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USAF Security Police Tragedy

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BACKGROUND PAPER
ON
THE MAYAGUEZ INCIDENT: AN ENLISTED PERSPECTIVE OF A
USAF SECURITY POLICE TRAGEDY

Monday, May 12, 1975 the U.S. merchantman Mayaguez was sailing for Sattahip, Thailand to deliver commercial cargo and supplies for American servicemen and embassy personnel. At 1430 she was attacked by two Cambodian gunboats. The Mayaguez and 39 crewman were captured by the newly established communist government of Cambodia. This incident directly resulted in the death of 23 Airmen, 18 were enlisted Security Police (SP). Many are not aware of these numbers and do not associate the Air Force casualties, especially the SPs, to the Mayaguez incident. This paper takes a look at the Southeast Asian political and military situation in the Spring of 1975 and the sequence of events surrounding the Mayaguez incident. It also addresses the civilian, military and USAF SP perspectives of the operation. To clarify the SP enlisted perspective, the role of the 656th Security Police Squadron (656 SPS) will be discussed at length. To understand the Mayaguez incident you must realize what was happening in Southeast Asia (SEA) in the early months of 1975. When looking at the turmoil in the area, one could almost have predicted an incident such as the Mayaguez.

South Vietnam had fallen to the North Vietnamese. The

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pullout of American forces left little doubt as to the fate of the South Vietnamese government. On 30 April, 1975 the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) of North Vietnam entered the undefended city of Saigon and declared the city totally liberated. The PRG further announced that Saigon would now be called Ho Chi Minh City. Prior to the fall of Saigon 130,000 Vietnamese had fled their country (4:8). The month of April was also a dark time for Cambodians.

On 17 April, 1975 the communist Khmer Rouge Army entered the capital city of Phnom Penh. Radio Phnom Penh announced the Royal Government of National Union of Cambodia had taken over. One objective of the new government was to evacuate all major cities and three million people were herded out of the throbbing city of Phnom Penh (4:50). Both the fall of Saigon and Phnom Penh presented a major concern to the U.S. for the safety of refugees and Americans, particularly embassy personnel, which remained. U.S. Military evacuation plans were developed in anticipation of these events. The plan for evacuation of Phnom Penh was code named "Eagle Pull".

Option III of "Eagle Pull" was the use of helicopters to insert ground security forces into Phnom Penh and remove refugees from the beleaguered city (8:24). Those ground security forces largely consisted of USAF SP units stationed in nearby Thailand. One of those units was the 656 SPS at Nakhon Phanom Royal Thai Air Base (NKP RTAB). The 656th Security Police Squadron (656 SPS) equipped and trained for their role in

operation "Eagle Pull" and were ready to deploy if execution orders were received (2:4). The danger to the Cambodian capital increased rapidly.

"As hostile activities led to interdiction of the Mekong (river) and all roads leading into Phenom Penh, the city became completely dependent on airlift to provide the life-sustaining supplies of rice, ammunition, and fuel". The airlift became the "greatest sustained air support of a city since the Berlin Airlift" (10:6). On 6 April "Eagle Pull" units were placed on standby for the Phenom Penh evacuation and on 11 April the execute message was received. All personnel were notified that they and equipment should be ready for imminent deployment (2:4). However, Option III for the 656 SPS became a reality, not for the evacuation of Phenom Penh, for the rescue of the Mayaguez.

On 12 May, while just off the tiny and disputed Wai Islands located 100 kilometers from the Cambodian coast, the Mayaguez was captured by the Cambodians. They fired rockets across her bow and boarded as the radio operator sent a desperate "mayday". The Cambodians action was reportedly based upon their belief that the Mayaguez was a spy ship supporting the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. Thirty-nine civilian crew members were taken captive. They and their ship were moved to locations unknown to the U.S. (4:108) The U.S. reaction was swift and decisive.

The following morning, President Gerald Ford listened as Secretary of State Henry Kissinger stated "At some point the

United States must draw the line. This is not our idea of the best such situation. It is not our choice. But we must act upon it now, and act firmly" (4:109). The following day, after efforts through the Chinese to persuade the Cambodians to release crew and vessel failed, President Ford began military planning in earnest (4:108). Eleven hundred marines from Okinawa, and two marine platoons from the Philippines, flew to the Thai Air Base at Utapao. Of importance to this perspective is to note that this was done inspite of objections from the Thai government. That evening an Air Force helicopter bound for Utapao from NKP RTAB crashed. All five crew members and the 18 enlisted Security Policemen aboard were killed (6:3). The 656 SPS and the entire Security Police career field had suffered a great tragedy. Let's look at the events surrounding the crash to understand it's significance.

The H-53 helicopter was assigned to the 21st Special Operations Squadron (21 SOS), NKP RTAB. The 21 SOS had been actively involved in current SEA missions.

"On 3 May, the 21st began sling-loading Vietnamese F-5's and A-37's from Utapao to the USS Midway...these were the same aircraft flown into Utapao by the fleeing Vietnamese and there was a degree of urgency to get the aircraft out of Thailand. This mission was carried on through 5 May during which the Knives (unit call signs)lifted 27 A-37's and 14 F-5's to the Midway.

"All crew members returned to NKP RTAFB on 6 May, while

some maintenance personnel remained at Utapao to repair helicopter 68-10928. Knife crews and helicopters had logged a total of 143 sorties for 181.3 hours for Frequent Wind (the evacuation of South Vietnam) and the two associated missions. One flight crew was taken back to Utapao on 7 May to pick-up helicopter 928 and return it to NKP RTAFB".

"The 21st was again alerted at 1830 local on 13 May for a mission in the Gulf of Thailand. The American cargo ship SS Mayaguez was seized in international waters off the island of Koh Tang by the insurgent Khmer Rouge of Cambodia on 10 May. The Knives were tasked to be ready for an infiltration of marines onto Koh Tang, should the US Government decide to use military forces to regain the Mayaguez and its crew. After a quick brief on the trip to Utapao and general brief on the trip on the possible upcoming mission, crews were formed and aircraft assigned as soon as maintenance verified the helicopters were ready"...

"Helicopter 68-10933 crashed approximately 2130 local, some 37 miles west of NKP RTAFB, while enroute to Utapao. All 23 persons on board were killed... The investigation revealed a missing sleeve in an overhauled main rotor blade". (7:7)

The 21 SOS had been through a grueling mission on both man and machine and its maintenance teams were depleted. During

sling operations to deliver aircraft onto the MIDWAY, Two F-5s were dropped and lost (7:7). One can understand the impact of current SEA affairs on the disaster. But why was the 65^b SPS tasked and what would have been their role in the Mayaguez rescue?

Remember that when the Mayaguez was captured, "Eagle Pull" units were already on stand-by. They were ready for deployment to forward locations and equipped for a fight. Their locations would allow them to be quickly transported in support of a rescue attempt. It was logical for "Eagle Pull" units to be involved in the incident. The following sequence of events occurred on

13 May:

1630: Thirteenth Air Force asked how many "combat assault" security police could be made available from major Thailand bases? The answer was one 25 man team from each large base. NKP reported the capability to provide 50 security police.

1800: Teams were formed and advised to standby.

2000: Col Stewart, PACAF/SP, confirmed the order to deploy.

2130: "Knife 01-3, H-53 from NKP was down. Other aircraft in area reported flares observed going off believed to be type carried onboard helo. Crash approximately 37 miles west of NKP. NKP CSP (Chief, Security Police) not aboard". (9:--)

In a military operation such as this, when relatively small numbers of participants are eliminated they are replaced or the

mission simply goes on without them. So the loss of Knife 01-3 had little impact on the Mayaguez rescue. But what would have been the role of those 18 SPs from NKP?

The 656 SPS planned involvement in the Mayaguez rescue is unknown to this author. I very simply was not allowed access to documents which held that information. However, assumptions may be drawn from facts. The function of Air Force Security Police in ground combat is focused on air base ground defense. It is for that which we are trained and equipped. Except for the few exceptions of special tactical assault teams comparable to civilian police "SWAT" units, SPs are used for defense. Yet, 13th Air Force asked for "combat assault" SP teams to respond to the Mayaguez incident. "The entire force was to be airlifted to Utapoa for a mass assault to recover the ship" (6:3). If the intent was for SPs to assault Cambodian forces defending the Mayaguez, they were not prepared for their mission. US intelligence underestimated the size of Cambodian defense forces on the island (4:109). If the SPs were intended for an offensive assault, the outcome could have been even more tragic considering the results of the US Marine assault which will be addressed later. This conclusion is subjective. I and others, will argue that the SPs were capable to handle the mission; however, based only upon training, others might contend that they were not. USAF SPs role in "Eagle Pull" was to provide air base ground defense at Phenom Penh airport while other US military units evacuated embassy and civilian personnel. This is our classic role in

military operations. Having been stationed at NKP RTAB and a member of the SP "Eagle Pull" team in 1974, I can attest to our role and our air base defense preparation for that mission. Considering the Mayaguez operations at Utapao RTAB at the objection of the Thai government, it would have made more ^{Sense} since militarily to use USAF SP forces in defense of that installation and the US resources committed to the Mayaguez rescue. US military forces then, and now, are specialized to do what they do best in a given situation. To use them otherwise is unwise.

One of the missions of the 21 SOS was to insert combat assault forces into hostile situations and the US Marine Corps were, and are, specialized to conduct offensive assault operations. They, with assistance of other highly skilled US military units, undertook operations to free the Mayaguez and her crew.

"On the night of the 13th, the 432nd Reconnaissance Technical Sq received imagery from both the Navy and the RF-4C aircraft of the 14TRS showing the ship. The Navy photos...showed patrol boats at the side of the captured ship. At 1310 hours on the 13th, USSAG/7AF scrambled the Wing's two alert aircraft which flew to the freighter's location and fired in front of the ship in an attempt to stop its movement. At 1450 hours, USSAG/7AF directed the Wing to generate two F-4E aircraft each half hour periods until told to terminate. Eight aircraft were launched, four from

the 421TFS and four from the 25TFS. The ship attempted to move but was held at bay by the Wing's aircraft. When Khmer gunboats tried to run the blockage, at least one was sunk" (5:33).

These actions were taken to prepare the primary battle that rescued the Mayaguez. That battle occurred on 15 May.

Knife 21, commanded by Lt Col John Denham of the 21st SOS, and Knife 22, 23, 31, 32, and 41 departed Utapao at 0420 hours. The first four Knife helicopters approached Koh Tang together with Knife 21 and 22 going to the west beach and Knife 23 and 31 going to the east beach. Knife 21 sustained severe battle damage and was forced to ditch approximately 3/4 miles offshore, "after unloading their marines". Knife 22 was forced away from the HLZ (hot landing zone) by the intensive ground fire and was unable to off-load its marines. Knife 22's second attempt was also unsuccessful due to heavy enemy fire. Because of extensive battle damage, Knife 22 was only able to return to the Thailand mainland instead of Utapao" (7:11). Because Knife 22 was unable to insert its marines, the western beachhead was not secured and the eastern beachhead was vulnerable. "Meanwhile, Knife 23 and 31 made their infiltration onto the east beach. Knife 23, at attempting to unload his marines, decided at the last moment to depart the area. As they attempted to leave, the tail boom separated from the helicopter, and they crashed approximately 20 feet offshore. The crew made it safely to cover with the Marines, where 1Lt Lucas, the copilot, set up a Forward Air

Controller position using only his survival radio. SSgt Gross, one of the flight engineers, was hit four times as he scrambled onto the beach. Meanwhile, Knife 31 received intensive fire and also tried to exit the area but burst into flames and crashed. 2Lt Vandegeer, the copilot, was killed by the groundfire, but the rest of the crew and most of their marines made it safely out to sea where they were rescued by the Navy. Knife 32 arrived on scene in time to see Knife 31 explode. Deciding not to attempt infiltration at that time they turned around only to see Knife 21 ditching into the water. After rescuing three of the four crew members (the fourth, SSgt Runbaugh, was never found), Knife 32 then made its insertion of Marines onto the west beach. During the landing, SSgt Morales, a flight engineer, and a Marine were wounded. Although extremely damaged, Knife 32 was able to return to Utapao for medical attention for the two wounded." (7:11) The battle for the Mayaguez was not going well for the Americans and the loss of lives, punctuated by aircraft losses, were severe. More failures were to follow.

"Knife 51 and 52 departed Utapao later that morning. Due to heavy enemy fire and sustained battle damage, Knife 52 was unable to off load its marines. Once in the area of Knife 22's downed helicopter Knife 52 suffered a hydraulic pressure loss and was forced to set down on the Thailand mainland. Knife 51, after making infiltration and picking up four wounded marines, provided vectors to assist Knife 52 to Knife 23's position, off loaded Marines at Utapao, and returned to the island". By this time the

Mayaguez and crew had been returned to US control (&:11,12).

"Knife 51, the last flyable 21 SOS helicopter, made several runs onto Koh Tang. Each load of Marines was taken to the USS Coral Sea and after the final load of 29 Marines, Knife 51 was refueled and returned to Utapao" (7:12). The battle for the Mayaguez was over but other military action continued.

The US had also planned punitive air strikes against the Cambodians. Because Phenom Penh failed to confirm the release of the Mayaguez crew, President Ford authorized the raids to be carried out (4:109). "On the 15th, naval tactical aircraft flying from the US aircraft carrier CORAL SEA struck a railroad yard, port facility, POL refinery, and airfield at Kampong Saom as well as the Phumi Phsar Ream Naval Base" (3:1). The Mayaguez incident was considered a victory by the White House.

President Ford was praised for his reaction under pressure and his standing in the polls shot up eleven percent. Later the grateful Mayaguez crew presented him with the ship's steering wheel. The national celebration overshadowed the fact that, to free the 39 crew members and ship, fifty marines were wounded and 41 servicemen had died (4:109). The military, especially those units directly involved, had no reason to celebrate. In the case of USAF SP, the bad feelings were increased because the military and public failed to associate them with the incident.

The helicopter crash which killed 18 enlisted SPs occurred early in the military operation. This meant that the US could

not release information which revealed rescue plans were in motion. Even after the details of the operation were released the news media failed to associate security police to the Mayaguez incident. "One AF helicopter was known to have crashed in Thailand during the period but its part in the rescue operation was not clear" (1:3). Ask a security policeman about the Mayaguez incident and, if he or she is familiar at all with the history of the SP career fields, the loss of 18 SP lives will be mentioned; others are largely unaware of the association. We, like all other military units, are proud and respectful of our own who have made the supreme sacrifice for their country and want history to record their contributions.

This paper has presented an enlisted Security Police perspective of the Mayaguez incident. The SEA situation in early 1975 was best described as "turmoil" and events led to the Capture of the Mayaguez by the new communist government of Cambodia. US forces, to include the 656 SPS were put on standby to rescue refugees and embassy personnel from Phenom Penh but instead were used for the Mayaguez rescue. Political and military objectives, the questionable role of the SPs, and the subsequent helicopter crash which killed 5 crewman and 18 SPs were addressed. The rescue, hampered by poor intelligence and aircraft losses, was viewed by the US as a victory. And finally, the SP perspective that those lossed are not given credit, or due respect.

This paper is dedicated to all who lost their lives in the
Mayaguez incident.

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