

last battle of Vietnam, The

Hunter, Ric

May 12, 2000 will mark 25 years since Khmer Rouge Communists highjacked the U.S. flagged container ship SS Mayaguez off the coasts of South Vietnam and Cambodia. After the fall of Saigon two weeks earlier, the Khmer hierarchy felt the U.S. was weakened and that one of its ships would be an easy target. President Gerald Ford quickly responded by sending in U.S. forces--predominantly airpower. The crew of the Mayaguez was returned to the U.S. side three days later, but at a heavy cost. May 12, 2000 will mark 25 years since Rouge Communists hijacked the U.S.-flagged container ship SS Mayaguez off the coasts of South Vietnam and Cambodia. After the fall of Saigon two weeks earlier, the Khmer hierarchy felt the U.S. was weakened and that one of its ships would be an easy target. President Gerald Ford quickly responded by sending in U.S. forces-predominantly airpower. The crew of the Mayaguez was returned to the U.S. side three days later, but at a heavy cost.

The scene was surreal. The sun dipped in the west and now cast a peaceful, red-orange glow behind tracers that had crisscrossed the sky and the corridors of fire that had swept the darkening jungle. A din of whirling rotor blades, automatic-weapons fire and exploding mortar and cannon rounds drowned out even the loudest commands. The air reeked of spent gunpowder, jet exhaust and salt spray.

As Air Force para-rescuemen pulled wounded Marines aboard their CH-53, the crew spewed M-16 rifle fire at Khmer forces. From defensive positions on the beach around the big chopper, the remaining Marines returned fire through a pall of smoke. A "Nail" forward air controller (FAC) buzzed overhead in an OV-10A Bronco, rolled in on enemy gun positions and unleashed white-hot, "willy pete" 2.75-inch rockets. Higher, a circling AC-130A Spectre gunship pounded enemy positions with a continuous barrage of 20- and 40mm cannon fire.

First Lt. Richard C. Brims' CH-53-designated Knife 51 ripped a minigun fury along the tree-lined beach of the western landing zone (LZ). Brims was not helping to cover a retreat; this was an "extraction" from Koh Tang, a desolate atoll off the southern coasts of Vietnam and Cambodia.

At the same time as 27 Marines fought their way aboard Knife 51, Air Force Technical Sgt. Wayne Fisk ignored intense

hostile fire and ran, half-crouching, across the beach to the tree line. His mission was to make sure that no one was left behind. He spotted two young Marines laying down suppressive fire unaware the helo was about to depart. The three sprinted for the CH-53 and clambered up the ramp as it lifted off. Eventually, 29 Marines were extracted from the last firefight of the last battle of the bitter Vietnam War. Behind Knife 51, a Khmer encampment burned like an unearthly bonfire; it had been leveled and set ablaze by 152 willy pete rockets from "Bucktail," a flight of four F-4D Phantoms. Flames from the burning hooches served as a navigation beacon for the three remaining helos. There had been 11 when the savage day began.

Soon, a deathly silence fell over Koh Tang. Fourteen hours of intense, high-tempo combat were over. The western LZ was dark except for the eerie wink of a strobe light abandoned on the beach. All that had been the crucible of the Vietnam War was over-if not forgotten.

This is the story of Koh Tang as told from a fighter pilot's personal experience, as well as from declassified documents and photographs. Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese on April 29, 1975, and for the next two weeks, U.S. morale was in the trash can. I was among the Air Force F-41D Phantom pilots based at Korat Royal Thai Air Force Base, Thailand. As U.S. participation waned in Southeast Asia, it was clear America was on the run. It had evacuated Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and then Saigon, South Vietnam. We wondered whether Thailand's capital, Bangkok, would be next. The situation looked exceedingly bleak.

At 2:20 p.m. local time on Monday, May 12, 1975, a Khmer Rouge Communist gunboat changed the course of U.S. influence in Southeast Asia for decades to come. When one of its machine gunners triggered those first few rounds across the bow of the container ship, SS Mayaguez, he unleashed a maelstrom. The Khmer radicals seemed to have forgotten their own Asian proverb, "One should not anger a sleeping tiger."

On a small, remote base like Korat, rumors travel at warp speed. On the evening of May 12, at the squadron dinner table, we heard that an American ship might have been hijacked in the Gulf of Thailand, 300 miles to the south. Already on edge, we reacted bitterly. Were we about to taste yet another defeat in Southeast Asia? Would this be another Pueblo incident? That specter both energized us and made us as mad as hell.

It was long after duty hours, but nearly an entire squadron of pilots and weapons-system operators trickled into the operations building. We learned the Khmer Rouge had indeed hijacked an American ship in international waters eight nautical miles from Poulo Wai--an atoll claimed by the Khmer Communists and the provisional revolutionary government of South Vietnam. Through diplomatic channels, President Ford demanded its return. If a game was to be played, we

wanted in; my group was the nearest airborne firepower.

TUESDAY, MAY 13

FIRST MISSION

Two F-111As from Korat diverted from an unarmed training mission and were the first to sight the Mayaguez. At 2 p.m., they reported the ship off Koh Tang Island. Four armed, A-71) "Sandys" from the 3rd Tactical Fighter Squadron at Korat launched at 2:48 p.m. to replace the F-111s and surveil the Mayaguez. While the Sandys were overhead, the ship attempted to move, but the A-7s fired rockets and 20mm Vulcan Gatlinggun rounds across its bow and stopped it. At 5: 17 p.m., the Joint Chiefs of Staff ordered 24-hour surveillance.

AC-130A/H Spectre gunships from the 16th Special Operations Squadron at Korat, equipped with infrared and lowlight-level television, orbited the island and the Mayaguez all night. At 3:30 a.m., Spectre 41 encountered heavy .50-caliber and 40mm fire from a Khmer patrol boat near Koh Tang. It returned fire with 53 rounds of 40mm, and the boat ran aground.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 14 7%

THE BATTUS IS JOINED

At dawn, the action picked up. Four Khmer gunboats left Koh Tang for the Cambodian mainland. Spectre 51, now on the scene, was directed to fire across their bows and prevent them from reaching the coast. The gunship's 40- and 105mm howitzers turned three gunboats back. Flights of F-IIIAs, F-4Ds and A-7Ds attacked in front of the remaining gunboat with 2,000pound bombs, 2.75 rockets and riot-control agent (gas). It refused to turn, apparently to test U.S. resolve.

"Denis"-a flight of four A-7Ds led by Lt. Col. Donald L. Rebtoy-was directed to use 20mm strafing to disable the gunboat's engines. Accurate strafing set the stern ablaze but didn't kill the engines. Denis was then directed to sink the boat with 20mm cannon fire and 2.75 rockets.

A few minutes later, at about 7:15 a.m., a different kind of boat was observed leaving the island for the mainland. Denis identified it as a 40-foot Thai wooden fishing boat with what could have been our guys onboard. During the four hours it took this boat to reach Kompong Som in Cambodia, A-71)s and flights of F-4Ds led by Col. Roger L. Sprague, Lt. Col. Phillip W. Offill and Maj. Joe D. Parker precisely employed rockets, strafing and riot-control agent in front of the vessel in an attempt to make it turn back to Koh Tang. The Thai fishing boat did not turn.

Several of us tried, but weren't able, to fire rockets in front of the boat because our F-4s had not been properly armed prior to takeoff. The only armament on board was an SUU-23 centerline pod, which carried a Vulcan Gatling gun. When I selected the gun station, the centerline armament circuit breakers popped, and that left me without weaponry. I remember thinking, "I've got a screwed-up jet, just like this screwed-up war." Our only option was to drop low over the water and take a good look. I rolled the F-4 up on its left wing in front of the boat and then could see people lining each side of its curved, upward-sloping bow. They appeared to be Americans, doubled-up in the schoolroom air-raid position with their hands protecting their heads. A few of them looked up as I passed overhead; I felt profoundly helpless. I'll always regret not photographing the boat and crew with the 35mm camera in my cockpit map case. If the entire crew had been accounted for, the assault on Koh Tang the next day might have been avoided. I was angry and too engrossed in flying a toothless Phantom to think of taking photographs.

Two days after the operation had ended, Capt. Charles T. Miller of the SS Mayaguez told the Honolulu Star Bulletin: "You have to give our pilots a lot of credit. They can hit the eye of a needle. They did everything possible to get [the fishing boat] to turn around. If we were strafed once, we were strafed and bombed a hundred times. It was clear that they saw we were in the boat. Two jets flew 70 feet above us; the Thais turned back once, but Cambodian guards put guns to their heads

THURSDAY, MAY 15

DEATH ON THE BEACH

The Sikorsky CH-53 Knife and HH-53 Super Jolly Green Giant are not ordinary aircraft. They are much larger than the UH-1 Huey helicopter, have armor-plating and are equipped with 7.62mm rapid firing miniguns. Both the HH-53 and CH-53 are rescue helicopters and have miniguns in the waist positions, but the HH-53 can be refueled in the air (it has 450-gallon foamfilled tip tanks-self-sealing in case of damage), and it has an additional minigun in the tail. Both 53s are much more likely to survive than are most choppers, but on this day, they were forced beyond their limits. Several of them did not make it back.

At dawn, 11 helicopters approached Koh Tang from the northwest. Three separated from the group and unloaded a reinforced Marine platoon onto the USS Harold E. Holt, a Navy destroyer escort near the island. Their mission was to board and secure the Mayaguez. The other eight helicopters-with 170 Marines aboard-continued in pairs to Koh Tang. As the sun boiled up in the east, surprise was their greatest asset. Koh Tang is an irregularly shaped island; its northern end

resembles a slingshot. Between the forks lies a U-shaped beach that was the eastern or primary LZ. Across the neck of land was the western LZ. Preparation of these areas with tactical air strikes was ruled out because Mayaguez crewmen might still be on the island.

The helos split up for a two-pronged assault as they approached the island's northern end. Knives 21 and 22 reached the western LZ first and didn't face resistance. As Lt. Col. John Denham of Cheyenne, Wyoming-pilot of Knife 21 touched down on the beach, his Marines streamed out and down the back ramp just as Khmer forces let loose with automatic weapons, rockets and mortars. While the chopper held to allow Marines to scramble down the ramp, one of Denham's two engines was severely damaged by enemy fire. The crew jettisoned everything they could while the "wingman," Knife 22, laid down suppressive fire with its miniguns. Denham's CH-53 skipped across the waves, taking on water as the pilot fought to stay airborne. After struggling for nearly a mile, Knife 21 ditched.

At the eastern LZ, the choppers made it in without resistance; a trap had been set. As the two helos hovered to offload Marines, a murderous crossfire erupted. Knife 23, piloted by Ist Lt. John Shramm, took punishing hits to its rotor system. As he looked to his left, Shramm saw his wingman, Knife 31, piloted by Maj. Howard Corson, get hit, burst into flames and fall to the beach. Shramm wrestled his own wounded CH-53 onto the beach just as the tail section was tom off. Miraculously, no one was killed in the crash landing; the 20 Marines aboard scrambled to the tree line for cover.

Meanwhile, Maj. Corson's downed CH-53 continued to take hit after hit from machine guns and rockets. Sgt. Randy Hoffmaster returned fire with the waist minigun while the copilot, 2nd Lt. Richard Vandegeer, fired an M-16 from his window. A direct grenade round hit the cockpit and blew it apart, killing Lt. Vandegeer.

Four men were shot or drowned near the burning wreckage of Knife 31. A fifth, stunned and wounded, stumbled his way nearly 100 yards to the tail ramp of Knife 23 before he was cut down. His death marked the 13th KIA of Knife 31: one USAF copilot, two Navy corpsmen and 10 Marines. Thirteen survivors were picked up at sea. One survivor was Marine Lt. Terry Tonkin, a forward air controller (FAC). While swimming on his back away from the beach, with enemy bullets spewing geysers all around him, Tonkin used a small USAF survival radio to call in air strikes. At the same time, Ist Lt. John Lucas, copilot of Knife 23, was on his survival radio, calling in air strikes against enemy positions that had his group pinned down in the tree line of the eastern beach.

Situation: three of eight initial assault helos were down-two on the beach of the eastern LZ and one a mile out at sea. Battle damage forced a fourth helicopter down on the mainland, and two more were severely damaged. An hour after the assault began, only 54 Americans were on Koh Tang, and they were split into two groups. The day's battle was under

way.

"Karen"-a flight of three A-7H Corsairs lead by Maj. Phil W. Nuber--circled overhead and observed the CH-53s taking hits. Armed with 20mm. cannon, the Corsairs quickly rolled in and silenced several Khmer gun emplacements. Time and again, the A-7s flew low to attract enemy fire and thereby locate enemy positions. After each A-7 pass, Khmer troops resumed their fusillade against the few Americans who made it to the island.

A chaotic situation was quickly worsening. Friendlies scattered into tree lines along the eastern and western LZs. At times, they were no more than 20 meters from enemy positions. They desperately needed more Marine firepower. The 25 Americans trapped on the eastern beach after the two CH-53 shootdowns were in the worst situation. Khmers used them as bait to lure more helicopters into their crossfire.

Several attempts were made to rescue the trapped Americans; it proved to be a day for heroes. An official report to Gen. Louis L. Wilson, Commander of Pacific Air Forces, gives this account of one heroic helicopter crew:

"Shortly after 8:00 a.m., First Lt. Charles Greer, pilot of Jolly 13, began his approach. Heavy fire was observed early in the run-in, and it continued all the way into the landing zone, which was a short distance northnorthwest of the wreckage of Knife 23. Disregarding the thud of rounds smashing into his aircraft, Lt. Greer touched down on the beach while his crew raked the shoreline with their miniguns. Cambodian positions, however, were numerous. The survivors, although in sight of the rescue helicopter, were pinned down by heavy fire. In what was a matter of seconds, [though it] must have seemed much longer, jolly 13 remained in its exposed position, absorbing punishing hits from heavy automatic weapons. Then two fires broke out--one in the Jolly's flare case and another in its auxiliary fuel tank. It looked as though the wreckage of a third helicopter would litter the eastern beach With all hope of recovering the men at the tree line lost and his aircraft engulfed in flames, Greer pulled back from the landing zone. [He] nursed his chopper away from Koh Tang and limped back toward the mainland with 35 holes, severe rotor blade damage, and fuel, oil and hydraulic leaks."

Meanwhile, on the western beach, after repeated attempts and against heavy enemy resistance, Jollys 42 and 43 successfully inserted their Marines. There were now 109 Marines and five USAF personnel on Koh Tang.

First Lt. Thomas D. Cooper Jr., of Tallahassee, Florida, made two attempts to land on the western beach with his Marines, but he was driven back by intense fire that included .50-caliber machine-gun rounds that hit the right fuel tank and ramp area. During the next hour, Cooper made two more landing attempts, only to be pummeled by heavy fire and mortar attacks. While Cooper completed his third aerial refueling, a Spectre gunship hammered enemy positions near the western

beach with 20/40mm cannon and 105mm Howitzer rounds. The Spectre reduced one fortified emplacement to rubble, and Cooper then made his fifth attempt and landed at the western beach. Marines poured out of the back of Cooper's aircraft while mortar rounds walked toward them. Each round came closer to the HH-53, and the sixth was only 10 feet off the tail rotor. With Marines still aboard, Cooper aborted and lifted off. When he returned to hover for the last Marines to deplane, a mortar round passed through the rotor blades and exploded only 20 feet away, blowing a hole in the helo's belly. The HH-53 withdrew for the last time with its five remaining Marines and returned to the staging base. Severe damage prevented its use for the remainder of the operation.

In the initial assault, eight helicopters were so badly damaged they could no longer be used. At this point, 15 Americans had been killed in action.

Mayaguez crew recovered

While Lt. Cooper made valiant attempts to insert his Marines, a Thai fishing boat with the crew of the Mayaguez on board was on its way to Koh Tang under a white flag. At 10:05 a.m., the entire crew boarded the USS Henry B. Wilson and later transferred to the Mayaguez, which steamed away from Koh Tang under its own power.

The challenge now shifted to getting the Marines disengaged and off the island. Before that could happen, more Marines were needed to stabilize the situation. Air insertion was the only option. just five helos remained to carry nearly 100 Marines in to the assault and later to extract all of the Marines from Koh Tang. Two additional helos were repaired and added to the effort after the battle started.

Knives and Jollys---the only way in for reinforcements

As he tried to insert his Marines one last time on the eastern beach, the pilot of Knife 52, Lt. Robert Rikitis of Springfield, Pennsylvania-low on fuel-was immediately hit, and what little fuel he had began to leak. He aborted and returned to his staging base. Under continuous automatic-weapons and 60mm mortar fire, the four remaining helos successfully delivered Marines to the western beach. Wounded Marines were evacuated on each return trip, and the helo crews administered first aid.

Shortly after noon, reinforcements were complete; more than 200 Americans were on the island, nearly all concentrated on the western side. Enemy resistance was intense, so American ground commanders decided not to push across the island's neck to link up with the 25 men pinned down on the eastern beach. They would have to be extracted by helicopter,

and that would not be possible until Khmer resistance was reduced, if not obliterated. With one HH-53 miraculously repaired and returned to the effort, there were four helos to complete the extraction. Nightfall was only two hours away when two OV-10A "Nail" FACs began their watchful orbits overhead.

I was excited and a little apprehensive when my squadron commander, Lt. Col. Phil Offill, called me in to the command center. He was busy. In very few words, he told me to pick my flight members for a four-ship and report the ordnance needed for the mission. We were to be ready on short notice, as the Americans on Koh Tang were in trouble. We were needed even sooner than we had expected.

After air-refueling over the Gulf of Thailand, "Bucktail," with four F-4Ds flew east to find Koh Tang. As we split from the KC-135 Stratotankers, we checked in with "Cricket," the Airborne Battlefield Command and Control aircraft orbiting the island. "Cricket, Bucktail, four fox-fours with you, 68 miles northwest of the island."

"Bucktail, proceed inbound pronto; I've got work for you with Nail 68."

"Bucktail's pushing it up."

As the island came into view, I formed a mental picture of the airpower stacked overhead to make an extraction possible. Looking vertically, Nail 68-an OV-10A Bronco-was lowest, with Nail 47 above him. We were next in the stack; followed by "Cricket" and a Klong 960 flight of four C-130s with BLU-82B, 15,000-pound bombs, waiting to clear jungle undergrowth for landing zones. Departing Koh Tang was "Coach" flight, which had expended eight MK-84, 2,000-pound bombs on the island.

We had the only weapons in the area suitable for use in close support of our forces engaged with the enemy. We checked in with "Nail 47," the high FAC. "Bucktail, Nail 47, go ahead with your lineup."

"Roger. All four F-4s have 20mm, numbers one and three have LAU-3 rockets; two and four have MK-82s [500-pound bombs]." "Nail 47, copy."

"Bucktail, green 'em up [arm weapons]."

"Bucktail, this is Nail 68; I'll take over now. Do you see me over the north end of the island?"

"Roger.,'

"OK, FAC is in to mark; where my rocket goes will be the target. "

"Bucktail is 'tally-ho'; the target is the hooches.

"Affirmative; you're restricted to a run-in heading to the southeast only. There are friendlies just to the northwest. Can you put your rockets where I just put that rocket?"

"Bucktail, affirmative. How many do you want?"

"Let's try two pods on the first pass. Knife 2 dash three, keep your heads down, please." [The survivors of Knife 23, the downed CH-53, who made it to the tree line.] "Bucktail, you're cleared hot."

"Bucktail's in hot; FAC in sight."

Into the heart of the enemy encampment area went eight LAU-3 pods-152, 2.75-inch rockets tipped with white phosphorous that would bum through anything in their paths. I pressed in close, working the gunsight precisely to the target and trimming the heavy jet to feel as light as a feather; then I unleashed the rockets. As they disappeared into the trees in the hooch area, they reminded me of an eagle's talons reaching out in front as the raptor dives toward the ground. Nail 68's enthusiasm was obvious, "That's it, my friends; that's it!"

Maj. Robert W. Undorf-"Nail 68"-called me the next day at Korat. He credited Bucktail with 39 enemy KIA and for the destruction of the Khmer encampment. He said our ordnance had been instrumental in allowing the Marines to be extracted. I recalled the death of my best friend from high school-a 19-year-old Marine who had been killed near Quang Tri, South Vietnam, on July 20, 1966: "This mission was for you, Tim Davies."

Extraction under fire

Though Khmer forces were hit hard, they continued to resist strongly until the last Marine had been taken off the island; their mission was to inflict maximum damage on the remaining U.S. forces. While the Mayaguez crew steamed west, 25 Americans remained trapped near the eastern beach tree line, and nearly ZOO defended the western beach LZ.

Capt. Thomas DesBrisay, in his December 1975 official report, "Fourteen hours at Koh Tang," described the last extraction effort on the eastern beach in this way:

"Although all three helicopters raked the shoreline with minigun and submachine-gun fire, Jolly 11 took ground fire from all quadrants, some less than 50 meters away. The Marines began an orderly withdrawal from the tree line, stopping every few feet to fire their weapons. Despite the cumulative effects of daylong airstrikes and the fact that three helicopters were spewing minigun fire up and down the length of the tree line, enemy resistance was almost fanatical. At one point, Cambodian soldiers-seeing the Marines escaping from their grasp-stormed the helicopter and attained band-grenade range. just as one of them started to throw his grenade, the whole group was cut down by minigun and rifle fire."

The extraction on the western beach continued into darkness, and the three remaining helos rescued approximately 200 Marines. At one point, jolly 43 lifted off with 54 Marines aboard-nearly twice the allowable combat-loaded configuration.

Resistance remained heavy throughout; heroic efforts were the norm. It was an operation that involved the best teamwork among the Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force and used airpower to insert, defend and evacuate U.S. forces from the last battle in Southeast Asia.

A military press release dated June 4, 1975, quoted a 20-year-old Marine machine-gunner, PIC Daniel Mendez of Poteet, Texas: "As I lay there, wounded, I began to feel a lot better and thought I might make it out when I saw the Air Force planes come in to strafe. I saw four rockets shot up at them, but they came in anyway.,,

Air Force Capt. G. Scott Ralston, an A-71) pilot based at Korat, added, "This portion of the fighting was one of the most rewarding moments of my life. It was a moving experience when I realized that the survival of those Americans depended upon our skill as airmen." 1,

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