

The *Mayaguez* Incident

BLUF: The Mayaguez incident involved Kampuchea, formerly known as Cambodia, and the United States from 12–15 May 1975. The Communist forces of the Khmer Rouge took control of Cambodia on 17 April 1975. Less than a month later, the new government of Kampuchea seized an American merchant ship named the *USS Mayaguez*. In a hurriedly planned rescue of the crew, U.S. Marines attacked Koh Tang Island, believing that the *Mayaguez* crew were being held there. The Marines encountered heavier than expected resistance on the island. Three U.S. Air Force helicopters were damaged during the initial assault. The Marines fought a day-long battle before an evacuation could be managed. Three Marines were left behind, eventually being killed by the Khmer Rouge. The *Mayaguez* crew was released the following day.

GENERAL STORY: On 12 May 1975, the cargo ship *USS Mayaguez* was sailing two nautical miles from a group of islands owned by Kampuchea. Because they were not in international waters and the ship was not flying a flag, the ship was intercepted by two Kampuchean swift boats. The *Mayaguez* was ordered to the Kampuchean port of Poulo Wai on Koh Tang Island. The crew, however, was removed from the ship to Rong Sang Lem for interrogation.

President Gerald Ford, wishing to avoid another *USS Pueblo* incident, decided to take decisive action to recover the crew. On 15 May at 0613 hours, 100 Marines stormed the ship finding it empty. By then, eight helicopters carrying Marines and equipment were attempting to assault two beach fronts of Koh Tang Island. Three helicopters were damaged, with two being stranded on the east beach. One hundred heavily dug-in Khmer Rouge soldiers defended the island. Eventually, 225 Marines assaulted the beaches but found themselves overwhelmed by the island defenses.

During the day and into the evening, the Marines fought against the Khmer Rouge. Several evacuations were attempted, though the final evacuation was not until 2000 hours on 15 May. Because the coordination of communications was poor, three Marines were left alive on the island, along with several dead corpsmen and airmen. The *Mayaguez* crew were not on the island, though they were released the following day. This action is considered the last battle of the Vietnam War.

MARINE STORY: The Marine Corps violated its own doctrine of not assaulting an entrenched enemy with a 3-to-1 numerical superiority during the operation. Because of the inadequate planning and coordination, the Marines were in an impossible situation. Ten Marines were killed during the operation, with another 35 wounded. First Lieutenant Terry Tonkin received the Silver Star award for his actions.

QUESTIONS

1. Why did the Mayaguez incident take place?
2. Why did the Mayaguez rescue mission fail?
3. What lesson did the Marine Corps learn most from the Mayaguez incident?

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