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In Southeast Asia

Search and Rescue

The United States Air Force

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Foreword

Search and rescue has always been important to the United States Air Force, whose aircrews deserve nothing less than the fullest possible commitment to save them and return them home. The motto of Air Force search and rescue, "So Others May Live," is one of the most compelling of all military mottoes. It embodies this spirit of altruism and, as events have proven, also indicates the service's intention to furnish life-saving SAR for civilian as well as military purposes.

Search and rescue flourished during World War II as lifeguard ships and submarines joined patrolling aircraft in saving lives and sustaining morale, especially in the Pacific Ocean Areas. The rotary-wing, turbojet, and avionics revolutions made modern SAR a reality. Foreshadowed by the Korean War, the helicopter became the principal form of air rescue vehicle in Vietnam. In three major conflicts, SAR forces gained a reputation for bravery, dedication, and self-sacrifice, as they ventured repeatedly into hostile territory to pluck fallen aircrews to safety.

The USAF rightly continues to place a top priority on search and rescue, seeking better ways to perform this function through the use of advanced equipment and aircraft (such as the multipurpose MH-53J Pave Low helicopter) and improved training of personnel.

This reprint of a classic work offers the reader an exciting and exacting history of the evolution of combat search and rescue in America's longest and most grueling war: the conflict in Southeast Asia.

Richard P. Hallion
Air Force Historian

huge oak doors. One Marine shut off the elevators and then tossed tear gas grenades into the shaft. He then joined the others in a race up the stairs. At the fourth floor they turned to throw tear gas grenades down behind them. As they rushed the last steps to the rooftop helicopter pad, panic-gripped Vietnamese smashed through the doors below and surged through the gas into the embassy and up the stairwell. At the top of the stairs the Marines threw more gas and smoke grenades down the well, then they ran out onto the pad barring the small door behind them. They climbed aboard Swift 22, a waiting Marine CH-53. The turbines whined, the rotor blades moved around, picking up speed with each revolution. The ramp came up and the chopper lifted.⁷³

The log of the joint rescue coordination center summed it up:

APR

29/2325 SWIFT-22 AIRBORNE WITH 11 GSF [ground support forces], ALL EVAC [evacuees] EXTRACTED.
29/2357 KING-23 [airborne command aircraft] CLEARED TO RTB [return to base], ETA [estimated time of arrival] 0090.
29/2359 LOG CLOSED. FREQUENT WIND COMPLETED.⁷⁴

At dawn the rescue crews aboard the *Midway* repaired their damaged helicopters. Throughout the day they watched as forty-eight South Vietnamese Huey helicopters, three CH-47s and even a small, single-engine O-1 observation plane brought out more Vietnamese refugees. When a Vietnamese Air Force major in the O-1 contacted the carrier's air traffic controller to request landing instructions, the controller told him to ditch. The major agreed but added, "Please have a helo alongside, my wife and five children are with me." The ship's captain, who was in the control room, heard the plea. He told the major to land on deck. The Vietnamese, who had never landed on an aircraft carrier, brought the O-1 down successfully without the use of arresting cables or hooks.⁷⁵

Bad weather delayed the rescue crews departure from the *Midway* until May 2. When they arrived back at Nakhon Phanom the crews went through the usual round of debriefing followed by a party.⁷⁶

America's involvement in Vietnam spanned a generation. Throughout those years, the United States slipped into the conflicts in Southeast Asia. Most Americans thought that withdrawal from Southeast Asia, which began in 1969, ended in the frantic rush to the rooftop of the American Embassy in Saigon. However, the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service faced yet another challenge.

During the first week in May 1975 two merchant vessels bound for Thailand were accosted by Cambodian gunboats. A Korean ship was fired on but escaped. On May 7, the Cambodians seized a Panamanian registered vessel, held it for thirty-five hours, then released it.⁷⁷

On May 12, 1975, the American-registered cargo ship *Mayaguez* was

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taken by Cambodian naval forces. Three hours after the seizure, at 6:15 A.M. in Washington, the watch officer at the State Department's Intelligence and Research Bureau awakened Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger with news of America's newest crisis in Southeast Asia. Dr. Kissinger briefed President Gerald R. Ford an hour and a half later. The President called a meeting of the National Security Council for noon.⁷⁸

Meanwhile, the master of the *Mayaguez*, Capt. Charles T. Miller, stalled his captors to frustrate their efforts to move the ship to Sihanoukville harbor on the mainland. The ship was riding at anchor near Poulo Wai island when a U.S. Navy P-3 four engine reconnaissance plane spotted it shortly after dawn.⁷⁹

On the morning of May 13, PACAF headquarters ordered the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service units in Thailand to prepare a rescue force for the thirty-nine crewmen being held by the Cambodians. Meanwhile, following orders from the President, CINCPAC instructed fighter-bombers and gunships to prevent the ship or its crew from being taken to the mainland. The pilots were told to fire warning shots across the bow of the *Mayaguez* if it moved toward the mainland under its own power. If shots across the bow failed to halt the ship, the pilots were to strafe its aft portion in an effort to disable it. Should the Cambodians try to tow the vessel to the mainland, the towboat was to be first warned, then sunk.⁸⁰

It was late on the afternoon of May 13 when crews in Thailand received these orders. That night AC-130 gunships orbited over the *Mayaguez*. One Khmer gunboat fired at the gunship. The Spectre opened up on the boat forcing it aground.⁸¹

Rescue forces swung into action that evening when the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered eight HH-53s from the 3d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group and eight CH-53s (Knives) from the 21st Special Operations Squadron to Utapao on the Gulf of Thailand. They were told to carry seventy-five security policemen from Nakhon Phanom to Utapao as a possible recovery force.⁸² Tragedy struck when one of the CH-53s crashed in a wooded area thirty-seven miles west of Nakhon Phanom killing all aboard: eighteen security policemen and five helicopter crewmen. An HH-53 a couple of miles back in the formation saw the fire. By the time the chopper landed, the heat was so intense that no one could get closer than seventy-five feet.⁸³

On the morning of May 14, at 8:17, two HH-53s took off for a search and rescue mission to assist any survivors of a Cambodian gunboat sunk by strafing A-7s. The chopper crews spotted no one and returned to Utapao. Helicopter crews and air policemen spent the rest of the day waiting for instructions.⁸⁴

Meanwhile, action in the Gulf of Thailand picked up. A few minutes after sinking the gunboat, the same flight of A-7s spotted a wooden fishing boat full of people headed for the mainland. They suspected that the boat

contained the crew of the *Mayaguez*. In an effort to turn the boat back to Poulo Wai island, the A-7s fired across the bow and dropped tear gas all around.⁸⁵

On board the fishing boat, the thirty-nine members of the *Mayaguez* crew plus some captured Thai fishermen, along with their Khmer Rouge guards, gasped and vomited as the gas took effect. The crewmen wanted to overpower the guards, but the riot control agent incapacitated them as well as the communists. The Thai boat captain tried to turn back, but at each attempt a Cambodian guard put his AK-47 to the Thai's head. As the boat continued to the mainland the A-7s returned to Thailand. The *Mayaguez* crew, first taken to Sihanoukville, was later transferred to Kaoh Rong Samloem, a nearby island.⁸⁶

Other A-7s, F-4s, and AC-130s resumed the watch over the *Mayaguez*. At mid-morning A-7s destroyed a forty-foot patrol boat towing a barge east of Koh Tang. That night an AC-130 sank another patrol boat as it approached the *Mayaguez*.⁸⁷

As the sun set on May 14, no one knew for sure where the crew of the captured vessel was located. Military preparations continued in Thailand, while in Washington the Ford administration made diplomatic approaches to obtain the release of the crew. When it appeared diplomatic efforts had failed, the President ordered the Joint Chiefs of Staff to take back the ship and recover the crew.⁸⁸

Intelligence estimates indicated that a handful of Khmer Rouge guards and Cambodian civilians were holding the ship's crew on Koh Tang. Accordingly, a plan emerged whereby sixty marines would be landed on the USS *Holt*, a Navy destroyer. These men would then board the *Mayaguez*, thus fulfilling the first part of the President's order by taking back the ship. Meanwhile, Air Force helicopters would shuttle up to six hundred marines from Utapao to Koh Tang to recover the crew. The plan called for a U.S. Army interpreter, in the first helicopter load, to tell the Khmer Rouge that the U.S. Marines had landed and that the only way to avoid certain destruction lay in immediately handing over the crew of the *Mayaguez*. It was not going to work out like that.⁸⁹

The attack on Koh Tang began early on the morning of May 15. Eight helicopters, five CH-53s and three HH-53s, approached their designated landing zones on the north end of the island in two waves. Their objective was to land marines on the western and eastern sides of the north peninsula. The first chopper to the island, Knife 21, met no resistance until most of the marines had rushed down the ramp and fanned out across the beach. Then the Khmers opened fire knocking out one engine of the chopper as it lifted off the beach. Knife 21 skipped over the waves until it was a mile out to sea, there it settled into the water.⁹⁰

Two Jolly Greens, having just unloaded marines on the USS *Holt*, moved in to pick up the crew of Knife 21. They recovered the pilot, copilot,

and one of the flight mechanics. SSgt. Elwood E. Rumbaugh, after saving the life of his copilot by diving under water to pull him from the wreckage, disappeared beneath the surf. He was never seen again and later declared dead.⁹¹

Back on the island, Knife 22 tried to land its load of marines, but enemy fire damaged it too severely. The chopper limped toward the Thai coast escorted by a pair of Jolly Greens. There Knife 22 ran out of fuel and made a forced landing.⁹²

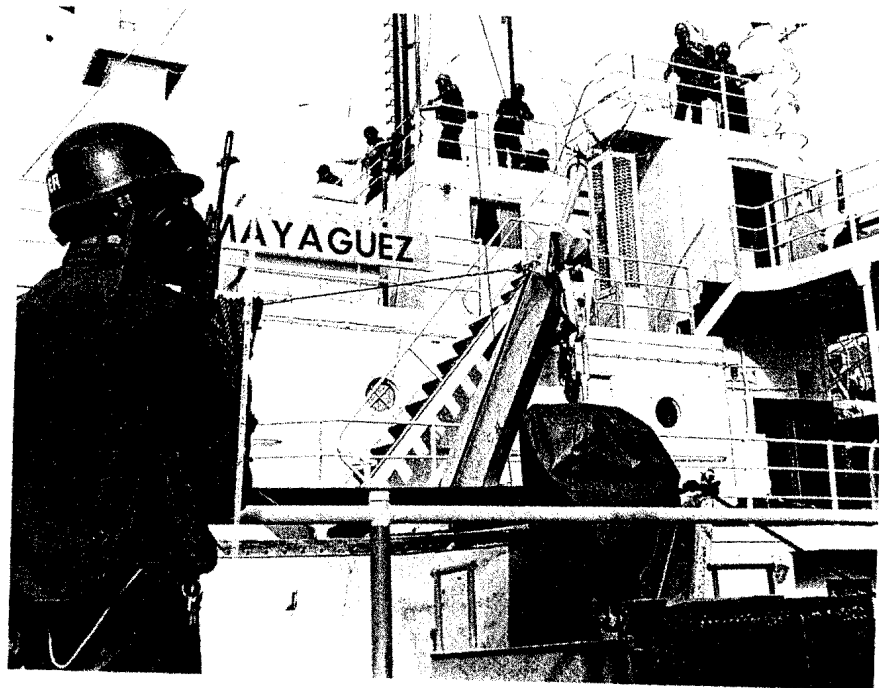
Meanwhile, in action at the island, Knife 23 and Knife 31 headed for the eastern landing zone. As they approached the beach, the enemy blasted them with small arms, heavy machine guns, rockets, and mortars. One chopper antirotated making a controlled crash landing in the surf and snapping its tail boom as it hit. Its crew and twenty marines ran ashore to fight for their lives on the beach. The other chopper burst into flame as it fell into shallow water just off shore. Eight people died in the wreckage. Five more died in the surf as the Khmer Rouge fired at the survivors trying to swim out to sea. Those who made it were picked up by a launch from a U.S. Navy destroyer.⁹³

During this initial assault, a simultaneous effort to recapture the *Mayaguez* was underway. The USS *Holt*, with the marines delivered by Jolly Greens earlier, pulled alongside the *Mayaguez* and the boarding party climbed aboard to find the ship abandoned. The *Holt* then began towing it away from Poulo Wai island.⁹⁴

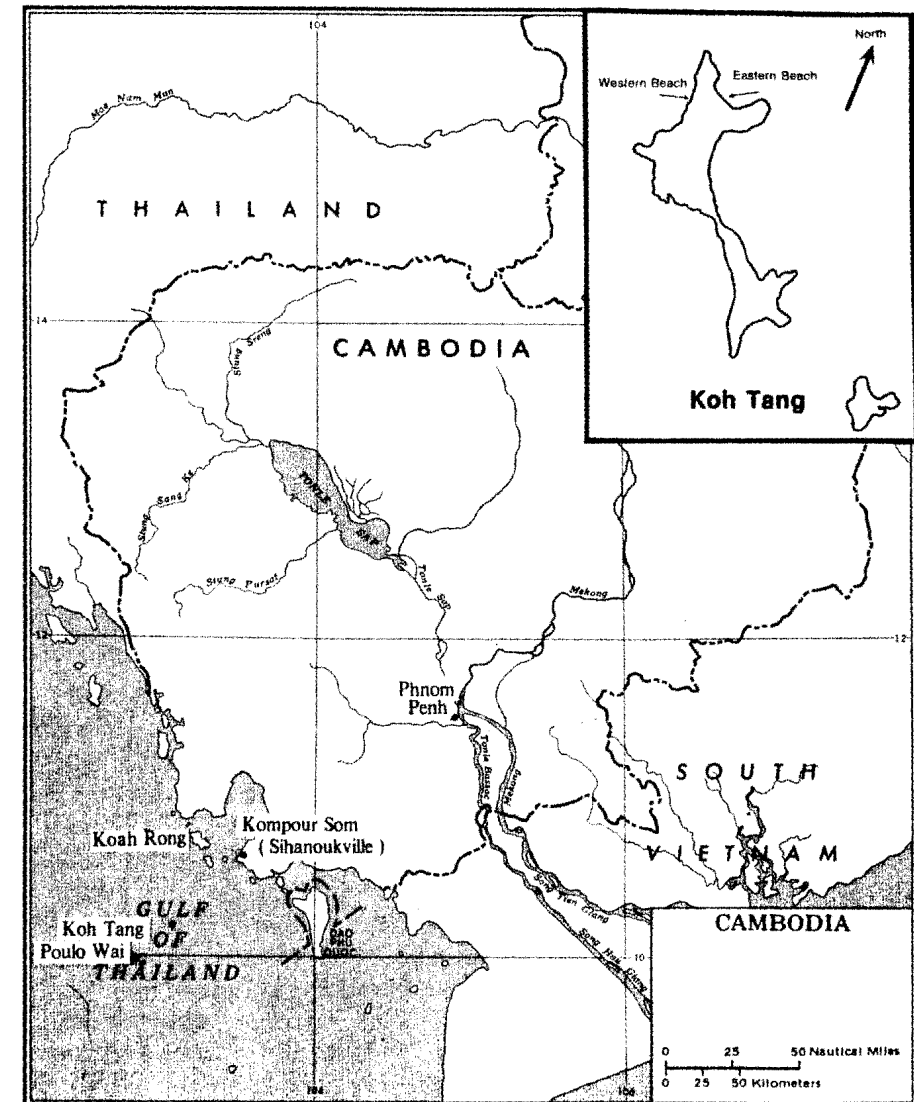
As these events unfolded, the crew of the *Mayaguez* was making its way seaward from where they had been held. As the Thai fishing boat approached the destroyer USS *Robert L. Wilson*, the *Mayaguez* crewmen stripped off their underwear to make white flags. On board the *Wilson* battle stations had sounded before anyone saw the skivvies flying from the mast of the fishing boat. Within an hour the crew of the *Mayaguez* was safely aboard.⁹⁵

An hour after the assault began, there were fifty-four marines and Air Force crewmen pinned down on the two beaches at Koh Tang. Three helicopters had been shot down and two others severely damaged. So far fourteen Americans were dead or missing.

With the crew of the *Mayaguez* safe, the operation became one of disengaging the fifty-four members of the rescue force stranded on Koh Tang. To do that additional forces had to be landed. Accordingly, three more Jolly Greens prepared to deliver their marines. Two made it on their second try, but the marines were put down in separate locations, one south of the landing zone and the other on a small patch of sand 1000 yards from the other group. The third Jolly Green was repeatedly driven off by enemy fire. By 8:30 A.M. there were 109 marines and airmen on Koh Tang.⁹⁶ With the *Mayaguez* crewmen safe, A-7s, F-4s, and AC-130s could blast enemy positions on the island more freely.



U.S. Marines from USS *Harold E. Holt* board the *Mayaguez* following its recovery from the Cambodians.



Landing Zones on Koh Tang

For the next hour and a half under heavy enemy fire, choppers landed reinforcements. Jolly Green 41 moved toward Koh Tang at ten o'clock. Lts. Thomas D. Cooper and David W. Keith, pilot and copilot of Jolly Green 41, made four attempts to land their troops but were driven away each time. Finally they called in an AC-130 gunship to hit enemy positions with 20-mm and 40-mm fire. Then Jolly 41 shot up the jungle near the beach. Jolly 41 flew in to drop off the five remaining marines. A mortar round exploded nearby before Cooper could pull clear of the landing zone, seriously damaging the chopper. Jolly Green 41 retreated toward Utapao.⁹⁷

But enemy forces were still too strong to allow the marines to disengage and be safely removed. Cricket, the airborne command post, marshalled its still airworthy choppers (all five of them) for this final reinforcement effort. Two CH-53s, Knife 51, Knife 52, and one HH-53 (Jolly Green 43) were in the first wave. Jolly Green 11 and Jolly Green 12 formed the second wave. Knife 51 landed nineteen marines and carried out five wounded. Jolly Green 43 put in another twenty-eight marines. As Knife 52 approached the landing zone enemy fire ripped into its fuel tank. The aircraft commander, 1st Lt. Richard C. Brims, aborted the landing and returned the marines to Utapao. Jolly Green 43, having landed its load of troops, refueled and then orbited just in case an aircrew recovery situation developed. The second wave, Jolly Greens 11 and 12, unloaded their marines to bring the total to 222 Americans on Koh Tang.⁹⁸

In early afternoon, with enemy resistance still heavy on Koh Tang and the leathernecks pinned down in their landing zones or on the beaches, the controllers aboard Cricket turned their attention to withdrawal. Jolly Green 43, flown by Capt. Roland W. Purser and Jolly Green 11 commanded by Capt. Donald R. Backlund, refueled at 2:30 in the afternoon and then orbited near Koh Tang while A-7s, F-4s, and OV-10s strafed, bombed, and dropped tear gas canisters on enemy positions. After this pounding, Jolly Green 43 moved toward the eastern beach where an isolated group of marines was fighting a persistent Khmer force. As the chopper approached the shore, heavy ground fire disabled one engine. Captain Purser continued on, landed and took on a very full load of fifty-four marines. Jolly Green 43 skipped over the waves to make an emergency landing on the aircraft carrier *Coral Sea*. Captain Backlund escorted the damaged chopper to the ship and then pointed Jolly Green 11 toward Koh Tang.

Three choppers remained operational, Jolly Greens 11 and 12, and Knife 51. Another helicopter, Jolly Green 44, previously out of commission at Nakhon Phanom, was being repaired in a hurry. By 4:00 P.M. it was rushing to Utapao.⁹⁹

Meanwhile, Cricket and the forward air controllers directed tactical strikes against Khmer Rouge positions. On the *Coral Sea*, Captain Purser and his men worked with rubber tubes and borrowed clamps to repair Jolly Green 43's disabled engine and ruptured fuel lines. At 5:30 Purser's chopper

rejoined Backlund off Koh Tang. Together they greeted Jolly Green 44, freshly arrived from the mainland.¹⁰⁰

Before the evacuation effort resumed, an Air Force C-130 cargo plane lumbered over Koh Tang to drop a 15,000-pound bomb on the center of the island. The bomb devastated an area the size of a football field. Anyone inside a fifty-yard radius of the explosion died from the concussion.¹⁰¹

After the smoke from the explosion cleared, a forward air controller directed Backlund to make a final run to get the marines off the eastern beach. Backlund knew that those isolated men would probably not survive the night. Jolly Green 11 came under heavy enemy fire as soon as it neared the beach. Captain Backlund, who had been flying since before dawn, backed his chopper to the water's edge and tried to hover a foot above the surf. "I was pretty tired and scared and it was very noisy," said Backlund, "the ramp was moving up and down two, three, to four feet up off the rocks and then it would come crashing down."¹⁰²

Under intense fire, the marines began boarding the chopper, two-by-two. A pair would rise from their position near the trees, fire a few rounds into the jungle, dash to the chopper's ramp, turn and empty their M-16s at the enemy infested underbrush, then toss their rifles into the helicopter and scramble toward the front. One of the first pair of leathernecks aboard, in a hurry to get to the forward part of the cabin, ripped out the intercom system. From that point Captain Backlund, working the controls, had no way of communicating with his pararescuemen and flight mechanics supervising the loading in the rear. SSgt. Harry W. Cash, the flight mechanic manning the rear ramp minigun, was blasting the jungle to provide covering fire for the retreating marines. He yelled into his intercom when the last two leathernecks leaped aboard. In the cockpit Backlund heard nothing. He held the precarious hover. Cash and the other crewmen in the rear yelled into their dead headsets for Backlund to pull up and away. Up front Captain Backlund wondered what was taking so long as he listened to enemy bullets pelting his chopper. Sergeant Cash saw black clad figures emerging from the jungle and swung his minigun to chop them down. One of the figures drew back to toss a grenade. As his arm started forward Cash's stream of fire sliced him in two. The grenade rolled toward the helicopter and exploded. With that Backlund decided that loaded or not it was time to go. Jolly Green 11 moved forward a few yards and then climbed.¹⁰³

At dark there were three helicopters still operating and 202 marines to be evacuated. Knife 51 flew through a hail of small arms fire to pick up 41 of them. Jolly Green 43 followed to carry out 54 more. Then Jolly 44 moved to the beach to load up 34 leathernecks. The remaining 73 men had withdrawn to hold positions only a short sprint from the landing zone. OV-10s and A-7s strafed the nearby jungle, but the Khmer Rouge pressed their attack. At 7:25 P.M. the Marine commander on the island reported that he thought his men would be overrun within fifteen minutes. As an

AC-130 blasted the dark tree-line beyond the leathernecks, Jolly Green 44 returned from the *Coral Sea*. The marines set up a strobe light to guide the chopper to them. Jolly 44 followed the light to the beach, picked up 40 marines, and headed for the *Coral Sea*.¹⁰⁴

Knife 51 spotted the strobe light. Above the light an OV-10 orbited, occasionally turning on its landing lights to draw enemy fire away from the approaching chopper. Knife 51 settled into the landing zone, picked up the remaining marines, then took off.¹⁰⁵

During the action on Koh Tang, approximately 230 men were landed on the island and then withdrawn. Total U.S. casualties were fifteen killed, three missing and forty-nine wounded. Of the fifteen helicopters that participated, four were destroyed and nine were damaged.¹⁰⁶

America's involvement in the fighting in Southeast Asia was over, and the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service had remained in action even as the last shots were fired. After the *Mayaguez* incident, events moved rapidly to the final withdrawal of all rescue forces from Thailand in January 1976. There were no combat saves after the 3d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group was credited with thirty during the action on Koh Tang. From late in the spring of 1975, the missions flown by rescue units in Thailand were no different from those flown by rescue units throughout the world. These included medical evacuation missions, searches for missing boats, and an aircrew recovery sortie for the two-man crew of a Royal Thai Air Force T-28 which made a forced landing near Ubon.¹⁰⁷

Rescue forces were among the very last to leave Thailand. As bases closed, rescue units were moved to maintain a continuing search and rescue capability. On October 1, 1975, the last American units left Nakhon Phanom, and the 3d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group moved to Utopao. The Joint Rescue Coordination Center transferred with them to continue coordinating rescue forces as they were reduced in numbers by returning helicopters to the United States.¹⁰⁸

When the 3d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group left Nakhon Phanom, the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadrons moved to Korat. There they were co-located with the remaining HC-130Ps and the A-7Ds of the 3d Tactical Fighter Squadron. On October 15 the 56th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron was inactivated, and its four HC-130Ps became part of the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron. The HH-53 and the HC-130P crews coordinated with the A-7 pilots of the 3d Tactical Fighter Squadron to maintain a reduced alert posture. Also, one HH-53 remained at Udorn on a temporary basis to provide a search and rescue capability in northern Thailand.¹¹⁰

Meanwhile, packing and crating of equipment continued. On December 15, 1975, the Joint Rescue Coordination Center closed.¹¹¹ Six weeks later, on January 31, 1976, Lt. Col. Cleveland F. Forrester, last commander of the 3d Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group, cased the unit

flag. The same day, the 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron was inactivated at Korat.¹¹² Thus ended an era of unparalleled valor in which the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service gallantly upheld its motto, "That Others May Live."

During its involvement in the wars of Southeast Asia, the U.S. Air Force lost 2,254 aircraft in combat and in normal operations. Aircrew members killed, captured, or missing totaled 1,763. Throughout the war the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service became the greatest combat aircrew recovery force in the history of aerial warfare, saving 3,883 lives.¹¹³ For those flyers who went down, whether in combat or by accident, the best hope of survival was in a quick recovery by air-sea rescue forces.

The air war in Southeast Asia shifted often, varying its intensity, location, and focus as Americans fought enemy forces that ranged along the warfare spectrum from insurgency to protracted and, finally, conventional action. Rescue forces remained flexible to counter each threat and meet every challenge. Wisely, the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service never followed hard and fast rules or established rigid regulations defining how much effort was enough. The rescue crews gave each mission all they had. Nevertheless, when enemy antiaircraft fire was too intense, there was only so much the helicopters (even the giant HH-53s with their armor plate and impressive firepower) could take. As discussed earlier, during the Linebacker II operations of December 1972, not one aircrew member was picked up from North Vietnam's heartland because the targets were in densely populated, highly-defended areas.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, during the operations on Koh Tang in connection with the *Mayaguez* incident, the entrenched Khmer Rouge force, armed with automatic weapons, a few heavy machine guns, rocket launchers, and perhaps one mortar, destroyed four helicopters and damaged nine others, at least five seriously.¹¹⁵ The inherent limitations of the helicopter, slow speed and large size, made it highly vulnerable in a high threat environment.

Almost every modern military organization has, at one time or another, been accused of attempting to fight its present war as it fought its last war. If true, it would seem that we should ignore the lessons of history to concentrate on discovering inventive alternatives to previous tactics and policies. But one should study history to learn from, rather than to repeat, the past.

Those involved in rescue can learn some valuable lessons from the Southeast Asia experience. The most important lesson can be summed up in the concept of readiness. Peacetime rescue forces must be ready to perform combat search and rescue in a variety of situations. Perhaps too much has been made of the lack of preparedness in the Air Rescue Service prior to the Vietnam war. Rescue was no less ready for the very different and difficult kinds of warfare in Indochina than any other organization in the Air Force, or the entire U.S. military. Nevertheless, it would appear that the old Air