

OPERATIONS EAGLE PULL, FREQUENT WIND, THE MAYAGUEZ AFFAIR AND THE FALL OF LAOS AS VIEWED FROM BANGKOK THAILAND

EAGLE PULL

I worked in the JUSMAGTHAI TCC (Joint United States Military Advisory Group Telecommunications Center) from April 1973-July 1976. JUSMAGTHAI was located in the Thai Supreme Military Headquarters Compound located on Satorn Tai Road, Bangkok, Thailand. My job consisted of sending and receiving message traffic for JUSMAGTHAI and about 30-40 other military and civilian units/activities located in the Bangkok Area. From the time I got there, Cambodia was front and center of a lot of the message traffic. Real hot in August of 1973 and became hot again beginning the first of the year of 1975 as the Khmer Rouge had cut off all aid going into Phnom Penh except by air then. In April, the Khmer Rouge were close enough to Phnom Penh to be able to rocket and motor the Phnom Penh air field making even air re supply a harrowing experience to those who flew in there. About 2 days prior to the beginning of the evacuation, the Colonel of JUSMAGTHAI J-6 came down to the TCC and asked for volunteers to go in to Phnom Penh prior to the evacuation taking place to establish secure communications to be utilized during the evacuation. He was looking for people who had experience in tactical communications, especially with the Magic 17 van (secure teletype van small enough to fit on a ¾ ton pickup) and with a VSC-2 RATT (radio teletype via AM communications which would fit on the back seat of a jeep). I volunteered as did most of those on my shift; I made sure the Colonel knew I had experience operating both Teletype and RATT.

Then nothing, no word the day prior or even on April 12, the day of the evacuation. That is until a few hours prior to the evacuation were to begin, then the message traffic picked up tremendously. All 5 of the RTAFB's (Royal Thai Air Force Base) where we still had American Air Force Units left, went on alert, this also included Nam Phong, Marines and U-Tapao, the Royal Thai Navy Air Base that housed B-52's. We, working in the TCC expected some heavy bombing runs to take place, but that never happened either. I am not sure that a single air plane got airborne, although they were armed, fueled and ready. All I could do was monitor the message traffic and deliver the messages to whom they were addressed as fast as I could. What a way to take part in the evacuation, I wondered what happened to the J-6 Colonel who had asked for volunteers. Following the message traffic, I seen that the evacuation was taking place flawlessly and in no time, it was over. I am not sure how long the actually evacuation took, but it could not of been more than a few hours. Once the last helicopter landed on Navy ships out at sea, the J-6 Colonel finally showed up. He thanks us for volunteering, for the wonderful job we did prior and during the evacuation keeping all informed and finally stated: we were not needed as it had been decided not to add to the number of people on the ground in Phnom Penh that would have to be evacuated. For us, it was over and when our shift ended, time to go home. I do not think very many of us gave Cambodia another thought, all the traffic we received dealing with Cambodia, the IR's (intelligence reports), the OPSUM's (operational summaries), SITREP's (situational reports) since August of 1973 anyway, always spelled gloom and doom for Lon Nol and FANK. It was just a matter of time

before Cambodia fell to the Khmer Rouge. April 12, 1975 just happened to be that day. I personally thought the U.S. should have done more for Lon Nol and his troops, but not having been assigned to or served in Cambodia, not knowing any Cambodians personally; I really had no feelings one way or the other once Phnom Penh finally fell to the Khmer Rouge. The first domino had fallen.

FREQUENT WIND

For me, Frequent Wind was more than a 2 day operation; it was 2 months of agonizing reflection. January and February of 1975, our attention was focused on Cambodia, receiving very little traffic dealing with Vietnam, which changed in March. Receiving reports of the fall of Ban Me Thout and Kontum brought back memories when I served in RVN. Russell Major Relay, my first assignment at Long Binh had teletype circuits to these places when American Troops were there back in 1971. I knew of these places and had sent messages back and forth to them. I kept wondering why the U.S. was not doing anything to help. Then came in reports of the fall of Quang Tri, Hue and Chu Lai, still the U.S. did nothing. I reflected back to the Eastertide offensive, with massive air support the ARVN had been successful; I was there, why not now. When Danang became surrounded and looked like it might fall any day, we sent out a message putting all the remaining Air Force units left in Thailand on 48 hour recall alert. Still, most of our traffic still concerned Cambodia, which puzzled me. Could it be because we had very little American presents in Vietnam, I did not know, Cambodia did not have a lot of Americans either, just MEDT-C and the Embassy Personnel that I knew of.

There just weren't many official reports coming in dealing with RVN, frustrating to say the least. I read the Bangkok Post to keep up with the situation in RVN and learned more from the Post than from our official message traffic. The next thing I knew, Danang fell, Nha Trang which had been home to one of our ASC's, (Automatic Switching Center) was abandoned, and things were going down hill fast. The Bangkok Post was asking if the South Vietnamese could hold on to the lower third of their country. Still, the U.S. did nothing, I was frustrated, but the thought of all our Air Force units sitting on the ground and not helping out our ally, I knew they, the Air Force, had to be frustrated more than I. After all, the reason they were kept in Thailand was for such a case as was happening before our eyes in Vietnam. Then came Operation Eagle Pull, Vietnam took a back seat for a few days as we became focused on Phnom Penh. Once that was over, Vietnam became our primary focus, maybe this is why none of us in the JUSMAGTHAI Compound gave Cambodia much thought right after it fell. The fall of Xuan Loch hit us hard, it meant Saigon was next and hopes for the South's survival was fading fast, in fact we all knew it was over. Would the J-6 Colonel ask for volunteers for Frequent Wind as he did with Eagle Pull? The answer we all knew was no. I kept reflecting back to the Eastertide offensive, our air power, why on earth is it still sitting on the ground? Our air power along with the ARVN made a very good effective team back in 1972, to me it was time to get these two together again, but it would not happen. Unlike Cambodia, I came to know some Vietnamese, both in Long Binh and Saigon and I began to wonder about them. People and places where I had served were falling to the commies; I could do nothing about it, just process the message traffic and ensure timely delivery to whom it

was addressed. Beginning on the 29th of April, everything was a whirlwind, what comes to mind was chaos, if Eagle Pull went off without a hitch, Frequent Wind was just the opposite, a fly by your pants type of evacuation, it did seem that anything that could go wrong, did. The 29th and 30th of April, we were so busy processing traffic, none of thought much of what was happening in Saigon. Maybe this was a good thing, being so busy you did not have time to think. Going home from work on the 30th, what I remember was the headline in the Bangkok Post or was it the Nation, Surrender is what it said. I was devastated, heart broke and wondered about the friends I had meet in Long Binh and Saigon, the world had been turned up side down. The fall of Vietnam hit me hard, I had been assigned there, I worked there, I knew people there, only one thought was going through my mind, this is not right. I became embittered to the people of the U.S. the more I thought about it. The second domino had fallen. I knew the U.S. had the capability to prevent it, the U.S. just chose not to. Damn the U.S. is how I felt, better to be an enemy of the U.S. than its friend and ally. I began to retreat into a shell, to become a loner that to this day, still lingers. It was not right and should not have happen.

THE MAYAGUEZ AFFAIR

With the fall of both Cambodia and Vietnam to the commies, life and message traffic kind of settled down. There were those immediate messages dealing with an South Vietnamese Air Force pilot flying his plane to a Thai Air base, the exodus of what became known as the Vietnamese Boat People, but for the first half of May, just regular traffic was flowing, not much of that. Then on 12 May, 1975, a couple of flash messages came into the JUSMAGTHAI TCC stating that the Khmer Rouge had seized the SS Mayaguez. Most of us just shrugged our shoulders and said so what. Two whole countries, Cambodia and Vietnam were let to fall to the commies by the U.S., who was concerned with a little cargo ship. That was our thinking at the time. But surprises awaited us, first NKP was put on alert and we started receiving messages from Okinawa or/ and the Philippines stating that they were sending in the Marines, all of a sudden, we perked up. Life had meaning again. We heard BG Aderholt, Chief of JUSMAGTHAI along with Embassy folks were negotiating with the Thai Government for us to attack the Khmer Rouge using our aircraft stationed at the different RTAFB's. Then a message stating that an Spectre gunship had taken off from either NKP or Ubon and attacked the Cambodians. After action reports showed they destroyed several of the Khmer Rouge boats, reports started coming in of other U.S. aircraft from the sea attacking other targets on Cambodian soil. We went about our jobs in a dazed state, not believing the U.S. had it in them to actually do something about the seizure, but from all the message traffic we were seeing coming into us, the U.S. was re acting.

U-Tapao was to be the staging area for the rescue attempt, helicopters from NKP were on their way, when another flash message came in stating that one of the rescue helicopters destined to U-Tapao had crashed. That message was rushed over to the J-3 Operations Center. It would not be until the next day that all aboard was confirmed killed. We got reports that the Marines had landed on Koh Tang Island and were doing battle with the Khmer Rouge and an IR stating that the crew of the Mayaguez was not on the Island. It was unsure at that time whether we would invade the mainland or not, in an attempt to

retrieve them. Time was going by fast; we were very busy with little or no time to think, then another message and a couple of more messages stating both another helicopter and aircraft had been shot down over the Island. It seemed this whole operation was causing a lot of military casualties in order to rescue some dumb civilians who had happen to get too close to Cambodian territory. Our original euphoria about the U.S. doing something about the seizure now turned into worry and concern. I over heard one of the JUSMAGTHAI officers mumbling something about this rescue attempt being made with out any planning or without any detailed plan and a complete lack of accurate Intel. We had more messages coming in about the fighting going on at Koh Tang, when we learned the Thai Government had refused U.S. request to utilize our assets in country from their RTAFB's. We had launched without their approval it seemed, maybe that JUSMAGTHAI officer had something, nothing seemed to be going right.

Then more IR's, it seems the crew were being delivered to their ship, more questions, like was all of this for naught? Then more reports, the crew was free and on their ship and heading out to sea, but fighting was still taking place on Koh Tang. Finally another flash message, ordered the evacuation of the Marines on the Island, we continued to receive all sorts of message traffic on this operation, we were keeping an eye open for the message that said all Marines had been evacuated successfully. Then it was over, after action reports started coming in, the number of military killed started to climb, we only knew of the crashed helicopter from NKP, one other helicopter and an Navy plane had been shot down over the island. There were more, exactly how many, we did not know, all we were sure of the reports stated all Marines were extracted and the crew was safely aboard the Mayaguez, headed toward Sattihip. Time to head home, have a beer and reflect on what just happened, read the Bangkok Post as the Post had the full story, myself, just bits and pieces of message traffic I saw, never the full story.

When I returned to work the next day, everything had settled down, but one after action report was showed to me. It stated some 40 military had lost their lives trying to rescue the crew of the Mayaguez, that some Marines may have been accidently left on the Island in the haste to evacuate, but the civilian crew was safe. Mission accomplished. The Thai government was peeved at us for using NKP and U-Tapao with out their permission, 40 plus dead military, not sure if that counted the Marines left on the Island, my question, was if it was worth it and why did we do it? How could we allow 2 friendly countries and allies to fall and then rush in with military force to rescue a ship. Personally, I do not think it was worth it, with or with out the hind site of the Khmer Rouge freeing the crew regardless of what we did or did not do. I do know, this operation made me madder at the civilians and politicians back in the states, those who spit on our returning Vietnam Vets, calling them baby killers, only to rely on us to save their butts and give them the freedom to call us all sorts of names. I was not a happy camper. There was another chapter to follow and the name of that chapter was Laos.

FALL OF LAOS

The fall of Laos is a strange story that is completely different from the above three. My background dealing with Laos started in 1967 working in the Area Communications

Center on the second floor of the Capital Hotel. Our main customer was DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI whom resided on the 5th and 6th floors. DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI, not to be confused with the real JUSMAGTHAI located across town on Satom Tai Road, two completely different organizations and missions, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI was responsible for or should I say provided men, logistics and supplies for Project 404 in Laos, for Pepper Grinder, the Ammo Dump outside Ramason Station, not AB-1 Pepper Grinder on Udorn RTAFB and Water Pump that I know of. In other words, support the SECRET War going on in Laos. Having volunteered for Project 404 when my tour was coming to an end in 1969, I was accepted and went to work in the Attaché Commcenter, Na Hai Dieo Compound, also known as the USAID Compound in Vientiane, Laos.

So why was the fall of Laos different, DEPCHJUSMAGTHAI had moved out of the Capital Hotel in 1971 and re located at Udorn RTAFB. So we had no official message traffic to monitor exactly what was going on in Laos when I returned to Bangkok in 1973 for my second tour. Just bits and pieces published on Laos by the Bangkok Post. While I was in Vietnam, 71-73, naturally the Vietnam War was what I was supporting, no message traffic dealing with Laos at all and the only newspaper was the Stars and Strips, no news there either. I lost contact with what was going on in Laos while I served in RVN. I reported to the JUSMAGTHAI TCC in April of 1973, immediately, Cambodia was to the fore front, Vietnam second, again from that time until the fall of Phnom Penh and Saigon, not a thing as far as message traffic on Laos. MACTHAI JLD (Military Assistance Command Thailand) was training Cambodian pilots up at Udorn and there was an Cambodian Army training site south of UBON, in part justifying our focus on Cambodia. MACTHAI was a separate command from JUSMAGTHAI, but the Chief of JUSMAGTHAI was Commander to both. MACTHAI/JUSMAGTHAI became one command after the fall of Phnom Penh and the MACTHAI portion was deactivated early 1976. In January of 1975, the fall of Thakhek hit the Post; this was the first time I realized that a coalition government was now in charge in Vientiane, this was the first news about Laos I remember since leaving Vientiane. I had little or no news concerning Laos thru August of 1975, when the Post again reported that the Pathet Lao had taken over Vientiane. Oh how I missed those IR's, SITREP's, OPSUM's that we used to receive on my first tour. Our focus from April thru September was refugee's coming into Thailand from Cambodia, along with normal routine traffic. We had a few refugee's from Laos, but not many during this time frame. Then in September the Pathet Lao declared officially the Lao Peoples Democratic Republic, the last domino had fallen. Now Laotian refugees started pouring into Thailand and this brought back reflections and questions. My first concern was what happened to all the Lao friends I had made while serving in Vientiane? Were they refugees, were they killed, and were they herded off to re education camps? This was another country I served in, worked in, made friends there that had finally fallen to the commies. For awhile the impact did not hit me, there was no big operation or evacuation of personnel as in Phnom Penh and Saigon, Laos went with a whimper. I wondered about Vang Pao, Souvanna Phouma, General Kouprasith and others, but most of all I wondered about friends like Nicky, Jack, Tom, Rosy whom owned the bars I visited, the monks at Wat Sisawat next to my house in Vientiane, the owner of the noodle shop across the street, the Lao guards who guarded my house and USAID Compound that I shared Lao Lao with and partied with at times. Many, many

others also, it hurt, but the way it went, the way it fell was Lao style. I read or heard that a group of female Pathet Lao soldiers walked into Vientiane and declared victory and the war was over. I would not doubt that was the way it ended. I was not mad this time; I was not frustrated, I was just sad. All the promises made by the U.S. to our friends and allies in Southeast Asia had been broken and reneged on. My second tour in Bangkok was coming to an end, I would depart for Ft. Leonard Wood in July of 1976 to become a Drill Sergeant, I would leave sadden and dispirited, in a foul mood. The U.S. Military would depart Thailand as well, except for about 40 military slots that JUSMAGTHAI would have left. Two evacuations, one rescue and the fall of the last domino, it was over, U.S Military involvement in Southeast Asia was at an end. But at what price?