

While a tense world waited, the president ordered...  
**Air Mission MAYAGUEZ**

by Capt. John B. Taylor - AIRMAN magazine, Feb, 1976.



photo by YN3 Michael Chan, USN US Marines and Air Force personnel board the SS Mayaguez

Tuesday, 1 p.m. Two F-111 fighter bombers swept across the Gulf of Siam looking for a ship. THE ship. The S.S. Mayaguez. Boarded the previous day - May 12, 1975 by Khmer Rouge troops, Mayaguez had disappeared from the anchorage where she had spent her first night in captivity watched over by Navy P-3 patrol planes. Maj. Roger Bogard and his wingman in another F-111 had

been sent to locate her. It took them twenty minutes. Bogard's sensitive radar spotted the vessel anchored now off a small island known as Koh Tang, some 35 miles north of where it had been boarded.

Mayaguez was sitting underneath a thunderstorm, which made identification tricky, but after several low-altitude passes, the F-111 crews felt sure they had the right ship. "We compared it to pictures we had been given," Bogard said. "With all those containers on deck, there just couldn't be any doubt." The F-111s were unarmed, having been diverted from a training mission. Soon they were joined by ordnance-carrying flights of F-4s and A-7s. Meanwhile, on Koh Tang, Capt. Charles Miller, master of the Mayaguez, was having trouble convincing his captors his ship carried neither weapons nor spy gear. The Cambodians demanded a look behind some locked doors on the ship, so Miller was taken back on board.

Tuesday, 5:20 p.m. The watchful fighters overhead noticed the approaching boats and the renewed activity on deck. This, coupled with the puffs of smoke coming from the ship's stack, led them to think the Cambodians were getting ready to move the Mayaguez. The international maritime signal for "do not proceed" is a shot fired across a vessel's bow. There's nothing that says this signal has to be fired by another ship, so with Washington's O.K., an A-7 peeled off and delivered the message. The Khmers got it loud and clear. Miller said later that the Cambodians hauled him back off the ship so fast he didn't have to show his captors anything aboard.

Tuesday, Early Evening. It was early morning in Washington. As diplomatic efforts to free the ship and its crew continued, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were busy carrying out the instructions given by the President to Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David C.

Jones (acting chairman since Gen. George Brown was in Europe on TDY) at a White House meeting 16 hours earlier. As military options were identified, the Pentagon began advance preparations to assure swift action on any order the President might give. Marines in Okinawa and the Philippines were alerted; the destroyers Holt and Wilson and the carrier Coral Sea were turned toward the Gulf of Siam. Since one option was the use of Air Force security police already based in Thailand to recapture the Mayaguez, 75 SPs were ordered to stand by at a forward staging base. Unhappily, a CH-53 helicopter carrying 18 SPs and a crew of five went down during the shuttle operation, killing all aboard.

Tuesday Evening. Encouraged by the news that the Mayaguez and its crew hadn't been taken to the mainland, the President ordered the JCS to have the Air Force prevent any boat traffic between Koh Tang and mainland Cambodia.

Tuesday, Dusk. The Mayaguez rode easily at anchor off the island. Overhead there was a "changing of the guard" as the F-4s and A-7s departed for home. All night Captain Miller and his crew would hear what he described as a "whine" of the night watch upstairs - the whistle of a nearby Spectre AC-130 combined with the muted rumble of high-flying F-111s.

Tuesday, 11 p.m. It was almost noon Washington time when the JCS ordered one Marine battalion and two Marine platoons from their bases to U-Tapao Airfield in Thailand. They also ordered all Air Force heavy-lift helicopters in Thailand to that same base. MAC C-141s began arriving with loads of troops at 4 a.m. The stage was set. It could go either way. It was Cambodia's move.

Wednesday, Dawn. The Cambodians made their move about 6:30, just after the Spectre and the F-111s had been joined by

flights of F-4s and A-7s. A regular airborne command and control plane was on the way, but for the moment Spectre was directing the operation. When a military patrol boat started for the mainland with a smaller craft in trail, Spectre sent the F-111 in to turn them around.

"He [Spectre] told us to drop two of our 2,000-pound bombs about a mile in front of the lead patrol boat," F-111 pilot Capt. John Palm remembered, "but the boats just kept coming. On the next pass he asked us to make it a half mile off their bow, which is just about the edge of a 2,000-pounder's blast range." Some other boats making a break at the same time turned back, but not these two. Even after Spectre raked the water ahead with a dazzling display of firepower, the boats kept going. Finally, Spectre had had enough. He had been taking 40-mm fire regularly from the patrol craft so, with JCS authorization, Spectre directed a flight of A-7s led by Lt. Col. Don Rebotoy to attack. The patrol craft sank so fast the RF-4s in the area missed getting pictures of it.

The force then turned its attention to the small wooden boat behind the gunboat. It plodded doggedly past its escort's grave toward the mainland. The A-7s and F-111s made some low passes to look the boat over. The pilots thought they saw some Caucasian faces among the people huddle on the deck. Their report was passed to the Joint Chiefs who told the White House. As the fighters pulled up, the word was flashed back: do your best to stop it, but don't sink it.

Later, Captain Miller would describe what happened next: "We were bombed a hundred times by our jets. Ten foot forward of our bow light. Rockets and machine gun fire. You have to give our pilots credit. They can thread the eye of needle from a mile away. They did everything that was possible without blowing us out of

the water to try to get this boat to turn around and take us back to the ship."

The crew - Thai fishermen who were also captives - tried several times to turn away from the onslaught. The Cambodians forced them to press on. "When they [the aircraft] saw it wasn't going to work," said Miller, "two jets overflew the boat from bow to stern about seven feet above us and tear-gassed us." But it was no use. The fighters finally called it quits and the boat sailed on in to Kompong Som. It was impossible to tell how many Mayaguez crewmen, if any, had been aboard. But that had been the only boat to get through. During the action that morning, three Khmer patrol boats were sunk trying to run to the mainland.

Wednesday, 8 a.m. Two HH-53 Jolly Green Giant rescue helicopters were launched to recover any survivors from the sunken Cambodian gunboats. Hostile fire drove them off.

Wednesday, Noon. Air Force helicopter crews waiting at the staging base were put on 30minute alert. Shortly, they were ordered to their aircraft to receive Marines. When each helicopter, crew, and load of passengers had been matched up, they were all released for crew rest. They were as ready as they would ever be. It was almost midnight in Washington. No one had heard from the Cambodians.

Thursday, Early Morning. The waiting was over. The President had called a meeting of the National Security Council and asked General Jones to brief on the military options open. The one the President picked is now history.

Thursday, 2:30 a.m. Air Force helicopter crews were briefed and sent to their aircraft. At about 3:50, JCS ordered Air Force Lt. Gen John J. Burns, commander of the joint operation, to begin the assault.



SMSgt. Joe Moore (second from right) and Sgt. Harold Young (right), Air Force explosive ordnance disposal specialists, break out their equipment as Marines prepare to search the Mayaguez. AF EOD and Marines aboard the Mayaguez.

Thursday, Before Dawn. The first wave of helicopters closed on Koh Tang and the Mayaguez at 150 mph. The first three-ship element was made up of HH-53s of the 40th ARRS. These Jollys carried the boarding party for the Mayaguez. The next four choppers were CH-53s of the 21st Special Operations Squadron. Their Marines would storm the island as would those aboard the last element of four helicopters, a mixed group of Jolly Green Giants and a Special Operations bird.

"It was very dark with lots of clouds over the water," Lt. Col. John Denham recalled. He was flying Knife 21, the lead chopper in the second element. There was little talking on the flight deck.

"We had been through Saigon and Phnom Penh [evacuations] together, the same crew; we pretty well knew what each man would do. We didn't have much to discuss going in to the island."



Thursday, First Light. The destroyer Holt was ten miles north of Koh Tang when the choppers swept in. The first plane, Jolly 11, laid its rear wheels on the destroyer's small helipad and lowered its ramp. "We had to hover that way while the troops jumped off," said 1st Lt. Donald Backlund, the pilot. "The pad wouldn't hold an HH-53." Jolly 12 and 13 followed suit, then all three headed for a waiting HC-130 tanker to refuel. They had been assault transports up to this point. Now they were rescue birds again. For a while, anyway.

Koh Tang isn't very big. It runs generally in a north-south direction, and has two small beaches on its east and west sides separated by only a few hundred yards of jungle. The rest of the choppers would land on those beaches.

The plan called for a quick assault that would catch the Khmers by surprise and not give them time to harm the Mayaguez crewmen.

Two miles out, Colonel Denham and his "wingman," Capt. Terry Ohlemeier, dropped down to the water and made a direct run at the ominously dark western beach.

"The landing zone was much smaller than what we had envisioned," Denham said. It would have to be a well-disciplined one-at-a-time operation. The beach was short and small. Denham went in first.

Marines and airmen dash for Lieutenant Backlund's HH-53. The photo, one of only two known to have been taken on Koh Tang island, is by Lt. Ronald Rand, an AAVS combat photographer. The Marines are scrambling down a rocky embankment and around the tail rotor. The helicopter's tail was in the trees, its nose in the water. The haze is gunsmoke. Marines and airmen dash for an HH-53 on Koh Tang Island.

"The only way to get the people in was to let our ramp down on the sand and keep the nose in a hover over the water." They hadn't expected much opposition, and since the Mayaguez crewmen were thought to be on the island, there had been no "softening up" bombardment prior to the landing. "They [the Communist gunners] were very disciplined," Denham said grimly. "They waited until we were down and Ohlemeier was close by before they cut loose on us. There was lots of noise from the ammunition impacting on the aircraft and waterspouts in front of the nose. We were getting destroyed. The plane just came down around my ears."



As the Marines dashed for cover, Denham tried to pull out with his one remaining engine and damaged transmission. No go. The best he could do was bounce it across the beach and exposed rocks and coax it into a "skipping stone" motion out to sea. With each bounce the plane scooped up more and more water until finally it plunged to a halt three-quarters of a mile offshore. The bird was on its left side with copilot 1st Lt. Karl Poulsen underwater. SSgt. Elwood E. Rumbaugh, one of the two flight engineers, pulled Poulsen to safety. Ohlemeier, whose crew had been raking the island with their miniguns, was overhead immediately.

So was Knife 32, piloted by 1st Lt. Michael Lackey, of the third element. Lackey had been driven off while attempting a landing on the east beach. Ohlemeier left the rescue to Lackey and headed back for another try at the west beach. He never made it. A heavy-caliber weapon nearly took the front of his helicopter off. Leaking fuel badly, he headed for a friendly coast nearly two hours away. Because he still had a full load of Marines, Jolly 11 and Jolly 12 accompanied all the way.

Lackey, meanwhile, had hoisted Colonel Denham and two of his crew out of the warm water. But SSgt. Elwood "Woody" Rumbaugh, the man who saved Lieutenant Poulsen, had disappeared.

The ordeal still wasn't over for Denham's crew. Lackey still had Marines on board, so Cricket, the command and control bird, sent them back to the island for another attempt -- this time at the west beach where Denham had been shot down. As they made their approach, Denham remembers picking up an M-16 and poking it out a side window. They came under heavy fire as soon as they touched down. SSgt. Nick Morales, who was at the same window as Denham, was wounded, as was one of the Marines. Then a 40-

mm projectile tore a two-foot hole in the plane and exploded inside. They off loaded and broke for home.

It was a busy morning for the fighters, too. F-111 pilot Capt. John Palm remembers the way things started: "It was quiet at dawn. Cricket had sent most of the A-7s and F-4s to a KC-135 tanker to top off when we saw black smoke coming up off the east beach. Cricket asked three A-7s to go down and see what was happening." What they found was Maj. Howard Corson's burning CH-53. It had crashed in the transparent shallows off the beach. Corson and a companion CH-53, Knife 23, had gone in to the east beach as Denham and Ohlemeier had approached the west.

"My leader and Number Two made a low pass on the water side and saw the wreckage of a helicopter exploding and burning in the water and what they thought was a rescue chopper nearby on the beach," Capt. Scott Ralston, Number Three man in the A-7 flight, said. "I made a pass on the beach side and I could see that the second bird was missing its tail rotor. We were picking up Mayday calls so we sort of switched from being a strike flight to a Sandy role [rescue support]."

They had contact with one of the survivors who lay in the water behind the burning wreck.

"He was pretty shook up," said Ralston. "All he would say for the first ten minutes was that his name was Mayday. That's understandable. He's just fallen out of the sky from 75 to 100 feet; he's got people around him who are dead, who are bleeding, and to complicate things, he's got people shooting at him. Every time he pressed his mike button, we could hear a machine gun fire over his survival radio.

"As soon as he got calmed down, he told us where he was and where the fire was coming from, so we could roll in to strafe. He was really cool about it as he directed our fire. Whoever he was, from that point on he did a most fantastic job. He actually acted as a ground forward air controller, directing us in to strike at where the ground fire was coming from. He must have worked with us on training missions before, because once he started in, it was just like we were on a practice mission. After I made a pass he said, 'Good pass, Three,' just like we were at the target range."

(AIRMAN recently learned that he was Lt. Terry Tonkin, a FAC-trained Marine. Tonkin's momentary confusion was a result of being blown out of the helicopter when it was still 40 feet in the air. While he directed the fighter strikes, he deliberately isolated himself from the other survivors to avoid subjecting them to the especially heavy enemy fire being drawn by the raised antenna of his radio.)

Ralston has a vivid memory of looking down during one pass and seeing what he took to be marker dye streaked all across the crystal-clear water and beautiful white sand. When he realized it was blood he was looking at, he came close to being sick. As one of the chopper pilots put it later, "It was amazing how such a beautiful South Seas-type island could hold so much death."

The men from the second helicopter downed on east beach were in better shape. They had been mauled but were all alive. The crew stayed put in a small ravine nearby, sticking close to their passenger Marines. Jolly 13, commanded by 1st Lt. Charles Greer, came in to try to get them out after he dropped his Marines on the Holt. His helicopter was damaged so heavily, however, that he too had to run for the coast. He landed on a beach near Captain Ohlemeier's plane.

All this had happened in scant minutes. But by then, the sun was well up, which provided better visibility for the last three helicopters in the initial assault wave coming in to deposit their Marines on Koh Tang. They were Jollys, which, unlike the "CH" model Knifes, could refuel from an HC-130 tanker in the area. They had gone to take on gas while the fighters worked with the downed airmen on the beach.

Then Cricket sent them in. First Lt. Phil Pacini's Jolly 42 put his 28 Marines on the west beach, then limped home, out of action. Capt. Roland Purser's Jolly 43 made two tries under heavy fire before getting his 29 Marines to the same beach. After 1st Lt. Tom Cooper in Jolly 41 was driven off three times, a Spectre gunship came in and raked some automatic weapons sites that were firing at Cooper from nearby slopes of the island.

Cooper got to the beach on the fourth try, but was greeted with mortar fire. With five Marines still left aboard, he pulled out. Seconds later he and his crew went back; six Marines had been hit on the beach and needed evacuation. This time a mortar round impacted within a foot of the main rotor blades. As the helicopter departed, still another round went off-on the spot the chopper had just vacated.

Thursday, 8 a.m. While the Air Force and Marines assaulted the island and Navy fighters from the Coral Sea pounded Cambodian military targets on the mainland, the destroyer Holt eased up against the anchored S.S. Mayaguez. In buccaneer style, Marines, an Air Force Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team, and civilian volunteer seamen from the Military Sealift Command swarmed over the rail of the captured ship. The Marines found no opposition and the EOD specialists, SMSgt. Joe Moore and Sgt. Harold Young, found no booby traps - just some meals getting

cold in the galley. Somebody had left in a hurry. Perhaps the tear gas laid down on the vessel by Air Force A-7s as the Holt approached her had ruined her captors' appetites.

Thursday, 9:23 a.m. As the Holt crew and Sealift Command seamen readied the Mayaguez for towing, a wooden fishing boat flying white flags approached Koh Tang. It was the same boat the A-7s had allowed into Kompong Som the day before. Captain Miller and his crew had been freed. The survivors from Major Corson's exploded plane were being picked up at the same time by the U.S.S. Wilson. The 13 men had made the three-hour swim with only three life preservers. Copilot 2nd Lt. Richard Vandegier had been killed in action. Only about half of the planned force of Marines had been landed. They were outnumbered and outgunned. At this point the problem was how to make a well-executed Marine withdrawal from Koh Tang that wouldn't cost more lives.

Thursday, 11:30 a.m. Jolly 11 (1st Lt. Donald Backlund) and Jolly 12 (Capt. Paul Jacobs) returned from U-Tapao with Marine reinforcements for the west beach. On the east beach, meanwhile, the survivors of the second wrecked Knife bird were still pinned down and alone. When Captain Purser in Jolly 43 returned with more Marines, he was accompanied by two replacement CH-53s, Knives 51 and 52, also loaded with troops. They were sent in to reinforce the east beach. Knife 52 went in first, but took so much fire that its pilot, 1st Lt. Robert Rakits, had to pull back out. He barely made the coast. Purser then made a run in to the opposite beach, followed closely by Lt. Richard Brims' Knife 51. Before departing from the western LZ, TSgt. Wayne Fisk, a pararescueman "on loan" to Knife 51, managed to get five badly wounded Marines on the plane for a run to the hospital.

Thursday, Noon. Now there was a Cambodian navy to worry about. Gunboats began working their way toward the island. Navy A-7s from the U.S.S. Coral Sea sunk one with 20-mm cannons. Air Force F-4s engaged a second ship with 500 pound bombs and rockets. As it zigzagged toward Koh Tang, Lt. Col. Malcom Bolton and his wingman brought their F-111s down from their high orbit and dropped eight 2,000-pound bombs on it. No direct hits were scored, but the ship sank anyway.

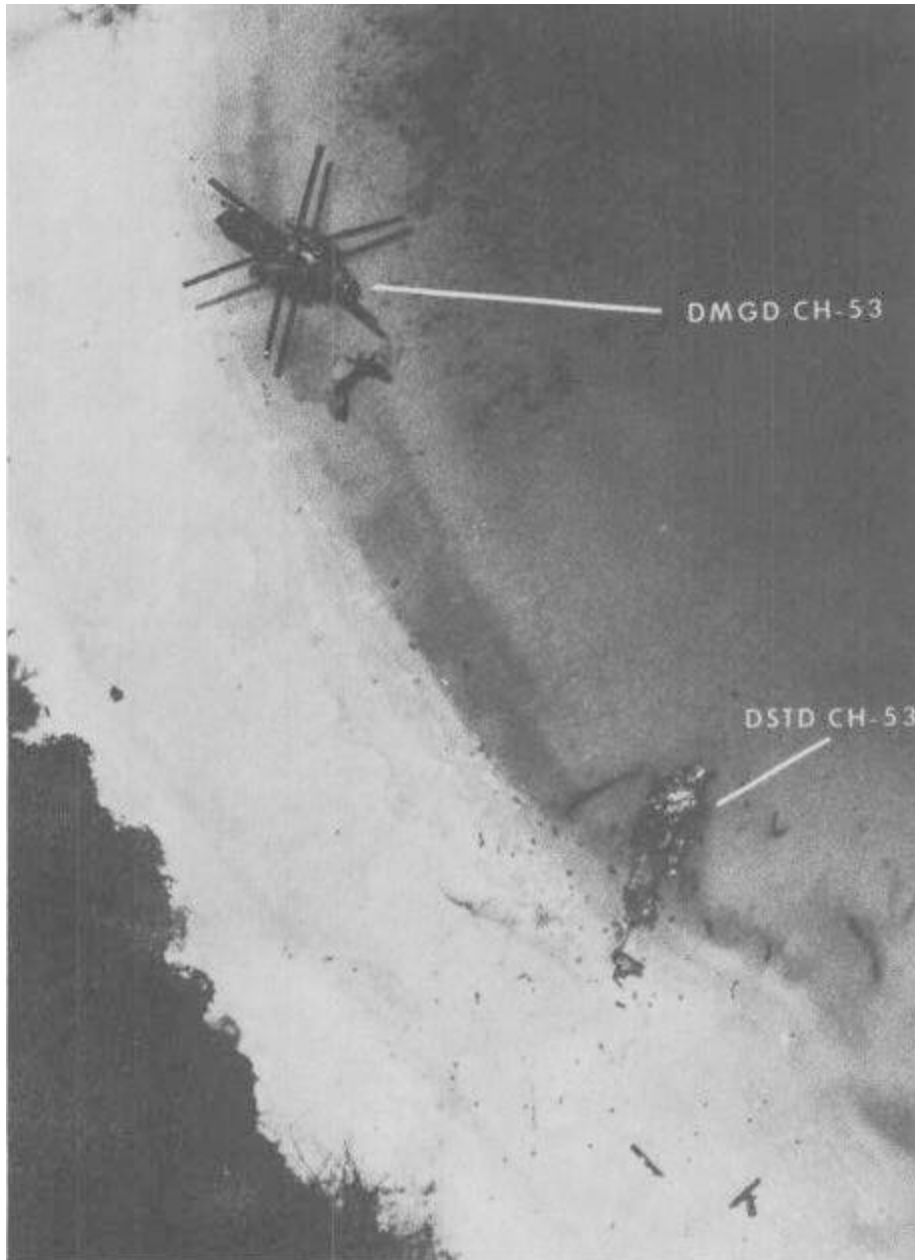
Thursday, 2:15 p.m. With the Mayaguez crew safe, tactical air support forces were now able to work over enemy positions more freely. Sonic One, the A-7 flight leader acting as rescue force onscene commander, decided to use this advantage to recover the men trapped in the ravine on the east beach. After air strikes and naval gunfire against positions nearby, he sent in Doolie Flight, another group of A-7s, to lay down tear gas. Then he called for Purser's Jolly 43 to go in for the pickup with Backlund's Jolly 11 providing covering minigun fire. Again, the fire discipline of the Khmers took its toll. They waited until Purser's plane dropped its tail on the beach with the nose in a hover before they opened up on him. The fire was just too much. With one crewman wounded, one engine out, and vaporized fuel streaming from the plane, Jolly 43 headed for the carrier Coral Sea, now in the area. No survivors got aboard.

Thursday, 3:05 p.m. The first two OV-10 forward air controllers arrived. It was open season on the bad guys. The "high" FAC, Capt. Richard Roehrkasse, inventoried the strike planes and ordnance available while "low" FAC, Maj. Robert Undorf, now the on-scene commander, talked to the "customers" on the ground. After conferring with Bingo Shoes 6, the Marine commander on Koh Tang, Undorf marked off the friendly forces' territory with smoke rockets and directed Spectre and the fighters against targets on the rest of the island. Bingo Shoes

now told Undorf that he was ready to withdraw his main force from the west beach. At the time, Undorf had only three heavy helicopters left, three unarmed smaller choppers from the Coral Sea, and three small boats from the destroyers Holt and Wilson.

Thursday, 5:00 p.m. Two more heavy choppers were now available. Purser's engineer, TSgt. S.D. Willingham, got Jolly 43 patched together on the Coral Sea and a new HH-53, Jolly 44, commanded by 1st Lt. Bob Blough, had been put in commission at home base in time to help with the evacuation. Now a hole card was played. A C-130, Klong 960, which had been orbiting overhead for some time, became a bomber. It dropped a 15,000-lb. conventional bomb on the southern end of the island. The "Daisy Cutter" cleared an alternate landing zone which could be used if things got too tough on the beaches. It most likely gave some Khmers headaches and something new to worry about as well.

Thursday, 6:15 p.m. The sun was setting. Strike power was down to the FACs, one AC-130, and a lone A-7. Undorf made a low, slow pass across the east beach to look over the enemy positions and check for ground fire. It looked like now or never for the men in the ravine, so Jolly 11 went in after them. "We managed to get the plane hovered over the water with the back end up in a little cranny on the beach," Lieutenant Backlund said. "I guess the Marines and crew of Knife 23 realized this was the last train out of town, because they came right out. It was an orderly withdrawal. They came out firing their weapons behind them and each man emptied his M-16 into the tree line before scrambling up the ramp." Return fire was tough. A Khmer soldier ran out on the beach next to the chopper and threw a grenade at them. Flight mechanic SSgt. Harry Cash cut him in two with a minigun. The grenade still exploded. Jolly 11 finally landed safely on the Coral Sea at dusk. Lieutenant Backlund's crew had logged 15 flying hours.



Koh Tang's east beach, with wreckage of two Knife losses Thursday, 6:30 p.m. Word went out that a crewman was still on the east beach in the wreckage of Knife 23. Jolly 12, flown now by Capt. Barry Walls and his crew, went to check. With covering fire from a tiny OV-10 and Knife 51's miniguns, Walls hovered over the deadly beach. As Sgt. Jessie de Jesus fished around the



wreckage with his hoist, he was shot away from the plane's doorway. Walls had to pull back to the Coral Sea. Later, it took a crane to get his helicopter off the carrier. As Walls pulled out of the eastern landing zone, Lieutenant Brims took Knife 51 directly across the island and set down on the west beach where he picked up 41 Marines. Captain Purser's plane, which had had its miniguns knocked out, went in next and lifted out a heavy load of 54 Marines. Things had to move quickly now. Every Marine taken out meant less firepower to protect those still left on the beach. Jolly 44, seeing its first action of the day, slipped in and picked up 40 more Marines. As 44 climbed to 100 feet someone on the plane spotted a Marine captain hanging from a gun tub outside the aircraft. Pararescueman A1C David Ash pulled him inside. Lt. Bob Blough took his Marines to the destroyer Holt instead of the carrier. He risked the dangerous landing on the ship's small pad in the black of night in order to get back to the beach in a hurry should Undorf need him.

Thursday, 8:00p.m. It was night as Knife 51 dropped off its load of troops on the carrier and headed back for more. The last load. "It was pitch dark," said copilot 2nd Lt. Dennis Danielson, "and we had trouble finding the island." They made it by taking a fix on the low FAC, now Capt. Seth Wilson, who along with FAC Capt. Will Carroll and Spectre was trying to give the few remaining Marines some protection. "We made four or five approaches into the landing zone, each time trying it from a different Kon Tang's east beach. We couldn't see. Depth perception was particularly bad. We'd get into a hover and the salt spray would wash up on our windshield so we couldn't judge our height. Spectre was dropping flares and the Cambodians were shooting some off, too, but it wasn't enough for us to even recognize shapes in the darkness. "On the fifth try we found something that worked. We turned on our landing lights, found

the beach, and landed, then turned to put the nose in the water and the back end up on the beach so the Marines could come aboard." They took the last 29 Marines to the carrier, refueled, and headed home.

Thursday, 8:30 p.m. Capt. Seth Wilson and his OV-10 had the skies over Koh Tang island to themselves. After 15 minutes of flying around looking at a black sea with a darker patch that was earth, sand, and trees, he set a course that soon put Koh Tang far behind the small twin boom of his plane's tail. It was over.

"Some people have compared this mission to the Son Tay raid," Lt. Col. John Denham, commander of the 21st Special Operations Squadron and pilot of Knife 21, said to AIRMAN later. "I hope you don't do that. Son Tay was a special situation where crews were handpicked and trained for months to perform an extraordinary task. 'The Mayaguez incident just happened.' We responded with regularly assigned Air Force crewmen and each man accomplished his end of the mission with outstanding success. This shows you what kind of professionals we've got manning our aircraft today." The 40 crewmen of the S.S. Mayaguez would probably agree. Talking to newsmen after his ship reached Singapore, Captain Charles T. Miller summed it all up: "Let me tell you one thing; if it wasn't for our Air Force, our Navy, and our Marines, I don't think this crew would be standing before you today."