

LESSONS LEARNED - SS MAYAGUEZ/
 KAOH TANG ISLAND OPERATION
 (12-15 May 1975)

1. General. The SS MAYAGUEZ/KAOH Tang Island Operation was planned and successfully executed under difficult and uncertain conditions. Planning time was extremely compressed, spanning approximately 16 hours from about noon Cambodia time on 14 May 1975 to execution at first light on 15 May 1975. A significant positive factor was the existence of planning staffs with recent experience in Vietnam and Cambodia evacuations. Some elements of the operating forces had participated in the previous operations. The area most frequently critiqued in summary reports is command, control and communications. The inability of the ground security force (GSF) commander to communicate effectively with Navy TACAIR support and the generally overcrowded communications nets are highlights. The key force issue addressed by field commanders was helicopter support; i.e., the relative small number available and the partial lack of an air refuel capability. While there are important lessons to be learned from this operation, it is clear that many of the conditions and factors involved are of such a variable nature that the "lessons" should be carefully considered before applying them elsewhere. The following, more detailed comments are based primarily on a Joint Staff review of lessons learned reports submitted by CINCPAC, CINCPACAF, CINCPACFLT and COMUSSAG/7AF.

2. Lessons Learned.

a. Planning.

- Although there were no on-the-shelf contingency plans for this situation, emergency planning was sound.
- Sufficient time for preparation of a detailed operation order was not available.
- It is not feasible to attempt to formally plan for the myriad of contingencies that could potentially arise worldwide.
- Well trained staffs and flexible, ready forces constitute the best preparation for potential crisis operations.

b. Command and control and communications.

- Reliance on HF radio for tactical command/control proved to be unsatisfactory.

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- Lack of security on tactical voice nets and the need to shift frequencies to maintain usable HF paths during critical operations emphasize a need to move to greater reliance on line-of-sight (satellite/relay) communications.
- Wideband, satellite-based, secure voice conferencing between JCS, CINCPAC, components, and USSAG/7AF was invaluable and the feasibility of extending this link to on scene/mobile commanders should be reviewed.
- Secure voice conferences for command/control showed a need to develop joint doctrine governing use/procedures for such nets.
 - The need for a parallel secure conference net to enhance record reporting and prevent cluttering the voice conference net should be examined.
- CINCPAC disagreed with the use of unilateral service reporting channels to JCS.
 - In CINCPAC's opinion, this permitted conflicting operational reports which had to be referred back to CINCPAC for resolution. Reporting channels should go through the unified commander to ensure coordinated and accurate reporting to all concerned.
- Usefulness of line-of-sight radio relay capability/satellite communications was demonstrated by the expedient use of the U-2 Olympic Torch as a manual voice relay facility.
 - The requirement for a more suitable high altitude, automatic relay capability should be explored.
- Greater emphasis should be placed on establishing communications equipment compatibility.
 - Loss of a single UHF radio available to the GSF element when the ground FAC radio was lost in a downed helo, showed the need for ground forces and supporting TACAIR to have compatible communications. The GSF primary communications was VHF/FM while Navy TACAIR had UHF only. Use of airborne FAC in the latter stages of the operation to provide a link between the GSF and Navy TACAIR was reasonably effective.

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U.S. Forces.

- The composition and size of forces was dictated by helo availability.
 - The initial insertion was marginal in size and rapid buildup ashore was not possible due to limited lift capability. Once the CORAL SEA was within 10 miles of Kaoh Tang Island and the shuttle distance reduced, adequate support was available for the extraction phase.
 - As force levels are reduced in a theater, particular attention must be paid to flexibility provided to force composition by airmobile support from all Services.
- The capability to move heavy lift helos quickly by MAC airlift may be the difference between success and failure in such situations in the future.
 - Efforts should be made to make heavy lift helos more compatible for lift by C-141/C-5 aircraft. ✓
- The feasibility of equipping for aerial refueling all heavy lift helos which could be used in an environment such as this, and installing fire preventive foam in external fuel tanks, should be examined. ✓
- TACAIR support was readily available when required throughout the operation and flow was controlled by the ABCCC. ✓
- The ABCCC proved to be an essential forward extension to the tactical air control system.
- OV-10 low speed, low altitude capabilities together with experience and training of OV-10 personnel in a FAC role, made these aircraft well-suited to support helo operations.
- AC-130 spectre aircraft were used effectively due, in large measure, to their sophisticated sensors, communication, and armament capability.
 - The forward-looking infrared (flir) system was particularly effective in locating enemy positions by observation of muzzle flashes.

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- CINCPAC reports that action has been initiated to retain in-theater a portion of certain specialized weapon systems which were either employed in the MAYAGUEZ operation or which, in retrospect, could have proved valuable.
- These include COMBAT TALON C-130 unconventional warfare aircraft with terrain following radar and forward looking infrared, and the BLU-82B which produces unique psychological and blast effects.
- In CINCPAC's opinion, loss of these systems would make PACOM particularly vulnerable to future hostile challenges.

d. Doctrine.

- Normal tactical doctrine governing helicopter assaults calls for extensive landing zone (LZ) preparation by TACAIR and/or artillery/NGF.
- Where unlocated friendlies may be threatened by normal LZ prep doctrine; alternative insertion techniques are desirable. The use of smoke screen/riot control agents or helo gunships for helo protection or employment of a single helo or fixed wing aircraft to test enemy resistance may have been effective.
- Depending on enemy resistance and the effectiveness of LZ preparation, alternate preplanned LZs may be required.

e. Reconnaissance/Intelligence.

- Warning provided by indications and warning (I&W) was adequate and timely.
- Both NSA and IPAC reported on the first KC acts against foreign shipping.
- Intelligence dissemination was timely.
- To speed up photo interpretation, reconnaissance aircraft and photo interpretation facilities should be colocated.
- Processing of products from strategic photo reconnaissance aircraft (U-2) was not timely enough for use in a fast moving event.

- P-3 aircraft proved valuable but demonstrated the need for the development of procedures to rapidly introduce handheld photography into other reconnaissance distribution systems.
- The need for COMPASS LINK, or a similar system, in each theater for rapid transmission of high interest imagery should be examined.

3. Joint Exercises. CINCPAC recommends that the number of joint incident exercises be increased to maintain the expertise required to successfully plan and execute an operation of this type. Scenarios should be imaginative and realistic. CINCPAC indicated that PACOM will commence such training with PACOM CPXs and plans to move, with JCS concurrence, to higher level political-military games (possibly inter-departmental) and then to frequent exercises with joint force participation.