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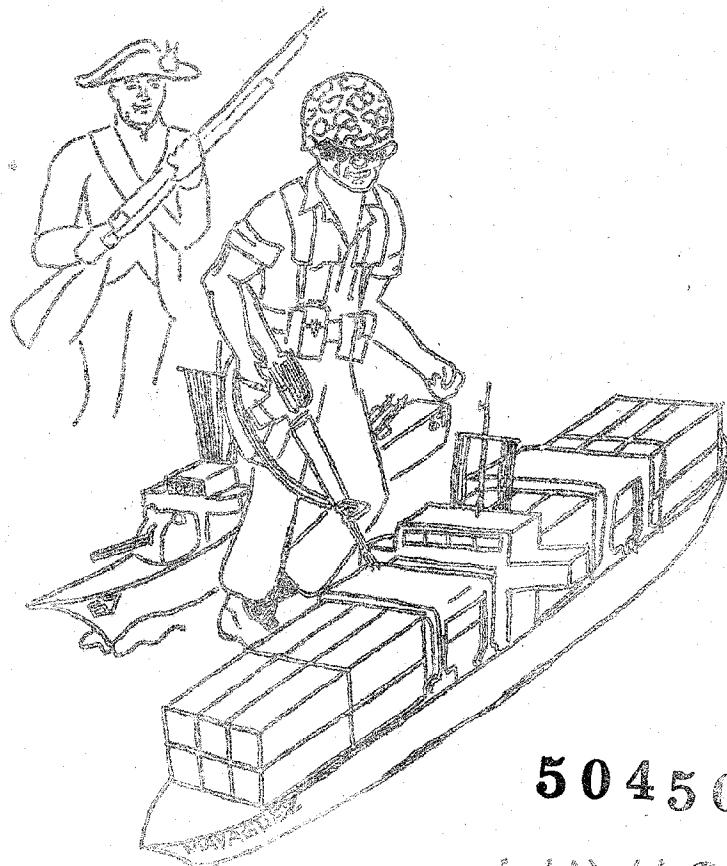
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MAYAGUEZ  
POST-EXERCISE  
REPORT

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CLASSIFIED BY COMMANDING OFFICER  
1ST BATTALION, 4TH MARINES

400 MARINE DIVISION

HEADQUARTERS

CLASSIFICATION

SCHEDULED FOR EXECUTIVE ORDER 11652  
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HEADQUARTERS  
1st Battalion, 4th Marines  
3rd Marine Division (-) (Rein), ~~FMF~~  
FPO San Francisco 96602

3/CAS/ret  
5510  
12 Nov 1976

From: Commanding Officer  
To: Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force  
Subj: Recovery of the SS MAYAGUEZ, After Action Report  
Ref: (a) III MAF OPO 301 (C)  
Encl: (1) Recovery of the SS MAYAGUEZ, After Action Report

1. In accordance with guidance contained in reference (a), enclosure (1) is provided as the SS MAYAGUEZ recovery operation after action report.

*R. E. Langton*  
R. E. LANGTON

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1st Battalion, 4th Marines  
3rd Marine Division  
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER II

CHRONOLOGICAL SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

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~~CONFIDENTIAL~~INTRODUCTION

1. "Marines over the side", a statement reminiscent of past U.S. Marine Corps glories and deeds, was repeated once again on 14 May 1975 when a detachment from Battalion Landing Team 1/4 of the Third Marine Division recaptured the SS MAYAGUEZ offshore Koh Tang Island near Cambodia.
2. Forces eventually involved in the recapture of the SS MAYAGUEZ were initially alerted at 0900 on 13 May 1975 while training at Subic Bay, Republic of the Philippines. Total U.S. Marine forces committed consisted of 120 men. This included Delta Company (-) (Rein), BnR 1/4 and a small BLT command group.
3. Task organized, assembled, and equipped, the 120-man SS MAYAGUEZ recovery force departed the Cubi Point Air Facility, Subic Bay, Republic of the Philippines at 0030, 14 May 1975 aboard a USAF C-141 bound for U-Tapao, Thailand. Upon arrival at U-Tapao, the strength of the boarding force was reduced to 59 men and only three USAF CH-53 helicopters were allotted to the recovery force. At 0415, 15 May 1975, while 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines conducted a helicopterborne amphibious assault on nearby Koh Tang Island, the SS MAYAGUEZ recovery force departed U-Tapao by helicopter. Due to a last minute change of plans the boarding party did not board the SS MAYAGUEZ directly from the hovering helicopters, but instead transferred from the CH-53 helicopters to the USS KIDD, an American destroyer in the area, with the intent of boarding from the deck of the USS KIDD to the deck of the SS MAYAGUEZ.
4. At 0726, 15 May 1975, following a pre-planned, on-call, tear gas preparation run by two USAF A-7's over the SS MAYAGUEZ, the USS KIDD and the SS MAYAGUEZ touched and the command "Marines over the side" was given. Following the successful boarding, search and securing of the SS MAYAGUEZ by the recovery force the National Ensign was raised aboard the SS MAYAGUEZ, thus signifying return of control to U.S. forces.
5. Following release of the SS MAYAGUEZ crew by Cambodian forces and the return of the SS MAYAGUEZ to international waters, the U.S. Marine SS MAYAGUEZ recovery force crossdecked to the USS WILSON, an American destroyer, and returned to Subic Bay, Republic of the Philippines, thus effectively terminating the SS MAYAGUEZ recovery operation.

  
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CHRONOLOGICAL GROWTH OF EVENTS

DATE	EVENT
— 30 Mar 75	1st Battalion, 4th Marines deployed for participation in evacuation operations offshore South Vietnam.
7 May 75	1st Battalion, 4th Marines designated as Battalion Landing Team 1/4.
— 13 May 75 (0900)	BLT 1/4 alerted to recall all forces from field training and prepare to deploy immediately for an unspecified mission.
13 May 75 (1000)	BLT 1/4 C.O. and S-3 directed to report to 9th MAB, and 31st MAU Headquarters, ashore in Subic Bay, for discussion of possible mission. Informed mission could involve amphibious assault of Koh Tang Island, offshore Cambodia.
— 13 May 75 (1400)	All forces assembled, preparations underway to backload BLT aboard USS OKINAWA, USS DULUTH, USS MOUNT VERNON, and USS BARBOUR COUNTY.
13 May 75 (1800)	BLT 1/4 C.O. and S-3 directed to report to COMNAVBASE Subic Op Con Center for situation update and possible change in mission.
— 13 May 75 (1930)	Following discussions, by phone, between 31st MAU staff, 9th MAB staff, III MAF Headquarters, MacDill, and Washington Command Center it was learned that Cambodian insurgents had captured a U.S. merchant ship, the SS MAYAGUEZ, and were holding it and the crew in the vicinity of Koh Tang Island.
— 13 May 75 (2040)	BLT 1/4 tasked to provide a 120-man force prepared to fly to U-Tapao, Thailand for possible mission of recapturing the SS MAYAGUEZ, with balance of BLT to complete backloading with all possible speed to sail immediately with the mission of securing Koh Tang Island by amphibious assault.
13 May 75 (2045)	BLT 1/4 S-4 officer directed to immediately put together a special Basic Allowance (BL) of ammunition for a 120-man force to include riot control agents. Company D alerted and directed to prepare 120 men for airlift within 3 hours from Cubi Point Air Facility.

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— 13 May 75 (2240) Actual definitive mission assigned - Recapture the SS MAYAGUEZ.

13 May 75 (2245) 120-man force and BA of ammunition assembled at Cubi Point. Force included two rifle platoons, Company Headquarters, and small battalion command group plus six MSC volunteers and one medical man.

— 14 May 75 (0030) 120-man force embarked aboard USAF C-141 for transportation to U-Tapao, Thailand, the designated base of operations for the planned operation.

— 14 May 75 (0445) 120-man force arrives at U-Tapao, Thailand.

— 14 May 75 (0500) Planning conference with USAF Staff at U-Tapao to determine course of action to recapture ship.

— 14 May 75 (0600) Plan of operation determined. Utilizing combination of combat in a built-up area and raid tactics, ship would first be prepared with tear gas from two USAF A-7's, followed by the boarding of the ship by the 120-man force utilizing six USAF CH-53 helicopters.

14 May 75 (0630) 120-man force briefed, organized into six boarding teams (one per helicopter) and ammunition distributed. Three aerial photographs of SS MAYAGUEZ and information about ship's configuration, as provided by civilian seamen, only intelligence available.

— 14 May 75 (0900) Six boarding teams rehearse assignments on ship schematic drawn on parking lot.

— 14 May 75 (1200) Boarding teams alerted and boarded helicopters. Prepared to begin mission.

— 14 May 75 (1415) Mission delayed. Boarding teams offloaded and billeted in adjacent gymnasium.

14 May 75 (1500) Informed that mission would be conducted early following morning due to lack of remaining daylight hours.

14 May 75 (1600) Continued rehearsals, including cross training of teams.

— 14 May 75 (1630) Arrival of elements of 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines from Okinawa.

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14 May 75 (1800) Meeting between BLT 1/4 representatives, 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines representatives and USAAG. 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines desired to assume both identified missions; assault of Koh Tang Island and recapture of SS MAYAGUEZ.

14 May 75 (2000) USAAG directed that 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines would conduct assault on Koh Tang Island and detachment of BLT 1/4 would recapture SS MAYAGUEZ. Due to shortage of helicopters and cycle time for additional waves only three helicopters could be used to transport SS MAYAGUEZ boarding teams.

14 May 75 (2100) Boarding teams reduced to three with total strength of 59.

— 14 May 75 (2130) Change in plans made by USAAG when it was learned that USS HOLT, an American Destroyer, was in the area. Rather than board ship from hovering helicopters, plan was changed to board USS HOLT from helicopters; then use the USS HOLT as a boarding platform from which to conduct the boarding operation on the SS MAYAGUEZ.

15 May 75 (0200) Alerted to stand by for execution of plan.

15 May 75 (0400) 59-man force embarked aboard three USAF CH-53's.

— 15 May 75 (0415) Boarding teams lift off from U-Tapao.

15 May 75 (0615) Arrive over USS HOLT. Troops disembark from helicopters onto USS HOLT. Helicopters required to hover over bobbing deck.

15 May 75 (0645) Coordination effected between boarding parties and captain and crew of USS HOLT. Concept of operations clearly understood by all concerned.

— 15 May 75 (0650) USS HOLT approaches SS MAYAGUEZ. Six men observed aboard SS MAYAGUEZ.

— 15 May 75 (0718) Pre-planned air delivery of tear gas conducted by USAF A-7's. Complete coverage of ship.

15 May 75 (0728) Two ships touch. Command given "Marines over the side". Boarding teams jump across onto SS MAYAGUEZ wearing gas masks. Complete search of ship conducted. Observe six men in small motor boat at some distance departing vicinity.

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15 May 75 (0820) SS MAYAGUEZ determined clear of all enemy personnel and possible booby traps.

15 May 75 (0822) National Ensign raised aboard SS MAYAGUEZ.

15 May 75 (0940) Preparations began to tow SS MAYAGUEZ by USS WOLT.

15 May 75 (1030) SS MAYAGUEZ crew located not on Koh Tang Island but nearby aboard a Cambodian small boat.

15 May 75 (1050) Towing underway.

15 May 75 (1100) SS MAYAGUEZ civilian crew returned and reboarded SS MAYAGUEZ.

15 May 75 (1700) SS MAYAGUEZ under own power in international waters. All Marine personnel cross decked to USS WILSON, another American Destroyer.

20 May 75 (1600) USS WILSON, with boarding teams aboard returns to Subic Bay. Reception provided with the Commanding General, 3rd Marine Division and III MAF in attendance.

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CHAPTER III

TASK ORGANIZATION

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TASK ORGANIZATION

Task Organization (13 May - 14 May 1975)

<u>Command Group</u>	<u>Off/Bnl</u>	
Det, H&S Co, BLT 1/4	<u>2/2</u>	Maj PORTER
<u>Co D (-)(Rein), BLT 1/4</u>		Capt WOOD
Co D (-)	2/14	
Det USS DULUTH	0/6	
Det EOD (USAF)	0/2	
Det ITT (USA)	1/0	
Det, USNS GREENVILLE VICTORY	<u>6</u> (Civilians)	
	<u>135</u>	

Task Organization (14 May 1975) (Boarding Force)

<u>Command Group</u>	<u>Off/Bnl</u>	
Det, H&S Co, BLT 1/4	<u>2/2</u>	Maj PORTER
<u>Co D (-)(Rein), BLT 1/4</u>		Capt WOOD
Co D (-)	2/53	
Det EOD (USAF)	0/2	
Det ITT (USA)	1/0	
Det, USNS GREENVILLE VICTORY	<u>6</u> (Civilians)	
	<u>68</u> (59 Marines/Sailors)	

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CHAPTER IV

OPERATIONAL SUMMARY

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a. 1st Battalion, 4th Marines deployed from Okinawa on 30 March 1975, well ahead of the scheduled afloat deployment date of 7 May 1975. Involved in the evacuation operation offshore South Vietnam the battalion returned to Subic Bay, Philippines and entered the Upper MAU Camp on 18 April 1975.

b. Designated as a Battalion Landing Team on 7 May 1975, the battalion was involved in an intensive training program and was assisting in the processing of Vietnamese evacuees through Grande Island, Philippines.

c. On 13 May 1975, at 0900, BLT 1/4 was alerted to recall all forces from ongoing field training and make immediate preparations for backload aboard ship with subsequent commitment to an unspecified amphibious mission.

2. Preparations Underway/Mission Assigned/Staging (1000 13 May - 0030 14 May 1975)

a. While all BLT 1/4 forces were being recovered from field training, the BLT C.O. and S-3 were directed to report to a temporary, combined 9th MAB and 31st MAU command post ashore in Subic Bay. Discussions at this meeting indicated that the BLT's mission could involve an amphibious assault on Koh Tang Island, offshore southern Cambodia.

b. By 1400, 13 May 1975, all BLT 1/4 forces had been assembled and preparations were underway to backload the BLT aboard the USS OKINAWA, USS DULUTH, USS MOUNT VERNON, and the USS BARBOUR COUNTY.

c. At 1800, 13 May 1975, the BLT C.O. and S-3 were again summoned, this time to the COMNAVBASE Subic Operational Control (OPCON) Center for a situational update and a possible change in mission.

d. By 1930, 13 May 1975, based upon various phone calls between representatives of 31st MAU, 9th MAB staffs and III MAF, FMFPac and the Washington Command Center, it was learned that Cambodian insurgents had captured a U.S. merchant ship on the high seas, the SS MAYAGUEZ, and were holding it in the vicinity of Koh Tang Island.

e. At 2040, 13 May 1975, BLT 1/4 was verbally tasked to provide a 120-man force which would be prepared to fly to U-Tapao, Thailand with the possible mission of recapturing the SS MAYAGUEZ. At the same time the balance of the BLT would complete its backload with all possible speed, each ship to depart individually when loaded, with a BLT mission of securing Koh Tang Island by amphibious assault.

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f. With information available at that point, an immediate effort was made by the BLT S-4 to put together a special Basic Allowance (BA) of ammunition for the 120-man force, to include riot control agents.

g. Company D was alerted to provide the force and the 120 men selected began immediate preparations in anticipation of being airlifted within three hours from the Cubi Point Air Facility.

h. At 2240, 13 May 1975, a definitive mission was assigned to BLT 1/4 - recapture the SS MAYAGUEZ.

i. By 2345, 13 May 1975, the 120-man force with its required BA of ammunition had been assembled at Cubi Point. The force consisted of two Marine rifle platoons, a rifle company headquarters, a small battalion command group, six MSG volunteers and one intelligence expert.

j. At 0030, 14 May 1975, the 120-man force embarked aboard a USAF C-141 and departed for U-Tapao, Thailand, the designated base of operations for the planned operation.

### 3. Final Preparations/Planning (0445 - 2130, 14 May 1975)

a. At 0445, 14 May 1975, the 120-man force arrived at U-Tapao, Thailand and was met by members of the USAIG staff.

b. An immediate staff meeting was called by the USAAG staff, which began at 0500, 14 May 1975, to determine the best course of action to recapture the ship.

c. By 0600, 14 May 1975, an acceptable plan of operation had been determined. The plan devised, utilizing a combination of conventional combat in a built-up area and raid tactics, called for the SS MAYAGUEZ to first be prepared with tear gas from two USAF A-7's. This would be followed by the boarding of the ship by the 120-man force utilizing six USAF CH-53 helicopters.

d. At 0630, 14 May 1975, the 120-man boarding force was briefed regarding the full details of the operation, organized into six distinct boarding teams (one per helicopter), and all required ammunition was distributed. Intelligence was very limited, consisting of only three aerial photographs of the SS MAYAGUEZ and sketchy information about the ship's configuration, as provided by the civilian seamen.

e. From 0900 to 1200, 14 May 1975, the six designated boarding teams rehearsed their individual assignments. To facilitate this, the ship's schematic was drawn out on a parking lot.

f. At 1200, 14 May 1975, the boarding teams were suddenly alerted, assembled and placed aboard USAF CH-53 helicopters in anticipation of

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executing the mission.

g. The helicopters were not launched and at 1415, 14 May 1975, the boarding teams were offloaded and billeted in an adjacent gymnasium.

h. Informed at 1500, 14 May 1975, that the mission would not be executed that afternoon because of a lack of daylight but would go the following morning, the boarding teams continued to rehearse which included the cross training of teams.

i. At 1630, 14 May 1975, elements of 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines from Okinawa, began arriving at U-Tapao. Following the arrival of the 2nd Battalion, a meeting was held between USAAG personnel, 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines, and BLT 1/4 representatives. At this time it was learned that 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines desired to assume the two identified missions, the assault of Koh Tang Island and the recapture of the SS MAYAGUEZ. By 2000, 14 May 1975, the decision was made by USAAG that the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines would conduct the assault on Koh Tang Island while the detachment from BLT 1/4 would recapture the SS MAYAGUEZ. Due to a critical shortage of USAF CH-53 helicopters plus the cycle time required to land successive waves of 2/9 on Koh Tang Island and the importance of a rapid buildup ashore it was determined that only three of the helicopters could be allotted to the SS MAYAGUEZ boarding teams.

j. At 2100, 14 May 1975, the boarding teams were reduced to three teams with a total strength of 59.

k. At 2130, 14 May 1975, another change in plans occurred when it was learned by USAAG that the USS HOLT, an American destroyer, was in the area. It was decided that rather than board the ship from hovering helicopters, the three boarding teams would board the USS HOLT from helicopter, then use the USS HOLT as a boarding platform from which to conduct the boarding operation onto the SS MAYAGUEZ.

4. Execution (0200 - 0322, 15 May 1975)

a. At 0200, 15 May 1975, the three boarding teams were alerted to stand by for execution of the plan.

b. At 0400, 15 May 1975, the 59-man boarding team embarked aboard three USAF CH-53 helicopters, and at 0415 lifted off from U-Tapao, Thailand.

c. At 0615, 15 May 1975, the three boarding teams arrived over the USS HOLT. Shortly thereafter, the troops disembarked from the helicopters onto the USS HOLT with the helicopters being forced to hover over the bobbing deck during disembarkation. By 0645, coordination had been effected between the boarding parties and the Captain and crew of the USS HOLT.

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The concept of operations to be used was clearly understood by all concerned.

d. At 0650, 15 May 1975, the USS HOLT closed on the SS MAYAGUEZ, which was dead in the water. Six men could be observed aboard the SS MAYAGUEZ but it could not be determined if they were armed or if they were military or civilian.

e. When the boarding teams estimated that they were approximately ten minutes away from the SS MAYAGUEZ, at 0718, 15 May 1975, a pre-planned, on-call, air delivery of tear gas was conducted by USAF A-7's which completely covered the ship, thus preparing the ship for boarding.

f. At 0728, 15 May 1975, the USS HOLT and the SS MAYAGUEZ touched and the command "Marines over the side" was given. While the ships were being hastily secured, the first boarding team jumped across onto the SS MAYAGUEZ and began the search of the ship. Wearing gas masks throughout the search, all teams were employed and completed the search of the ship by 0820. At that time, the SS MAYAGUEZ was considered to be clear of all enemy personnel and/or booby traps. At that same time, six men were observed in a small motor boat, at some distance, in the vicinity of Koh Tang Island. It is assumed that these are the same six who were observed aboard the SS MAYAGUEZ earlier.

g. At precisely 0822, 15 May 1975, the National Ensign was raised aboard the SS MAYAGUEZ, thus signifying the return of the ship to U.S. control.

#### 5. Aftermath (0940, 15 May 1975 - 1600, 20 May 1975)

a. By 0940, 15 May 1975, with the SS MAYAGUEZ secure, preparations began for the USS HOLT to tow the SS MAYAGUEZ into international waters.

b. At 1030, 15 May 1975, it was learned that the SS MAYAGUEZ crew had been located, that they were not on Koh Tang Island but aboard a Cambodian small boat nearby. It was also learned that the crew had been released unharmed by the Cambodians.

c. By 1100, 15 May 1975, the released crew was safely back aboard the SS MAYAGUEZ.

d. By 1700, 15 May 1975, the SS MAYAGUEZ was moving under its own power and steaming into international waters. At that time, all U.S. Marine personnel were cross decked to the USS WILSON, another American destroyer that had arrived in the area.

e. With the SS MAYAGUEZ recovery operation successfully concluded, the SS MAYAGUEZ continued on its original course toward Sattahip, Thailand, while the U.S. Marine boarding party aboard the USS WILSON steamed

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toward Subic Bay, Philippines. At 1600, 20 May 1975, the USS WILSON arrived at Subic Bay, Philippines and was met by a reception party headed by the Commanding General of the 3rd Marine Division and Third Marine Amphibious Force. The offload of the boarding teams at Subic Bay followed by their integration back into Battalion Landing Team 1/4, terminated the SS MAYAGUEZ recovery operation.

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CHAPTER V  
PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED/LESSONS LEARNED

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4. SUBJECT: Line Handling

DISCUSSION: When Marines initially boarded the SS MAYAGUEZ and were thrown lines they were not experienced with the procedures for tying up the two ships. Because of this, approximately five minutes of search time was lost.

RECOMMENDATION: That prior to pulling along side the target ship, Marines be educated in line handling and stationed by lines early enough to ensure adequate lines are thrown to the boarding party in the first few seconds. In order to minimize ship drift, lines must be secured as quickly as possible.

5. SUBJECT: Effectiveness of Riot Control Agents

DISCUSSION: Ten minutes prior to the estimated boarding time, fixed wing aircraft dropped riot control agents on the target ship. The drop had two effects: (1) It placed the inhabitants of the SS MAYAGUEZ under the psychological stress of being gassed, and (2) the gas cloud provided a screen for the approach that lasted for approximately seven minutes.

RECOMMENDATION: That riot control agents be a primary consideration for such operations. If the target ship is moving, it is recommended that several sorties be flown covering the ship and its course.

6. SUBJECT: Use of Gas Masks

DISCUSSION: The entire operation was conducted while wearing gas masks. The men found that they had three problems to overcome: (1) Initially, they tried to breathe breathlessly normal. (2) They were not accustomed to the restricted vision caused by being over low hatch bases and on ladders. Once they learned to bend their heads down to see, this problem was eliminated. (3) In this climate the air rapidly filled with perspiration. Several men choked on the fluid, drowning before they learned that they had to drain masks by placing a finger under the chin and "blowing them out". (4) Communication was more difficult with the masks on, thus hand and arm signals took on added importance.

RECOMMENDATION: That gas masks be worn by all personnel for at least one/half-hour period of fast moving, tactical training at every level of training, i.e., fire team, squad, platoon, and company tactics; patrolling; and, if possible, during command post exercises.

7. SUBJECT: Plan Based on Principles of Raids and Combat In Built-Up Areas

DISCUSSION: The plan developed for capturing the SS MAYAGUEZ combined the principles of a platoon-sized raid patrol and combat in a built-up area. It was kept simple. Fire superiority would be gained by use of machine guns trained on the key points of the ship while the boarding party gained the bridge area, gassed the engine room again through air vents, and then

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searched and cleared from the top down. Each man was assigned to a boarding party (reinforced squad) and to a search team (fire team). Once given their specific assignments the teams rehearsed their mission in a parking lot and gymnasium. Following the rehearsal they were questioned about other teams' missions and educated as to the overall concept. After equipment checks, they rehearsed until they were moved from the gymnasium area to the heli-hangar for the lift-off. The emphasis placed on knowledge of the missions of other personnel and on rehearsal of individual missions eliminated lost time once aboard the SS MAYAGUEZ and permitted the ship to be boarded and completely searched by 59 men in 54 minutes.

RECOMMENDATION: That all small unit activities of this nature employ the principles cited and that rehearsals be mandatory.

8. SUBJECT: Aggressiveness Pays Dividends

DISCUSSION: Throughout the planning and preparation phases of the operation, aggressiveness was stressed. Once into the operation, the aggressiveness displayed by each Marine, combined with the confidence gained from knowing exactly what they were responsible for as the result of rehearsals, led to an efficient and rapid execution of the mission.

RECOMMENDATION: Stress aggressiveness during training.

9. SUBJECT: Equipment

DISCUSSION: Normal equipment carried by a Marine infantryman had to be modified. Packs had to be left on the boarding ship (or pitched out of the helicopter before debarking) as they were to clumsy and restrictive to wear in the narrow passages on the ship. Additionally, the normal BA of a munition for the infantry does not include concussion grenades and, in a situation like this one, concussion grenades would have worked far better than fragmentation grenades. The normal two cell flashlight proved to be of little use in the gas vapors. Six volt flashlights proved excellent for the job.

RECOMMENDATION: That concussion grenades be included as part of the standard BA. If not used for operations of this nature, at least they will be available for use in combat in built-up areas.

10. SUBJECT: Landing on Containers

DISCUSSION: The original concept to recover the MAYAGUEZ did not include use of the DE; rather, the boarding was to be accomplished from helicopters hovering over the containers. Inspection of the containers revealed that the plan would have been sound as the containers were securely fastened. Jumping from the helicopter to the containers would have been difficult and further emphasized the need for the men to have small loads for the sake of balance. The containers would support some weight from the helicopter.

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~~RECOMMENDATION:~~ That, in view of the increased number of container ships in service and the possible need for personnel to board such vessels from helicopters, for a multitude of reasons, a stress study be conducted to determine which, if any, of our inventory of helicopters can safely land on the containers of a cargo ship.

III. SUBJECT: Crossing and Scaling Down Containers

~~DISCUSSION:~~ Under the "helicopter boarding" concept, the boarding party who required to land on containers, use them as protection from deck fire and cross them as it roved to capture the bridge. On the average the containers were separated by five-foot gaps at the ends and three foot gaps along the sides. Thus, unless the men wanted to risk jumping from containers to containers they needed some form of a ramp that could be placed between containers and secured well enough to preclude subsequent helicopters from blowing it away. (It was planned to use USAF N-2 ramps which weighed 150 pounds each and to place them vertically between the containers when subsequent helicopters landed. This would have been difficult under fire, but workable.) Another alternative would be scaling down over the sides of the container tops by wire cables with snap links on them. The average height of the containers was 36 feet; thus all such nests should be approximately 40 feet long.

~~RECOMMENDATION:~~ That some degree of study be made of the obstacles presented by the containers on a ship and that crossing and scaling procedures be established, not necessarily for combat conditions but for other emergency conditions that could prevail with the increased use of container ships.

12. SUBJECT: Use of a Command Group

~~DISCUSSION:~~ The decision to send the Battalion's Bravo command group on the operation proved to be an asset in that the group contained a field grade officer and thus liaison with the other services' command groups was accomplished on a co-equal level throughout the planning, execution, and follow-up operations. With the command group functioning, unit leaders were free to supervise their men during rehearsals and to prepare them to meet deadlines. Final control of the operation by the command group maintained coordination and enhanced the efficiency of troop employment.

~~RECOMMENDATION:~~ That Marine units sent on separate or joint service operations attach command groups from the parent headquarters.

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APPENDIX A

DEBRIEFS

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DEBRIEF OF CAPTAIN JONATHAN P. FINSTER, USMC

Following is the debrief taken from one of the Marines who participated in the MAYAGUEZ Operation. It is a combination of his own written statement and an interview conducted on 23 May 1975.

On the evening of 13 May our battalion was alerted for a mission of extreme urgency - to board and seize the SS MAYAGUEZ, a U.S. merchant ship which had been hijacked at sea by Cambodian Communist forces. The initial details were sketchy and specific only in that a 120-man force was supposed to fly to U-Tapao, Thailand later on the evening of the 13th. The force was designated to come from Delta Company and was directed to be ready to leave from Cubi Point at 2400. The original warning order came at about 2000. LtCol HESTER and Major SHAVER (Bn CO and S-3) returned from a meeting later that evening and designated Major PORTER (Bn Executive Officer), myself and two radio operators from H&S Company to go as an austere command group for the force.

At 2400 on the 13th the force assembled at Cubi Point where they boarded an Air Force C-141 along with a BA of ammo. At this point the force was joined by six Navy enlisted men from the USS DULUTH, six MSC volunteers, and a Cambodian intelligence officer. These individuals were to supply various expertise in getting the MAYAGUEZ underway once the ship had been recovered. The intelligence specialist had lived on the island near the present location of the MAYAGUEZ. The flight was uneventful with the exception that the C-141 was crowded to maximum capacity with the bulk of the force sleeping on top of one another. Approximately 4 - 5 hours after departure, the C-141 landed in U-Tapao, Thailand.

Upon arrival the force was greeted by Air Force personnel and, after some introductory comments, was taken to the mess hall. The troops entered the mess hall began to eat, only to be told that there was no time because the mission would be launched by helo (Air Force H-3) very soon. I went with Major PORTER and Captain WOOD to the headquarters where we received a sketchy brief which described the location of the MAYAGUEZ and stated that reconnaissance planes had been fired upon by the Cambodians aboard the SS MAYAGUEZ. Some aerial photographs were available, giving us an idea as to the specifics of the ship.

Faced with limited time planning began immediately. The first assumption was that the helicopters with the boarding force had to land on the containers on the MAYAGUEZ as no suitable location existed. Our planning relied heavily on experiences gained on evacuation operations off the coast of Vietnam. Specifically, we determined that the bridge was the critical feature of the ship and that it would have to be controlled prior to taking the rest of the ship. Following this the superstructure would have to be cleared, eventually ending with a clearing operation to the engine room. The basic concept used was to seize the critical feature (the bridge) and then work from the top down. Our planning considered splitting the force into six heliteams with the following missions: 1st heliteam: seize the bridge; 2nd heliteam: clear the

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superstructure to the fantail; 3rd heliteam: reach the bridge and begin clearing operations from the bridge to the engine room; 4th heliteam: support operations, clear superstructure to the bow and check all forward containers; 5th heliteam: reserve - prepared to support all other missions as required; 6th heliteam: provide expertise and designated skills to move the ship after the securing had been accomplished. The plan was simple and was solid. It was anticipated that gas would be used and that principles of combat in a built up area would be applied. Specific problem areas were the initial landing and securing of a foothold on the ship, the ability to move off or over the containers, and that there was no specific intelligence on the enemy force located on the ship. A factor which was constantly kept in mind was that the American crew might still be aboard.

After this plan had been drawn up it was presented to the Air Force who accepted it. The launch time was relaxed until the afternoon of the 14th. Our force then went to a gymnasium to stage. Here the force broke out and distributed ammunition based upon assigned mission. Special items of ordnance, weaponry, and equipment included shotguns, gas grenades, flashlights, M-79's with gas canisters, as well as the normal BA for M-16 rifles, .45 calibre pistols, and M-60 machine guns.

At this point heliteams were broken down to the man based upon the mission of the heliteam and space available in each designated Air Force helicopter. Heliteams were advised of the number designation of their specific helicopter. All heliteams were then shown aerial photographs and detailed specifics of each mission were discussed. Albeit many of the specifics could not be pinned down exactly, an attempt was made to do so. Within each heliteam selected personnel were assigned to carry specific ordnance with a purpose in mind (example: one man was assigned to drop gas down the vents to the engine room immediately).

During this time Major PORTER was continually being updated on the progress of the impending operation. As he was being updated, the force actually rehearsed certain aspects of the operation in the parking lot outside the gymnasium. Gas masks were donned and rehearsals accomplished with them. Rehearsals were limited primarily to a discussion of the best means of accomplishing each mission and designation of key men to perform certain tasks. However, movement in gas masks, fanning out to secure a lodgment on the ship, and possible movement of key individuals once aboard was rehearsed.

The force left for the airfield at about noon. Each heliteam proceeded to its designated helicopter and was briefed by the crew of each helicopter. The Marines remained in a ready status on the runway until about 1500 when the alert was lifted. It was believed at this time that additional information from Air Force planes in the area as well as the sinking of Cambodian gunboats in the vicinity of the MAYAGUEZ had altered the situation.

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Following the standdown from the alert, the force returned to the gymnasium. During this period of time, 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines began arriving at U-Tapao. I talked with several officers whom I knew in the battalion and learned of their possible involvement on Koh Tang Island. I was concerned about their training status as they had really only recently begun their predeployment training.

Delta Company then prepared for the next day at the gymnasium by resting, eating evening meal, and making final checks on personnel and equipment. Major PORTER went back to an evening conference. When he returned, the plan changed. Apparently the scope had been broadened to include 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines involvement on Koh Tang Island. A navy destroyer in the area was going to support one operation and we were told to reduce our force to three heliteams vice six. There was a proposal to rappell from the Air Force helicopters to a destroyer for further transfer to the MAYAGUEZ as it was felt that the container could not support the weight of the helicopters. Frankly, the proposal to rappell Marines laden with gear to a bobbing destroyer deck sounded absurd.

The reduction of the force resulted in the Marine contingent being reduced to 59 personnel. Additionally, 6 MSC personnel from the GREENVILLE VICTORY, 2 Air Force EOD specialists and one Army translator (Cambodian) were to go. This reduction was very disheartening for the members of Delta Company not selected because the motivation, preparation and aggressiveness of the entire force was readily apparent. In my opinion those who did not go were equally as capable as those who later executed the mission and I would commend their basic acceptance of the loss of the mission as professionals - taken with no complaints. This change of plans necessitated a late night planning session, for all heliteams were restructured, ordnance and ammunition redistributed, and personnel rosters updated. I should comment here that while all embarkation rosters were a constant problem due to changes, additions, or deletions, the force made a conscientious effort to keep rosters of all personnel involved current. Personnel accountability was stressed at every occasion.

In addition to the planning involved in restructuring heliteams, each individual heliteam now reviewed its mission in light of the changes. The breakdown of missions now looked like this: first heliteam - secure the bridge; second heliteam - secure superstructure move to bridge and work down; third heliteam - swing team ready to support other missions as well as to bring support personnel for clearing and starting the MAYAGUEZ. It should be mentioned that the assignment of new missions was not really that crucial as earlier in the day all Marines were familiarized with every aspect of the boarding operation.

The force then bedded down late the evening of the 14th. Major PORTER went to a final meeting early the morning of the 15th.

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When he returned about 0230 he brought back finalized instructions. We would land on the USS HOLT (DE 1074) for further transfer to the MAYAGUEZ - how had not yet been determined. We understood that the choppers would have to hover over the HOLT and we would probably have to jump a short distance to the deck to avoid placing the intire weight of the helicopter on the destroyer. Receiving the final word from Major PORTER, we boarded buses for the airfield. Prior to leaving, a last minute head count was accomplished with final updates to heli-team embark rosters.

We reached the airfield some time after 0300 and immediately proceeded to our specific helicopter. I was heliteam leader for the second team and I briefed the helicopter pilot on our mission - in turn receiving from him instructions as to how to load the chopper. Additionally our helo took cargo nets for employment on the MAYAGUEZ. We were discussing the launch time and both agreed that this would no doubt be like the previous NEMVAC operations "Eagle Pull" and "Frequent Wind" with multiple alert/standdown drills for helicopters and embarked heliteams. No sooner had this observation been made than a flight line vehicle gave us the signal to launch. Some few minutes after 0400 on 15 May 1975 we were airborne headed for the MAYAGUEZ.

The flight was an eerie trip launched into darkness and was quiet save the test firing of the helicopter's miniguns. Around 0600 we were there, circling the USS HOLT awaiting landing. We were the second to land and this took some time as the first helicopter apparently had difficulty in determining the best means of landing. However, our landing was smooth and though the Marines had to jump to the deck the distance was minimal in all cases. After I got off the helicopter I could appreciate the problem faced by the pilot in landing cross deck on a IE placing his rotor over the edge, and hovering ever so slightly off the deck. In retrospect the pilot did a superlative bit of airmanship.

Once all the force had arrived aboard the HOLT our next problem was how to get aboard the SS MAYAGUEZ - there was no easy answer. Finally it was determined that the best was - really the only way - was to pull the HOLT along side and board. There was a question of compatibility - it appeared that the MAYAGUEZ would be higher out of the water than the HOLT - thus making it mandatory to board using the Jacob's ladder on the MAYAGUEZ - a very risky operation. However, the scheme of maneuver was set and we hoped for the best.

In order to put this period of time in the proper emotional framework, it is important to expand the circumstances existing when we arrived. Once aboard the HOLT we could see the MAYAGUEZ - looming very large in the distance off the island of Koh Tang. On Koh Tang Island we could see smoke billowing from the beach and at this time we learned that at least one helicopter had been shot down. Our emotions were at a high peak because it was obvious after a period of feeling that

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our mission had a sense of unreality about it (suddenness - our own short preparation time - and the extremely fast pace of events), that we were now in the middle of an extremely critical mission. For me personally this short period of time before the boarding was the moment of truth - the period in which I finally comprehended the significance of the mission as well as the fact that we were actually going to accomplish it. After months of preparation for other contingencies without ever really executing a combat mission, this particular period of time was both awakening and inspiring.

At this time the HOLT began its run on the MAYAGUEZ. During this time the machine guns of our force, in conjunction with those of the Navy, lined the upper deck. Other Marine personnel were staged out of the area to be prepared for boarding. My team was amidship, prepared to board following Captain WOOD's team. As we approached the MAYAGUEZ, Major PORTER had the Army interpreter, a Captain PHILLIPS, use a loud speaker system to broadcast to any Cambodians on the MAYAGUEZ to give up. It was reported that there were six Cambodians aboard as we approached.

Following the appeal of the interpreter to give up, a close air support mission was called in - timed to occur immediately prior to our boarding. The close air run accomplished by Air Force jets was a beauty to watch - a strafing run with what appeared to be a cluster bomb filled with tear gas bomblets. It was precisely on target and, indeed, the MAYAGUEZ disappeared in a cloud of gas for several minutes. The accuracy of this bombing run was later brought home to me during the search operation on the MAYAGUEZ. I literally found gas bomblets everywhere on the exposed surface of the MAYAGUEZ. In addition, the gas was still persistent in some poorly ventilated portions of the ship when we left the MAYAGUEZ at 1930 - some twelve hours later.

At approximately 1930, all preliminary actions having been completed, the HOLT came along side the MAYAGUEZ. It was a beautiful run in by the skipper of the HOLT - no hesitation, strictly bold seamanship to bring the HOLT alongside. With the command "Marines over the side", the boarding began. Initially, two Marines made it over and were thrown lines. The boarding was not a smooth evolution because of the life lines on board the HOLT and the gas masks on each man. Initially after two men got on the MAYAGUEZ, the two ships parted, and after the line handlers got them together the boarding continued. My team got over a few minutes after the final securing of lines. It was a tough go because of the limited visibility. Personally, on several occasions I misjudged stepping down or tripped over obstacles I couldn't see. Once we got aboard the operation proceeded quickly. We moved to the fantail, then to the side of the ship exposed to Koh Tang Island (the destroyer had deliberately come along side the MAYAGUEZ on the seaward side to give us maximum protection). The superstructure was quickly searched and cleared. A group from my team then boldly proceeded down to the engine room as fast as possible and in short order - declared

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it secured. It had become quickly apparent now no one was aboard. Now we proceeded carefully for I was concerned about booby traps. Two Air Force EOD types came aboard to check out the ship. It was at this time that we discovered small flashlights were of little value and returned to the HOLT for larger ones. I also was concerned about exposure to Koh Tang Island and so I designated Marines to provide security on the exposed portion of the ship. We never received any fire from Koh Tang, however.

At about 0815 or so the ship in my judgement was secure, although searching and EOD operations were continuing. I received a national ensign to be raised on the fantail concurrent with a flag amidship. Reaching the fantail, my color detail, consisting of Sergeant RONSISEG, HN TAYER and myself, unfolded the flag, fixed a rusty snap link on the flagpole and raised the American colors at the same time as the flag amidship. Shortly thereafter the ship was officially declared secure.

Following this, a general search of the ship was conducted, containers looked at, and all possible hiding places gone over. The Cambodians appeared to have done little to damage the ship although there were many areas when they could have done considerable damage had they chosen. There was much evidence of their having been there - particularly in the bridge area. I personally observed a pot of cooked rice which had been abandoned and saw spent cartridges from AK-47 rifles lying all over the upper decks of the ship. However, no weapons or equipment were found.

During the search operation we were observing heavy action on Koh Tang Island. We could now see one beach where various Cambodian gun-boats were located. On the same beach were two downed Air Force helicopters - one was a charred black hulk and the other reasonably intact with the tail section apparently shot off. During this time I saw a third Air Force chopper leaving the beach with a big ball of flame in its tail. The fire went out and the helicopter flew off out to sea under its own power.

Back on the MAYAGUEZ we now directed our efforts at getting the ship started. The MSC personnel came over from the HOLT and began their initial efforts.

Marines became involved in numerous tasks to include line handling, policing up the ship (removing expended gas canisters over the ship), and handling equipment. Soon after the MSC personnel came aboard the MAYAGUEZ there was a request for personnel to be prepared to go ashore on Koh Tang Island. Captain WOOD and a force numbering 40 went back aboard the HOLT prepared to go ashore. Major PORTER and myself remained aboard the MAYAGUEZ. We were concerned about the completion of our mission - not only seizure of the MAYAGUEZ but also securing her - which

would be accomplished once the ship was in international waters. COMDEUSRON 23 requested Marines aboard and we remained.

After some initial difficulty, the MAYAGUEZ was able to be put in tow behind the HOLT. The anchor chain was cut and the MAYAGUEZ began to move around noon. Shortly after this operation had commenced, a fishing boat appeared waving a white flag. I had not been aware of the MAYAGUEZ crew release and initially I had Marines prepared to watch the fishing boat. However, the boat came alongside and the original crew embarked. They were extremely relieved to see us and expressed their gratitude. Most appeared to be fatigued and somewhat shaken, but nearly everyone was reasonably healthy. Some had received shrapnel wounds from Air Force jets who had strafed them with gas while they were on a Cambodian gunboat. Once they came aboard the power plant began to function quickly. They commented that little had been done to damage the ship except that it appeared that money had been taken from the Captain's safe. The crew in conversation revealed several things about their experience: they were treated fairly well, they had been made to sign documents admitting certain things, they had been told by their captors that the Americans were bombing and causing many Cambodian casualties. The crew in general was overwhelmed by the response of services (Marine Corps, Navy and Air Force) in their behalf. They had anticipated that their fate was to be similar to that of the crew of the USS PUEBLO.

The towing operation ceased around 1700 when the MAYAGUEZ got up to full steam and the HOLT received word to proceed immediately back to Koh Tang Island. We remained aboard the MAYAGUEZ, eating dinner there. At approximately 1930, an Army tugboat (LT-536) arrived from Sattahip, Thailand.

We proceeded to bed down on the Army tug where we were treated extremely well despite their limited facilities. We remained aboard until 0230 on 16 May when we transferred back aboard the USS HOLT. The entire Delta Company force involved in the boarding operation was now reconstituted. The HOLT remained in the vicinity of Koh Tang Island during the 16th. That afternoon it was directed to head to Guam and this necessitated our transfer to the USS WILSON (DDG 7). The transfer was accomplished at night with Marines carrying full equipment using motor whale boats. It was a hazardous transfer and yet accomplished without incident.

Aboard the USS WILSON the situation again changed and the force was directed along with the WILSON and the HOLT to remain in the area to pick up survivors from the Koh Tang operation. The next day, 17 May, was uneventful, but preparations were made to support a planned SEAL operation on Koh Tang. It was anticipated that Marines in motor whale boats from the WILSON might be used to provide support for the SEAL team investigating the wreckage of the helicopters or that Marines

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might be used as a rescue force. These contingencies were again planned for. Boat teams were designated, briefed and ready to go early the morning of 18 May. Prior to involvement, however, a message was received cancelling this operation and directing the force to Subic Bay, R.P. We arrived in Subic Bay without incident on 20 May 1975.

In retrospect, the operation was unique and memorable to have been part of. I personally learned several lessons: a real appreciation for the use of riot control agents, the value of a simple plan of execution, and the importance of aggressiveness. The entire operation was for me a positive accomplishment. Marines and sailors worked extremely well together. The professionalism of all units Delta Company worked with was readily apparent. Most impressive to me, however, were the individual Marines: aggressive, professional, and enthusiastic. Their efforts were outstanding. As a final note it was a pleasure to have been part of an operation which was a credit to the Marine Corps as well as the United States.

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DEBRIEF OF CAPTAIN WALTER J. WOOD USMC

Following is the debrief taken from one of the Marines who participated in the MAYAGUEZ Operation. It is a combination of his own written statement and an interview conducted on 23 May 1975.

I received my initial warning order from Lieutenant Colonel C. E. HESTER, CO BCT 1/4, at approximately 2000, 13 May 1975. I was informed to have 2 reinforced platoons ready to move out, plus a command group. The force was to total no more than 120 men. The Company has been placed on alert at approximately 1000 on 13 May with personnel being restricted to the area of the upper MAU Camp. To occupy the troops, I sent a detail to Cubi Point Gymnasium and on to Cubi Point Pool.

All members of "D" 1/4 were mustered at approximately 2130, and team composition announced. I chose to take the 2nd Platoon of Second Lieutenant E. R. WHITESIDES and the 3rd Platoon of Second Lieutenant J. M. LOCHES, JR. The platoons were reinforced with machine gun squads and by 2230 the Company was ready for deployment. The troops were instructed to take 5 days' chow and a field transport pack minus the blanket roll.

At approximately 2240, I was given a detailed brief by Lieutenant Colonel HESTER and was informed that my mission was to seize the SS MAYAGUEZ off of Koh Tang Island, Cambodia. At this time, Major PORTER and Captain FELTNER were selected as the headquarters element for the operation.

A final equipment and personnel inspection was held at approximately 2300 and embarkation rosters were physically checked to insure full personnel accountability.

By 2330 the company was loaded onto transportation and made the short trip to the Cubi Point Air Station. Here we were met by Air Force Liaison Personnel who had arranged our transportation to U-Tapao, Thailand. Additionally, at the Air Strip, we joined 6 MSC personnel and 6 sailors whose mission it was to begin the operation of the SS MAYAGUEZ once it had been cleared and secured.

Our BA of ammunition, an extremely complete BA, was delivered to the strip at approximately 0030. The troops and ammo were expeditiously loaded and a C-141, Starlifter took off for U-Tapao at approximately 0115, 14 May. While airborne, Major PORTER, Captain FELTNER, and myself made some initial plans based on the information we had received and additionally drew up a number of EEI'S that we felt were essential to the planning and execution of our mission. The C-141 was necessarily rather crowded, but the troops still managed to get a good deal of sleep on the trip.

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At approximately 0445, local time, we landed at U-Tapao, where we were met by Air Force transportation and taken to an Air Force dining facility for breakfast. In the midst of being served, an Air Force Colonel, Colonel JOCHA, arrived and informed us that we had an immediate brief and should be ready to board helicopters for the MAYAGUEZ by 0610.

The troops, much to their chagrin, were mustered out of the mess hall and Major PORTER, Captain FELTNER and myself attended an operation brief. In the course of the brief we were given pictures of the SS MAYAGUEZ and informed that we had 6 Air Force CH-53's for our use in the operation. Our plans were drawn accordingly, to land or hover above the cargo containers on the deck of the MAYAGUEZ and debark troops. Each helicopter team was given a specific mission. The first bird under my command was to land fore and the troops were to assault and seize the bridge. The second helo team was to clear the superstructure and work its way to the engine room and so on the plan went with each team being assigned a certain mission.

In the course of the brief we discovered our departure time was changed to "possibly" 0930. Immediately after the brief we joined the company at the U-Tapao gym when Gunner Sergeant BONKOWSKI was issuing chow and ammunition. Finally by 0830 we prepared heliteams and heliteam rosters and began rehearsing and briefing the plan to all the troops. In the midst of our preparation we were informed the operation had been postponed. Chow was served to us at the gym, and finally at approximately 1215 on 14 May we were instructed to move to the air strip and muster near out assigned helo. Each team had been previously assigned a helo by tail number.

The move to the strip was completed by approximately 1235 and at approximately 1415, we were informed that the assault had been "scrubbed" for the day. Once again we moved to the U-Tapao gym and remained there for the night, constantly rehearsing and preparing.

Major PORTER attended a brief at 1800 and informed us that we should plan to launch the next morning at approximately 0400. Reveille was held at 0200, the heliteams mustered, etc. The Major attended another brief when we first learned we were to be flown in 3 birds to the USS HOLT, a LST, for the boarding of the MAYAGUEZ. Due to helo availability our strength was cut to 57 Marines, 2 Navy Corpsmen, 2 Air Force EOD types, 1 Army translator and 6 MSG types.

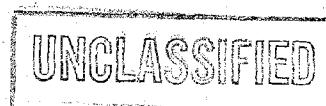
As scheduled, we launched at 0410 and began boarding the HOLT at approximately 0605 and the transfer was complete by 0625. Arriving on the HOLT, boarding plans were coordinated with the ship's captain, covering teams assigned, etc. By 0718 we were within 1500 meters of the MAYAGUEZ and Major PORTER ordered a CS air strike on the ship. Two A-7's made perfect runs on the ship, fogging it in a cloud of RC agents. By 0728 the two ships were alongside, Corporal COKER of the

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3rd Platoon, 2nd Squad crossed, followed by myself. The two ships drifted apart and Corporal COKER and I began to take mooring lines from the HOLT, first we moored fore, then aft, the entire evolution taking 4 or 5 minutes. Following the mooring, the remainder of the boarding party crossed. My 1st team covered the embarkation area, the 2nd team moved to the bridge, the 3rd team to the engine room. Although at 0630 we had been informed that 6 enemy troops were on board the ship, upon boarding we found the ship deserted, with only some cold breakfast remnants found on the bridge. The ship was thoroughly searched with some degree of difficulty inasmuch as the troops were laboring in gas masks in stifling heat. But the ship was thoroughly searched and ~~at 0632~~ the American Colors once again flew aboard the MAYAGUEZ.

Overall, the assault was devised as a raid in a built-up area and the plan, kept simple by intent, worked well. The real key to the operation's success, or to other similar operations' success is rapid, aggressive action. As to my troops, they acted boldly and without hesitation and acted as the exemplary Marines they are.

  
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DEBRIEF OF SECOND LIEUTENANT JOE FLORES, JR USMC

Following is the debrief taken from one of the Marines who participated in the MAYAGUEZ Operation. It is a combination of his own written statement and an interview conducted on 23 May 1975.

On the afternoon of 13 May 1975, I was informed by Captain W. J. WOOD, CO, Delta Company, that there would be no liberty that evening and to ensure that all my personnel were accounted for. I then asked for permission to take a detail to the Cubi NAS gymnasium to play basketball; the CO gave his permission.

At approximately 2030, Captain WOOD ran into the gym and informed me that I was to take everyone to the MAU Camp (a one and a half mile run), have them prepare a field transport pack, and have everyone ready to go at 2200. He said the only info he had was that a 120-man detachment was needed. We then selected our personnel and ensured they were ready. At 2240 we had a brief with Lieutenant Colonel C. E. HESTER, CO, 1stBn, 4thMar; he informed us we would be leaving from Cubi Point, NAS at 0030, our destination: U-Tapao, Thailand, our mission: to recover the MAYAGUEZ. Ensuring we had the proper personnel and equipment, we left at approximately 0030 on a C-141. We arrived in U-Tapao early in the morning and were taken to a chow hall, but were immediately pulled out and taken to a gymnasium. There we distributed arms, formulated a concept of operations and conducted rehearsals. We were then taken to the flight line, fully prepared to execute our mission, and after a wait of several hours we were informed that we were being pulled off the flight line and taken back to the gym. The men were fed, given cots to sleep on and told to get as much rest as possible.

Reveille was held at 0200, personnel and gear checked, plans finalized, and at 0410 we lifted off in CH-53's for a two-hour ride to the Harold E. HOLT, a Navy destroyer. Upon reaching the HOLT we then steamed towards the SS MAYAGUEZ, pulled alongside and proceeded to board it. Prior to boarding the ship had been gassed, consequently gas masks were utilized during the search and clear operation.

A complete search of the vessel revealed that there were no longer any Cambodians on board. Bowls of rice were found in the gallery. The ship was in fairly good order, with only a few rooms and the radio room in any type of disorder.

The flag was raised after securing the ship and we were then re-transferred to the USS HOLT, leaving a 15-man security detachment and the command group on board the MAYAGUEZ to complete the mission.

The mission had been accomplished aggressively and expeditiously, and we were now placed on a standby status to assist on the Koh Tang Island expedition.

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DEBRIEF OF STAFF SERGEANT C. E. HAGEN. USMC

Following is the debrief taken from one of the Marines who participated in the MAYAGUEZ Operation. It is a combination of his own written statement and an interview conducted on 23 May 1975.

At approximately 1600, 13 May 1975, "D" Company, 1stBn, 4thMar, was placed on immediate standby, reason not explained. All personnel not in the immediate area were called back at once. Later on that morning, the Platoon Commanders and Platoon Sergeants of "D" Company were given a brief on what may be expected of us. At approximately 2100 that evening, 3rd Platoon and some attachments from the 1st, 2nd, and Weapons Platoon were told to pack up and be ready to move out by 2330. At 2330, we boarded buses, drove to Cubi Point Airport, boarded a C-141 transport and at 0030, the plane with us aboard flew off towards our destination, Thailand. We arrived at 0500, 14 May 1975. We moved to the airport and remained there until approximately 1410. At this time we moved to the gymnasium where we spent the evening. At 0200, 15 May 1975, we got up, put on our gear and returned to the flight line and at 0400, boarded CH-53's and flew out to USS HOLT. At approximately 0810, we pulled alongside the SS MAYAGUEZ, boarded, searched and took control of the MAYAGUEZ. At 0822, the American Colors were raised. Approximately 1130, we returned to the USS HOLT, and commenced towing the MAYAGUEZ to neutral waters. Later, when the MAYAGUEZ was able to run on her own power, we returned off shore to Koh Tang Island, Cambodia to assist the Marines in their operations. Overall, the operation went smoothly and professionally. It was well planned by our OIC and his staff.

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DEBRIEF OF SERGEANT WILLIAM J. OWENS, USMC

Following is the debrief taken from one of the Marines who participated in the MAYAGUEZ Operation. It is a combination of his own written statement and an interview conducted on 23 May 1975.

On 13 May at about 1600 Company "D", 1stBn, 4thMar was told by Captain WOOD that the Company was on standby, later that day 3rd Platoon was told they would be leaving at about 2300, 13 May. I was assigned 3rd Squad Leader of the 3rd Platoon. We left at 0030, 14 May, about 0500 we got to Thailand, where we would, on the 15th of May, go on helo (CH-53) to the MAYAGUEZ to return it to the U.S. and to free the ship from the Cambodians. On 15 May we left as planned. On the way, we had to change to the USS HOLT, from which we would board the SS MAYAGUEZ. At that time my squad's mission was to go in the area of the engine room, clearing it of any personnel. As I went to the engine room there was no light to see with. I went down three decks to the engine room clearing each as my squad followed me down. After clearing all decks we went to the port side of the ship. I assigned positions to the men of my squad, along the port side. About 1100, 15 May, we went back to the HOLT to return to Subic, P.I. SS MAYAGUEZ would be towed by the USS HOLT until her engines were fired up. On 20 May we returned to Subic, P.I.

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## DEBRIEF OF SERGEANT R. RAMIREZ USMC

Following is the debrief taken from one of the Marines who participated in the MAYAGUEZ Operation. It is a combination of his own written statement and an interview conducted on 23 May 1975.

On the 13th of May, approximately 1600 hours, "D" Company 1/4 was put on a standby status for further deployment. At about 0030 hours, 14 May, "D" Company departed Cubi NAS, Subic Bay to Thailand on a C-141 troop transport plane.

At about 0500, having landed at Thailand, the Company was transported to the Mess Hall for chow. Only a few lucky individuals managed to get something to eat, due to the transport buses arriving to haul "D" Company away after being at the Mess Hall for about 20 minutes.

"D" Company was ready for deployment on the CH-53's stationed at the AFB. The ship crews were waiting and ready, "L" Company was waiting and ready for that final word but it was not to come down from higher echelons that day.

"D" Company was hauled away to the Gym, where we were informed we would be staying for the night, but the bunking aspect came to a sudden halt. One of the companies from 2/9 had prior claim to the cots. But the CIC of the detachment, Major PORTER, arranged to have the company moved so "D" Company would be prepared to give it another try at zero dark thirty hours to leave on the CH-53's.

0200, 15 May, "D" Co. was in the process of moving out to the LZ's. It was estimated to be about 0600 when we would be jumping off the choppers onto the deck of the Harold E. HOLT, which would carry the boarding Marines to the merchant ship, SS MAYAGUEZ. The Marines were given the task of boarding and securing the MAYAGUEZ from the Cambodians who had outright committed piracy in seizing that ship.

I was a member of Staff Sergeant HAGEN's team, which had been given the responsibility for clearing the passageways and rooms leading to the engine room and securing the engine room itself.

At about 0718, the MAYAGUEZ began to be gassed (prior to boarding) by U.S. Air Force jet planes. There was still one question circulating around, where are the crew members of the MAYAGUEZ? Nobody knew the answer.

At 0728, the Harold E. HOLT pulled up to the MAYAGUEZ and the Marines, gas masks donned, prepared to board. After boarding, each team successfully carried out its objective and the U.S. of A. flag was raised

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without opposition. Sergeant M. J. OWENS promptly secured the engine room with team members.

Lance Corporal WOOD and his squad stayed on the MAYAGUEZ for a very brief time for security purposes but later joined the departing Marines of the Harold E. HOLT.

All Marines were given a gracious welcome back to the ship. The Naval personnel on the two ships we were on, Harold E. HOLT and Henry B. WILSON, expressed their feelings in the ultimate fashion they could, provided for trivial needs, and made just many sacrifices of their time and needs to provide comfort for the Marines on board.

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## DEBRIEF OF CORPORAL CARL R. COOKER

Following is the debrief taken from one of the Marines who participated in the MAYAGUEZ Operation. It is a combination of his own written statement and an interview conducted on 23 May 1975.

On May 13, 1975 we, 3rd Platoon and attachments "Delta" Company 1/4 were at the gym in Cubi Point working out when our Company Commander, Captain WOOD came in and told us to go back to the Company area. We had been notified through the day that we were on a standby status but we hadn't received a mission. Later that night we were trucked to the airport in Cubi Point where we waited around a half hour, then we were briefed about our plane flight and in the next four hours we were in Thailand. We found that our mission was to capture the U.S. merchant ship MAYAGUEZ. On May 15, 1975 we boarded Air Force CH-53's and moved to our objective. From the CH-53's we were transferred to the destroyer USS HOLT. As we prepared ourselves aboard the ship our objective came closer. Each squad was assigned a different task. My squad's task was to be the first to board and secure the bridge of the ship. As the USS HOLT slowly pulled aside of the MAYAGUEZ, we all began to get positioned, moments before we arrived the ship had been hit with gas agents by U.S. Air Force planes, so we equipped ourselves with our gas masks. As we positioned ourselves to board the MAYAGUEZ, the USS HOLT anchor lines had to be tied to the MAYAGUEZ. Captain WOOD was told by Major PORTER to tie the lines down. Since I was closest to the rail, I was told to cross over to the MAYAGUEZ and tie the ropes of the USS HOLT to the U.S. merchant ship MAYAGUEZ. After both ships were docked, Captain WOOD, myself and the rest of my squad began to secure the ship. After doing this we positioned Marines on all exits on the aft end of the ship and waited to get the word from the rest of our small task force. After the word was passed that the ship was secure, the raising of the American flag began. Major PORTER and Captain WOOD raised the flag forward of the ship and Captain FELTNER, myself and corpsman TAYER raised the flag aft of the ship. After the recapturing of the ship we went back aboard the USS HOLT and began to tow the ship back to Subic Bay, Philippines. After the USS HOLT was assigned a new mission, we were transferred to the USS Henry B. WILSON which brought us safely back to Subic Bay, Philippines.

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DEBRIEF OF CORPORAL B. C. RUCKER, USMC

Following is the debrief taken from one of the Marines who participated in the MAYAGUEZ Operation. It is a combination of his own written statement and an interview conducted on 23 May 1975.

I, Corporal RUCKER, B. C., on the night of May 13th was playing basketball in the gym and Captain WOOD walked in and said let's go. On the night of May 13th we boarded a C-141 for Thailand. We arrived at Thailand on the morning of May 14th about 0600 and were taken to the chow hall and in the middle of getting breakfast, Captain WOOD passed the word to get out. We reloaded the buses and went to the airfield and from the airfield to the gym where we stayed for the night. On the morning of May 15th we revolved out at 0200 for Third Platoon and attachments. About two hours later we went to the airfield to accomplish our mission. We arrived at the USS HOLT on the morning of May 15th at about 0600. The bird hovered about five feet above the ship, so we had to jump down to the ship. We were on our way to the MAYAGUEZ; meanwhile it was being prepped with gas. We arrived at the MAYAGUEZ and Captain WOOD and Corporal COKER were the first two Marines to board. We were followed by Corporal COKER's squad and my squad along with Second Lieutenant FLORES. Then we took a deck at a time being sure that each deck was secure until we reached the bridge, and then our mission was accomplished.

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DEBRIEF OF CORPORAL E. J. RUCKER, USMC

Following is the debrief taken from one of the Marines who participated in the MAYAGUEZ Operation. It is a combination of his own written statement and an interview conducted on 23 May 1975.

I, Corporal RUCKER, E. J., was in the gym playing basketball on the night of May 13th and that was when it happened.

My Company Commander, Captain WOOD, came in and told us to get back to the area and pack our gear.

Later that night at about 2300 we left the Company area, and at 0100 we boarded an aircraft and went to Thailand. We stayed there for the rest of that day.

The next morning at 0300 we boarded an aircraft on our way to Cambodia. About 0600 we were taken off the aircraft and got aboard the USS HOLT and it took us to the MAYAGUEZ.

First we had planes drop C.S. gas on the ship, and with our gas masks on we pulled up beside the MAYAGUEZ on board the USS HOLT, a destroyer, and crossed over from the USS HOLT to the MAYAGUEZ.

There wasn't anyone on the ship so we had some people go to the engine room to get the ship started. While this was taking place the ship's crew came back. They took over the work in the engine room and got the ship started, after which we left the ship and returned to P.I.

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~~CONFIDENTIAL~~DEBRIEF OF LANCE CORPORAL L. C. HARRIS, USMC

Following is the debrief taken from one of the Marines who participated in the MAYAGUEZ Operation. It is a combination of his own written statement and an interview conducted on 23 May 1975.

I don't remember times and dates because my first thought was when or if I was coming back. It started when Delta 1/4 was on standby for where we didn't know. When we were given the word, "Delta standby", each man was told to pack his gear and prepare to move out when given the word. It seemed like a normal day after packing our gear; when we went to play a little basketball at the gym. We were there about one hour when Captain WOOD told us to head towards the camp and get our gear on. After the word; we got on buses and went to the air base where we were told we're going to Thailand, which took us about four hours to reach. After we reached Thailand, Major PORTER gave us word that the Cambodians had taken an American ship and we were going to get it back! I don't remember times but we started out to get helco'd in on the MAYAGUEZ but the plans were changed, so we stayed overnight on an air base in Thailand.

About 0200 we got up and proceeded to be helo'd out to a Navy destroyer which was going to take us to the MAYAGUEZ. We were told after boarding the Navy ship that the MAYAGUEZ was going to be gassed first then the Marine team would take over from there. We reached the ship and one by one started on the ship. After boarding there were two men that were security on different decks, covering each others back in case there was anybody on the ship that would had given us a fight. "We were led into one of the deck passages by Major PORTER when we didn't know exactly where to go. He just pulled his pistol and said 'come on' to us and went in the dark passage without stalling or anything. When he saw there were no enemy there he told us where to watch and went back to help other Marines do their job." The crew had gotten back on ship from another island after they got on the ship the destroyer tied lines to pull the ship into international waters. During that evening we had turned around and headed back to assist the Marines that were stuck on the Island, but unfortunately we didn't get too much action, the company of Marines were helo'd onto the Naval destroyer and we headed back to the Philippine Islands. We were glad to be back and welcomed by our fellow Marines.

  
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DEBRIEF OF LANCE CORPORAL D. H. WOOD USMC

Following is the debrief taken from one of the Marines who participated in the MAYAGUEZ Operation. It is a combination of his own written statement and an interview conducted on 23 May 1975.

Lance Corporal D. H. WOOD, of "D" Company, took part in the recovery of the SS MAYAGUEZ.

On May 13th, we were told that we would not have off base liberty. But we could go the movie or the gym in a group. I was at the pool when I got the word to get back and put my gear on. We went to the Cubi Point NAS and at about 2400 we were loaded on to a C-141 and took off. We got to Thailand about 0500. Went to chow and then we went back to the airfield. We were then told what we were going to do. We were all set to load on to CH-53's. But we were told to wait.

That night we stayed in a gym. We were told we would be getting up at 0200 the next morning. Well, 0200 came and we got up, went to chow, then straight to the airfield. The CH-53's were waiting for us. We took off and headed out over the ocean.

About 2 hours later we were over the USS HOLT. We had to jump on to the HOLT. I was told by Captain WOOD to spread my squad along the side of the HOLT.

Major PORTER gave the Cambodians a ten-minute time limit to get off the MAYAGUEZ, then they gassed the MAYAGUEZ 2 times. We came alongside and boarded.

My mission was to take my squad and clear the decks.

After we had swept through the ship, 3rd Platfon went back to the HOLT. My squad was left to provide security. The crew came back and the ship was under her own power. My squad stayed until 1830. Then we got on an Army tug and from there we were moved to the HOLT at 0200 in the morning. We stayed on the HOLT one half of a day and then we moved to the USS WILSON on which we came back to P.I.

On the way back we were told that we had to go back to Koh Tang to pull out some people. But the plan was given up so we came back to P.I.

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DEBRIEF OF PRIVATE FIRST CLASS WALTER ASHFORD, USMC

Following is the debrief taken from one of the Marines who participated in the MAYAGUEZ Operation. It is a combination of his own written statement and an interview conducted on 23 May 1975.

My company, which is Delta Co, was on standby to go on an unknown mission. Some went to the gym as most Marines do to stay in shape for such operations as this one. I'm always on the go so stayed back and went to the base movies.

The movie was interesting and I was really involved when out of the clear blue sky I heard this voice and I knew it was the First Sergeant telling all Delta Company to move out. Right then I had to call on someone to give me strength to go on this mission. We went and packed our packs. While in the process it started raining and I felt I would never make it back home. We got our weapons and gear ready then we went to the Air Force base and waited. All the time I was thinking. Then we finally left on this aircraft on what turned out to be a cold flight. We landed in Thailand and all the men were restless. The next night we were told to leave at 0200 and we left on time. We boarded helicopters and flew to the USS HOLT and stayed until we got in sight of our mission. There it was, the MAYAGUEZ, setting in the water.

Everyone was listening for the word and orders that were passed. We pulled alongside the ship. Every man was armed with his favorite weapon and all at point aim ready to fire if we had to or saw anyone that was not in green. I was on the boarding party that was to help other Marines board the MAYAGUEZ. We got aboard and stood guard duty until the entire ship was searched from top to bottom.

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DEBRIEF OF PRIVATE FIRST CLASS C. R. BENNETT, USMC

Following is the debrief taken from one of the Marines who participated in the MAYAGUEZ Operation. It is a combination of his own written statement and an interview conducted on 23 May 1975.

I, Private First Class BENNETT, C. R., participated in the recovery of the SS MAYAGUEZ, a U.S. merchant ship seized by the Cambodian Communists. This is my statement on what happened in this particular operation.

We were notified that we were on standby the afternoon of the 13th of May. We packed our combat gear and had it staged ready to go that afternoon. The people that were to go left the MAC Camp at 2400 hours to the Naval Air Station to board on a C-141 transport jet to fly to an airbase in Thailand. We arrived in Thailand about 0400 hours. From the airfield we were transported to a gym where we were issued ammo and briefed on the operation. We also were split up into three teams each assigned a part of the ship to be taken. Reveille was held at 0100 hours the next morning. We boarded CH-53 helicopters at the airfield. From there we flew to the destroyer, the USS HOLT. Everyone manned their battle stations. Two jet fighters flew over the MAYAGUEZ dropping CS riot gas on the ship to stun anyone on the ship. The USS HOLT pulled alongside the ship not knowing what to expect. We boarded the ship wearing full combat gear, each team going to its assigned position. The ship was thoroughly checked for anyone that still might be aboard. But we found out the ship had been abandoned earlier. After the ship was secured the U.S. flag was again raised by Major PORTER and Captain WOOD. Later the crew was found and returned to the ship. The destroyer, USS HOLT towed the SS MAYAGUEZ until she could come under her own power. From the SS MAYAGUEZ we boarded a U.S. Army tug, the same night we transferred to the destroyer USS Henry B. WILSON and from there we proceeded to Subic Bay in the Phillipine Islands.

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## DEBRIEF OF PRIVATE FIRST CLASS R. D. BONNET USMC

Following is the debrief taken from one of the Marines who participated in the MAYAGUEZ Operation. It is a combination of his own written statement and an interview conducted on 23 May 1975.

On May 13, our RIFs were put on standby. "D" Company Commanding Officer, Captain WOOD, passed the word. There would be no liberty, but we could go the gym or the pool. We had no sooner gotten there and we had to leave and pack all our gear because we were moving out that same night. Before we knew it we were on our way. We didn't know exactly where we were going until we got there. The morning of the 14th we were given a briefing on our mission by Major PORTER and then passed out ammo, hand grenades, and CS (gas) grenades. We loaded on buses and moved to where the helicopters were located. Then we were told the mission would not go until the next day at 0100 the 15th. We were ready to board the choppers. After flying for several hours we were unloaded off the choppers onto the USS Harold E. HOLT. It was about 45 minutes later that we were alongside the MAYAGUEZ. All Marines were ready to board the MAYAGUEZ with gas masks and M-16 rifles at the ready. We didn't know exactly how we were going to get across to the other ship but the major led us to the side near the MAYAGUEZ and directed us across from the HOLT. Once aboard the Marines swarmed the decks of the MAYAGUEZ securing the ship from the top down. After the ship had been thoroughly checked out, the engineers boarded to get the ship under way. Major PORTER had a flag raising ceremony. The MAYAGUEZ was ours once again. From the MAYAGUEZ we could see the burning helicopters on the beach of Koh Tang Island. We watched the island being bombed by U.S. aircraft and Naval gunfire. At this time we left the MAYAGUEZ, except for a few men for security, and boarded the USS HOLT. The HOLT was going to tow the MAYAGUEZ out of the bay but the crew got the engines running and she came out on her own power. We were given the word that a few men were going ashore to evacuate the Marines there but that mission was cancelled when the remainder of the Marines came in on choppers. The USS HOLT was given orders to leave for Subic Bay, Philippines. At sea for one day the USS HOLT was given orders for Guam, so we were transferred over to the USS Henry B. WILSON. The WILSON was given orders to go back to Koh Tang Island to recover missing persons. Approximately 20 miles from Koh Tang Island we were told to get underway for Subic Bay again, reasons being that recon of the island revealed no sign of the missing American Marines. We came into port the 21st and to our surprise there was a band and some of the BMT were waiting for us to congratulate us on a mission well done.

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DEBRIEF OF PRIVATE FIRST CLASS HERMAN M. JACKSON, USMC

Following is the debrief taken from one of the Marines who participated in the MAYAGUEZ Operation. It is a combination of his own written statement and an interview conducted on 23 May 1975.

I, Private First Class Herman M. JACKSON, am giving a brief statement on the SS MAYAGUEZ. On May 13, 1975, my company was given the order to go the island of Koh Tang to take back the SS MAYAGUEZ. My company left Subic Bay in the Philippines at 2400 in the morning going to Thailand. We arrived there about 0400, May 14, 1975, then we spent most of the day practicing to go aboard the SS MAYAGUEZ. We spent the night in a gym in Thailand. The next morning we were taken to the airport to go aboard helicopters. We left Thailand by helicopters going to Koh Tang. When we arrived we were taken off the helicopters and put aboard the USS HOLT. Then it took us about one half hour to get to the USS MAYAGUEZ. Then we got there the USS HOLT pulled up beside the SS MAYAGUEZ. Before we started to board, we were going to gas the ship with CS gas. Then our boarding party went aboard the ship. There were three teams that went aboard the ship. I was on the superstructure team. My job was to secure the superstructure. As soon as my team got aboard the ship, we went straight to the superstructure. It took us about 20 minutes to secure the superstructure. The whole operation took 35 minutes to secure the ship. Then we went back to the USS HOLT. The HOLT had to pull the MAYAGUEZ to safe waters. Then the HOLT came back to the Island of Koh Tang and we spent from 1400 to about 1700 just setting off the coast of the Island. Then we started back to the Philippines. We changed from the USS HOLT to the USS Henry B. WILSON, which took us to the Philippines.

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~~DEBRIEF OF PRIVATE FIRST CLASS S. J. SOURS~~

Following is the debrief taken from one of the Marines who participated in the MAYAGUEZ Operation. It is a combination of his own written statement and an interview conducted on 23 May 1975.

On 13 May while sitting on my rack writing a letter back home to my Mom telling her of the good time I was having at Subic Bay in the Philippines, myself (Pfc SOURS) and the attachments of "D" Co 1/4 were given the word to pack our gear. The real mission was not yet determined.

Leaving the upper MAU Camp around 11:15 that night of May 13th we arrived at Cubi Point, NAS where Delta Company boarded on a C-141 aircraft for Thailand. Landing in Thailand somewhere around 0400 in the morning we began to set up operation plans, and organizing our groups for our role in the plan of operation. We were giving all the rounds and ammunitions needed for the job and briefed by the CIC of our detachment, the Battalion X.O.

While waiting on the word for movement to helicopters, which we would board and fly to a Naval ship, the USS HOLT, we were delayed for another day so we rehearsed our jobs in the parking lot. On 15 May 1975, somewhere within the time of 0200 in the morning, we were awakened and organized for our departure from Thailand to the mission of the MAYAGUEZ Operation. We landed on the USS HOLT around 0620 that morning where we then made movement toward the MAYAGUEZ. Pulling up along side of the MAYAGUEZ, we placed security on it after making sure of there being no one aboard the ship. While standing on board the ship I watched air strikes by the Air Force, and Naval guns fired by the USS WILSON on Koh Tang Island. The ship and its crew were recovered.

Later that night we departed from the MAYAGUEZ onto the USS WILSON where we made our way back to Subic Bay in the Philippines.

The mission was a success and well performed.



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