a thick harness belt they thought was possibly from one of the downed helicopters. As they continued to excavate the site, a few bone

fragments were also recovered. When the departed Koh Tang Island, all remains recovered were transported to the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii (CIL-HI) for examination.

During the 1997 JTFFA trip to Koh Tang Island, the team interviewed a former Khmer Rouge medic, Rot Leng, who was on the island during the Marine Assault. He recounted events of the battle from the Cambodian side. According to Rot Leng, "A week after the battle, four Americans surrendered." His description of three of the men matched the members of the machinegun crew who were seen alive by other Marines shortly before the last helicopter extraction. Apparently the machinegun crew who stayed in position protecting their unit's right flank only to be left behind during the confusion caused by darkness and intense combat. According to Rot Leng, Khmer troops tried to get around the Marine position, but were stopped by "stubborn resistance."

The fourth man described as wearing Navy uniform and carrying medical supplies. The only two Navy corpsmen lost during Operation Mayaguez were Bernard Gause and Ronald Manning, and both men were on board Knife 31. If Rot Leng's account is true, one of the corpsmen successfully made it to shore after the helicopter sank offshore, then made it through the dense jungle to an area of relative safety before capture days later. When asked what happened to the captured Americans, Rot Leng stated the four men were taken to the Cambodian mainland.

The 161 bone fragments recovered from the excavation of Knife 31, and the handful of fragments recovered from the purported gravesite near the well were examined by CIL-HI personnel. On 8 May 2000, the remains of 6 of the Marines onboard Knife 31 - Lynn Blessing, Walter Boyd, Gregory Copenhaver, Andres Garcia, Antonio Sandoval and Kelton Turner -were identified by CIL-HI personnel through the use of DNA tests, dental records and the recovery of personal effects. On 23 June 2000, the remains of Richard Van de Geer, the aircraft's co-pilot; Bernard Gause and Ronald Manning, the two Navy corpsmen, were identified using the same techniques. All 9 of these sets of remains were recovered from the wreckage of Knife 31. Upon examination, the bone fragments recovered from the gravesite near the well were determined to be non-human remains.

For the men whose remains have been positively identified, the families have the peace of mind of knowing where their loved ones lie. However, for the other men lost in Operation Mayaguez, including Gary Hall, Joseph Hargrove and Danny Marshall, who are subjects of first-hand live sighting reports, as well as for Ashton Loney, Elwood Rumbaugh, Daniel Benedett, James Jacques, James Maxwell and Richard Rivenburgh, their fate, like that of other Americans who remain unaccounted for, could be quite different. Since the end of the Vietnam War well over 21,000 reports of American prisoners, missing and otherwise unaccounted for have been received by our government. Many of these reports document LIVE America Prisoners of War remaining captive throughout Southeast Asia TODAY.

American military men were called upon to fly and fight in many dangerous circumstances, and they were prepared to be wounded, killed or captured. It probably never occurred to them that they could be abandoned by the country they so proudly served