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COMMAND HISTORY

1975

Appendix VI — The SS MAYAGUEZ Incident

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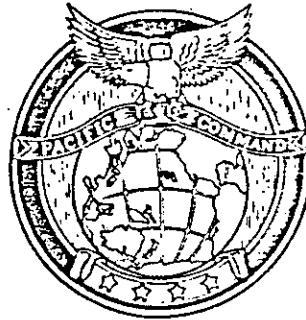
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APPENDIX C

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COMMANDER IN CHIEF PACIFIC COMMAND HISTORY



1975

Appendix VI — The SS MAYAGUEZ Incident

Prepared by the Command History Branch
Office of the Joint Secretary
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CAMP H. M. SMITH, HAWAII

1976

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APPENDIX VI

THE SS MAYAGUEZ INCIDENT

SECTION I--INTRODUCTION

(U) The Cambodian seizure of the United States vessel, MAYAGUEZ, on 12 May 1975 was a significant incident viewed in the context of the international situation when it occurred. Cambodia and Vietnam had just fallen to communist control the previous month and the PUEBLO incident of 1968 was still a fresh memory. It was apparent, at the time, to national leadership from the President on down that this test of United States willpower called for quick, firm, and decisive action which would help to reaffirm America's determination in the eyes of her opponents and allies as well as the American public. Admiral Noel Gayler, Commander in Chief Pacific at the time of the incident, commented on the successful joint Service recovery operation:¹

Cambodian adventurism tested the United States with the seizure of the merchant ship MAYAGUEZ on the high seas in May. The recovery operation has left no doubt as to our resolve and capabilities in that part of the world. Our Marines, sailors and airmen again met the challenge. Stories of their courage abound - from the Marine who directed air strikes while swimming off-shore after his helicopter was shot down, to the sailors in the motor whaleboat who took on dug-in heavy weapons with small arms, to the Air Force pilots who forced their way into the landing zones while taking hits.

During the period immediately following the incident, detailed reports were prepared independently by participants up to and including the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In addition, every aspect of the incident was subjected to exhaustive Congressional scrutiny to include a full-scale General Accounting Office (GAO) investigation, the unclassified findings of which were released to the public in October 1976. Although these findings were critical of certain aspects of MAYAGUEZ recovery operations, overall military participation was described as follows:²

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1. CINCPAC Command History 1975, Vol. 1, p. v.
 2. The Seizure of the MAYAGUEZ--A Case Study of Crisis Management, Report of The Comptroller General of the United States, May 11, 1976, p. 56, hereinafter referred to as The Comptroller General MAYAGUEZ Report.

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- Finally, assembling, under severe time constraints, the various military assets scattered throughout the Pacific area was generally accomplished in an efficient and effective manner.

- Command and control of, and communications between, multiservice assets was established expeditiously. The performance of U.S. Forces was inspiring.

(U) This monograph will not attempt to recount all the details of the MAYAGUEZ operation already available in existing reports. Instead, it will attempt to tie together loose ends and present an overview of the MAYAGUEZ operation from the CINCPAC unified command level. This overview will stress the important military aspects of the operation to include command and control, intelligence/reconnaissance, and planning and execution. In covering these aspects, further emphasis will be placed on CINCPAC's "lessons learned," which should provide valuable insight, and hopefully foresight, for reference in coping with possible future crisis action situations. As CINCPAC has noted, "...with full benefit of hindsight we could have done a number of things better. Life is like that, and there is no reason we should not acknowledge it."¹

1. CINCPAC 131338Z Feb 76.

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SECTION II--NOTIFICATION

~~(S)~~ Cambodia had fallen to the communists on 17 April 1975 and the fall of the Republic of Vietnam followed closely behind on 30 April 1975. On 12 May 1975 the American Embassy in Vientiane advised that the Pathet Lao had moved quickly to exploit the virtual disappearance of the Vientiane side and to exert control over government operations, commercial activities, and movement of persons there. In the wake of these events, most United States Forces had departed the immediate area except for those in Thailand. In the midst of this situation, the MAYAGUEZ incident tested the United States crisis action capabilities.¹

(U) It was 0718 Zulu (Z) hours on 12 May 1975 when Mr. John Neal of Delta Exploration Company in Jakarta, Indonesia received a "Mayday" (distress) call from the United States merchant ship MAYAGUEZ:²

Have been fired upon and boarded by Cambodian armed forces at 9 degrees 48 minutes north/102 degrees 53 minutes east. Ship is being towed to unknown Cambodian port.

~~(S)~~ CINCPAC received this information at 0914Z hours 12 May 1975 in a message from the American Embassy, Jakarta. This notification was similarly received by the White House, the National Security Agency (NSA), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), and the National Military Command Center (NMCC) at the Pentagon. Based on the message, CINCPAC contacted the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and discussed assets available to reconnoiter the scene of the incident; thus, initial preparations for the MAYAGUEZ operation were begun, pending the outcome of State Department attempts to make contact through diplomatic channels. As the situation developed, diplomatic channels were determined at executive level to be unsatisfactory and military means were employed to recover the MAYAGUEZ and release her crew.³

~~(S)~~ The MAYAGUEZ seizure, which began the chain of events leading to military action, was not a totally isolated incident, lacking any indications as to its possible occurrence. CINCPAC observed that adequate and timely warning was provided]

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1. CINCPAC Command History 1975, Vol. 11, pp. 607, 609, 617.
 2. Op. Cit., The Comptroller General MAYAGUEZ Report, p. 89. [All times will be shown in Greenwich Mean or Zulu time; for Cambodian (G) time, add 7 hours; for Hawaii (W) time, subtract 10 hours.]
 3. Jakarta 0356/120903Z May 75.

on earlier Khmer

Communist acts against foreign shipping.

1. CINCPAC 191623Z Jun 75 (EX)...

SECTION III--COMMAND AND CONTROL

Command Relationships

(the communications aspects of command and control will be discussed in detail later in this section).

(S) In conference, the local on-scene commander, who was Commander, U.S. Support Activities Group/7th Air Force (COMUSSAG/7AF), assumed the responsibility for planning and directing operations to recover the MAYAGUEZ and cause the release of her crew. Based upon this understanding, COMUSSAG/7AF, in his initial planning guidance to subordinate and supporting units, interpreted command and control relationships as follows:¹

...The international implications of this operation make restraint imperative. Complete command and control must be maintained by COMUSSAG/7AF, who will be acting upon direction from the National Military Command Center....

(S) CINCPAC's execution message, authorizing implementation of COMUSSAG/7AF's initial planning guidance, clarified the command and control relationship as it was to apply throughout the MAYAGUEZ operation until its termination on 15 May 1975:²

...Command and control will be maintained by CINCPAC, who will be acting under direction from JCS (NMCC).

(S) In accordance with this relationship, COMUSSAG/7AF, under CINCPAC's operational command, planned and directed MAYAGUEZ operations on the scene. Air Force and Marine assets were placed under the operational control of, and Naval assets (minus the Marines) supported, COMUSSAG/7AF. Command relationships were again spelled out, using different wording, in COMUSSAG/7AF's final operation plan:³

...overall control of the operation will be as directed by CINCPAC and approved by the JCS. CINCPAC will have

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1. COMUSSAG/7AF 131748Z May 75.
 2. CINCPAC 132051Z May 75 and 152330Z May 75.
 3. COMUSSAG/7AF 141730Z May 75 (EX).

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operational control over all PACOM designated forces. CINCSAC will have operational control over the B-52 strike force. COMUSSAG/7AF will act as the coordinating authority for the operations of supporting forces.

Command relationships are depicted on the following chart.

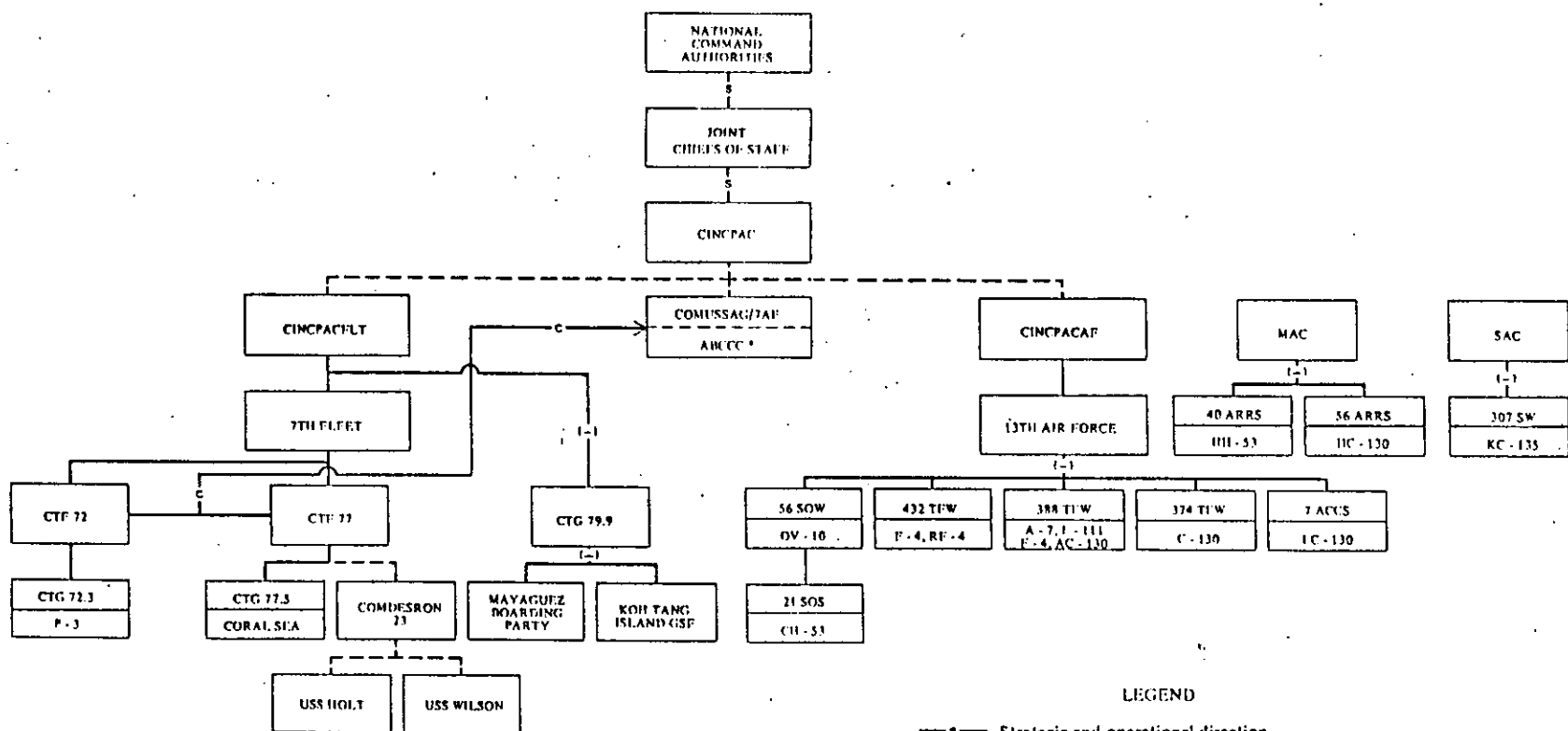
(U) Although Naval forces committed to the MAYAGUEZ operation were not under the operational control of COMUSSAG/7AF, it was noted that no requests made by the local command were denied by these forces. As the Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet (CINCPACFLT) noted, "the execution requirements for MAYAGUEZ did not provide sufficient time to prepare and promulgate a detailed OORDER..."; however, CINCPACFLT did advise that "unless otherwise directed, task force units assigned to subject operation in Gulf of Thailand should plan on operating in support of COMUSSAG/7AF with direct liaison authorized all concerned." The Commander, Seventh Fleet further passed on CINCPACFLT instructions for participating task force units to respond to directions and tasking from COMUSSAG/7AF.¹

Communications

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1. Ibid.; CINCPACFLT 131857Z May 75 and 140505Z Jun 75 (EX); COMSEVENFLT 142326Z May 75.
 2. J3 Discussion Topic, undated, Issue: Lessons Learned Recent Contingency Operations, for discussion at CINC conference held 14 Aug 75 at LANTCOM.

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COMMAND RELATIONSHIPS



LEGEND

- S — Strategic and operational direction
- - - Operational Command (Unified Command level)/Control (below Unified Command)
- Command
- 1-1 - Command less operational control. All units in this status were placed under operational control of COMUSSAG/7AF
- c —> Direct coordination and support
- Airborne Command and Control Center for operational coordination only

Constructed from the following sources:

CINCPACFLT 131857Z May 75, 142326Z May 75
 USSAG/7AF and JCRC History, 1 Apr - 30 Jun 75, p. 100
 Discussions with representatives of CINCPACAF and
 CINCPACFLT History offices

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in Hawaii; and COMUSSAG/7AF in Thailand. This arrangement emphasized operational control and real time reporting and information gathering.¹

~~(S)~~ The communications conference permitted direct control by Washington decision-makers over events halfway around the world. On the other hand, ¹ An example was COMUSSAG/7AF's interpretation of command and control relationships in his initial planning guidance. Furthermore,

~~(S)~~ The PACOM Required Operational Capabilities for Secure Voice and Data Conferencing and Communications for Remote Force/Joint Task Force Operations, included in the PACOM Command and Control System Master Plan submitted to the JCS on 29 January 1975, recommended use of inherent satellite broadcast capability to satisfy conferencing requirements and proposed that an operational test bed be established in PACOM to resolve operational and technical questions. The experience gained through extensive use ¹ during the EAGLE PULL, FREQUENT WIND, and MAYAGUEZ operations led CINCPAC to further emphasize the following requirements:³

~~(S)~~ Tactical communications established between the on-scene commander and subordinate and supporting units during the MAYAGUEZ operation were characterized

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1. CINCPAC 131338Z Feb 76.
 2. Op. Cit., The Comptroller General MAYAGUEZ Report, pp. 33-35; J6/Memo/0027-75 of 11 Jun 75, Subj: Lessons Learned-SS MAYAGUEZ/Koh Tang Island; J3/Memo/00566-75 of 8 Sep 75, Subj: SS MAYAGUEZ & Koh Tang Island Operation.
 3. J6/Memo/0027-75 of 11 Jun 75, Subj: Lessons Learned-SS MAYAGUEZ/Koh Tang Island; CINCPAC 191623Z Jun 75 (EX).

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and patched _____
as easily have monitored the same net.

It was monitored
Enemy forces could just

capability did
exist from the ABCCC to USSAG, and to Naval units only, through the _____

~~(S)~~ The Marine Ground Security Force (GSF), landed on Koh Tang Island to free the MAYAGUEZ crew, lost its _____ capability in a helicopter crash, and thus its _____ Therefore, the GSF was forced to _____

~~(S)~~ As a result of the _____ during the MAYAGUEZ operation, CINCPAC further emphasized the following requirements:⁴

-
1. Ibid.
 2. Ibid.
 3. CINCPAC 191623Z Jun 75 (EX).
 4. Ibid.

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(U) Communications nets involved in the MAYAGUEZ operation are depicted on the following chart.

(S) In commenting to the JCS on interrelated command and control and communications requirements for further contingency/noncombatant emergency evacuation (NEMVAC) operations, CINCPAC noted that, in the case of the MAYAGUEZ operation,

thus providing a clearer tactical picture to the on-scene commanders. The plot could have easily been remoted to the rear echelon headquarters and the

Reporting

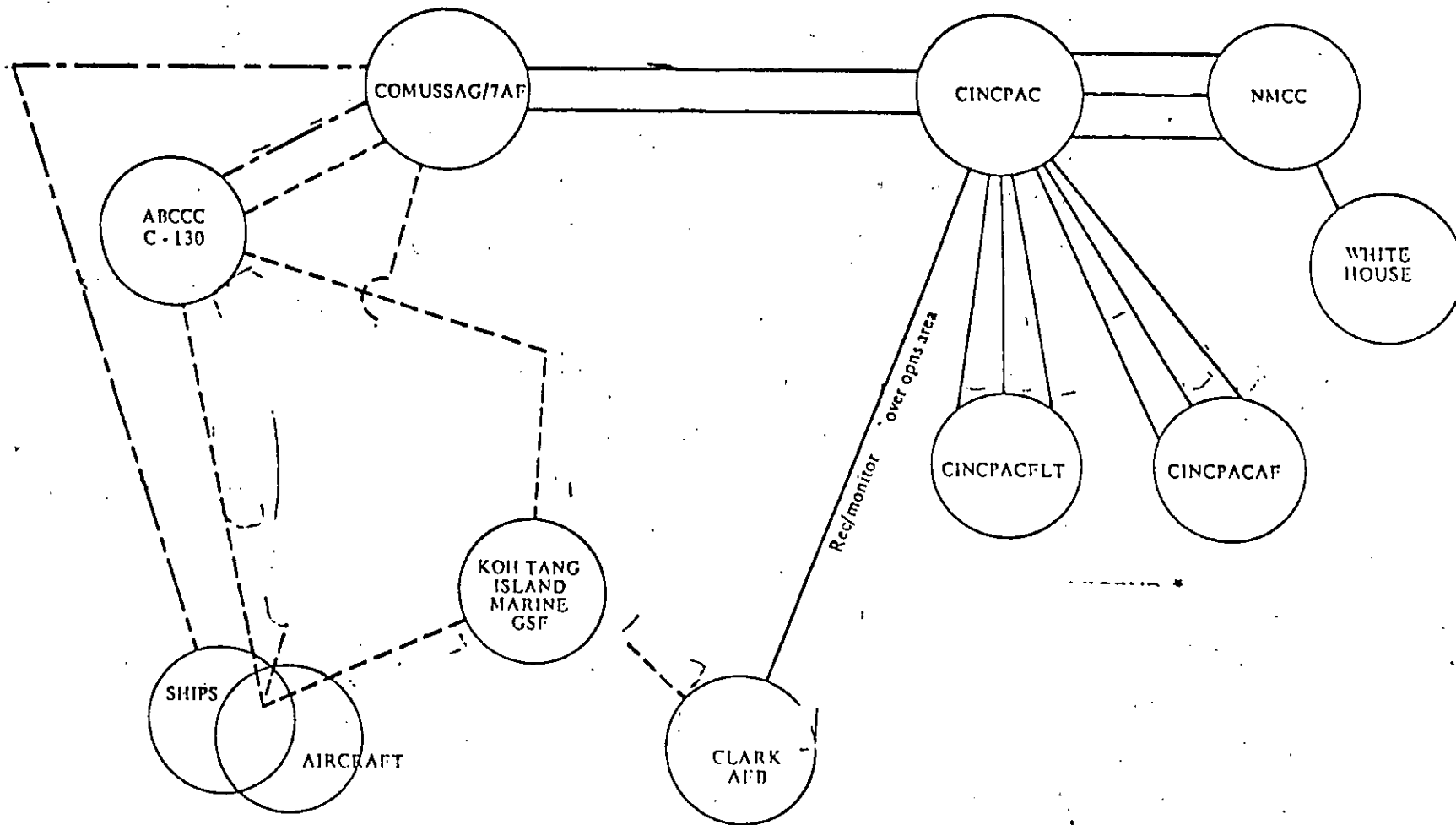
(S) The existence of unilateral Service reporting channels to the JCS during the MAYAGUEZ operation permitted the forwarding of conflicting reports, which had to be referred back to CINCPAC for resolution. The primary example of this was casualty reporting, where receipt and release of fragmentary and unverified information at Office of the Secretary of Defense level gave the appearance of inaccurate casualty reporting. This problem was partially related to the nature of the means of communication in use (for details see communications section), which, lacking specific procedures, allowed for ad hoc inquiries from higher authority and discrepancies between voice and hard copy reporting.²

(S) Interface between intelligence and operational reporting was an area that witnessed highly effective innovations as well as need for refinement (for details see communications and intelligence/reconnaissance sections).

(S) In addition to report-related observations found in the communications and intelligence/reconnaissance sections of this monograph, CINCPAC noted, in general, that channels must go through the unified commander to insure coordinated and accurate reporting to all concerned. CINCPAC, realizing that official casualty figures had to be reported through Service channels,

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1. Ibid.; J6/Memo/0027-75 of 11 Jun 75, Subj: Lessons Learned-SS MAYAGUEZ/Koh Tang Island Operation.
 2. J1/Memo/311-75 of 18 Jul 75, Subj: SS MAYAGUEZ/Koh Tang Island Operation; CINCPAC 191623Z Jun 75 (EX).

COMMUNICATIONS



Adapted from J620 Chart dated 8 Jul 76 and J6 Memo/0027-75,
11 Jun 75, Subj: SS/Mayaguez/Koh Tang Island Operation.

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recommended a change to JCS Publication 6 to provide force status and identity (FORSTAT) casualty reporting from unit level to the unified command to allow monitoring.¹

1. J1/Memo/311-75 of 18 Jul 75, Subj: SS MAYAGUEZ/Koh Tang Island Operation.

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SECTION IV--INTELLIGENCE/RECONNAISSANCE

(S) Upon notification of the MAYAGUEZ incident, the Deputy Director for Operations, National Military Command Center requested CINCPAC to launch reconnaissance aircraft from U-Tapao, Thailand. This initial request was followed by further guidance:¹

- CINCPAC provide continuous P-3 surveillance over the Gulf of Siam north of 8 degrees north and east of 101 degrees east, no closer than 12 nautical miles to the Cambodian mainland, islands excluded.

- CINCPAC provide photo coverage of Phnom Penh, Sihanoukville, and the islands of Poulo Wai at first satisfactory light, regardless of cloud cover. (The platform was not specified.)

- MEET) coverage of Poulo Wai at also within the 12 nautical mile restriction.

provide (OLYMPIC

(S) From this guidance, CINCPAC further instructed CINCPACFLT to report sightings of Cambodian naval units as well as the captured MAYAGUEZ, and obtain photos of Cambodian naval units as feasible. This mission was, in turn, passed to the Commander, Philippine Air Patrol Group (CTG 72.3), who had P-3 aircraft located at his primary base of operations, Cubi Point, Republic of the Philippines, and at his logistic base and refueling stop, U-Tapao Royal Thai Naval Air Station, Thailand. At 0166Z hours, 13 May a P-3 aircraft reported positive identification of the MAYAGUEZ at 9°56' N, 102°58' E.²

(S) The platform, mechanics of film processing, and exploitation procedures for photo reconnaissance were not addressed by the JCS, but after a telephone exchange between CINCPAC J2 and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) the DIA provided processing, duplicating, and disseminating instructions to CINCPAC, SAC, and the SAC Reconnaissance Center, with information copies to Air Force

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1. After Action Report, US Military Operations, SS MAYAGUEZ/Koh Tano Island, 12-15 May 1975, prepared by the JCS, Tab D, Encl 9, p. 1 (hereinafter referred to as JCS After Action Report); JCS 8233/121944Z May 75.
 2. U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, Vol. 102/11/885, Nov 76, p. 94, "'Mayday' for the MAYAGUEZ," by Commander J.A. Messegee, USN (hereinafter referred to as Proceedings); Op. Cit., JCS After Action Report, Tab D, Encl 9, p. 1; CINCPAC 122104Z May 75.

headquarters, COMUSSAG, CINCPACAF, and the 432d Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW) at Udorn, Thailand. The DIA message cited the JCS message as having directed (OLYMPIC MEET) and (FACE VALUE) missions against Cambodian targets; the FACE VALUE missions were to be processed and exploited by the 432d TFW at Udorn, while OLYMPIC MEET mission materials were to be delivered to the [redacted]. The remainder of the DIA message named specific exploitation objectives, but did not address the JCS-directed P-3 reconnaissance.¹

(8) This omission was apparently resolved (possibly through operational channels) because, approximately three hours after the DIA message, CINCPAC J2 directed COMUSSAG, CINCPACAF, and CINCPACFLT to follow the DIA instructions for processing and distributing the FACE VALUE and OLYMPIC MEET missions. CINCPAC also directed CINCPACFLT to forward unprocessed P-3 mission imagery to the 432d Reconnaissance Technical Squadron (RTS) at Udorn for initial processing and rapid readout. The 432d RTS was to prepare the Initial Photo Interpretation Report (IPIR) and dispatch it to specified addressees as "Special USN P-3 Coverage." A duplicate positive was to be sent to the Fleet Air Intelligence Service Center (FAISC) Pacific, and the original negative to Fleet Intelligence Center Pacific in Hawaii.²

(9) Because the Navy P-3 unit at U-Tapao, Thailand had not been an addressee on the CINCPAC message, COMUSSAG retransmitted the message to the U-Tapao-based P-3 unit, but apparently too late. A little more than six hours after the dispatch of the CINCPAC message, COMUSSAG was informed that the first P-3 film had been sent to the FAISC Pacific at Cubi Point, Philippines for processing.³

(5) Subsequent imagery was handled as instructed, however, and, when the operation to recover the MAYAGUEZ and her crew was authorized, CINCPAC provided film handling instructions for fleet tactical aerial photo reconnaissance operations. When IPIRs of Koh Tang Island indicated possible helicopter crash imagery, CINCPAC directed COMUSSAG to provide the most recent photography to the Commander Task Unit 72.3.5 (P-3s) at U-Tapao for possible resumption of Marine personnel recovery operations. Throughout the MAYAGUEZ operation, flash precedence COMPASS LINK was employed. Expedited Armed Forces Courier Service, requested by CINCPAC on 13 May 1975,

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1. J23 HistSum May 75, with 12 attached msgs, second of which was JCS 8223/121944Z May 75; DIA (DC-SC) 05216/122108Z May 75 (BOM).
 2. CINCPAC 130239Z May 75.
 3. COMUSSAG/7AF 131253Z May 75, which cited several undated phonecons and COMUSSAG INCR 130755Z May 75.

was cancelled on 20 May, and on 21 May CINCPAC directed CINCPACFLT, CINCPACAF, and COMUSSAG to revert to normal film handling procedures.¹

(S) With the photo reconnaissance platform specified as RF-4C, CINCPAC instructed COMUSSAG/7AF to provide photo coverage of Phnom Penh, Sihanoukville, Hon Panjang Island (09°18' N, 103°28' E), and the island groups in the vicinity of 09°58' N, 102°53' E (Poulo Wai). Flights over Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville were restricted to a minimum altitude of 6,000 feet, while flights over the islands were restricted to a minimum of 4,500 feet. The Essential Elements of Information (EEI) included merchant ships, naval craft, and paratroop landing/drop zones. After the MAYAGUEZ was located and under observation, CINCPAC requested initial imagery of Koh Tang Island and daily coverage until after the execution of contemplated recovery operations. Flights in the vicinity of Koh Tang Island were restricted to a minimum altitude of 6,500 feet. The EEI now included:²

- Pier facilities.
- Gun emplacements.
- Fortifications.
- Small boat locations.
- Troop concentrations.
- Evidence of ship/shore personnel movement to/from MAYAGUEZ.
- One-time readout of building locations/helicopter landing areas.

(S) Photo reconnaissance instructions were subsequently amended, as required, and included RF-4C coverage following each tactical air strike in support of recovery operations as well as Navy missions over the Kompong Som area. In both cases the minimum altitude restriction of 6,500 feet applied.³

(S) In the midst of this reconnaissance activity, the location of the MAYAGUEZ crew was of crucial importance to operational decisions. The

1. J23 HistSum May 75; CINCPAC 130241Z May 75, 142145Z May 75, 152333Z May 75, 161511Z May 75, 162226Z May 75, 200037Z May 75, and 210113Z May 75.
2. CINCPAC 122137Z May 75 and 132346Z May 75.
3. CINCPAC 140325Z May 75, 142110Z May 75, 150040Z May 75, and 150045Z May 75.

above-listed EEI included the requirement to report evidence of personnel movement to/from the MAYAGUEZ and, in conjunction with preliminary actions to isolate Koh Tang Island and the MAYAGUEZ, the JCS emphasized that:¹

It is particularly important to get maximum information on any outgoing boat to determine if there are Americans aboard and to report such when requesting authority to sink, although this will be difficult to accomplish. Deck loading probably will be required on the small boats as they did in taking personnel, believed to be Americans, from the ship to the island.

~~(S)~~ The knowledge that personnel, believed to be Americans, had been taken from the MAYAGUEZ to Koh Tang Island was based on P-3 aircraft (LY499) reports that one gunboat and one tugboat were observed along side the MAYAGUEZ and that personnel were being transferred from the MAYAGUEZ to the tugboat. The P-3 further reported that the gunboat and tug with personnel on board departed the MAYAGUEZ heading toward shore, and that the personnel seated on deck with heads on knees appeared to be Caucasian. COMUSSAG/7AF followed the progress of this movement:²

<u>Time</u>	<u>Observation</u>
131018Z May	Boat which had been tied to starboard side of MAYAGUEZ has started to move toward the island with a lot of people on board.
131024Z May	Small fishing-type vessel which was tied to port side of MAYAGUEZ is now moving toward island. The boat appears to have Caucasian personnel on board....
131033Z May	Ground fire was received by JUMBO 01 as he made low visual reconnaissance pass near the island. No hits. Personnel are disembarking on the island.
131115Z May	Report from KING 22, HC-130. Two small boats off-loading personnel on island and they are moving toward the interior of the island.

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1. JCS 9376/131905Z May 75.
 2. PATRON FOUR 131024Z May 75; CTG 72.3 131050Z May 75; COMUSSAG/7AF 131105Z May 75, 131115Z May 75, 131118Z May 75, 131135Z May 75, and 131245Z May 75.

131227Z May Summary of situation. The MAYAGUEZ is still in the water. All personnel appear to have been transferred to the island...both small boats are at the island....

(U) The above indications, which led to the conclusion that the MAYAGUEZ crew was being held on Koh Tang Island, prompted the actions taken to isolate the island and the MAYAGUEZ. The objective was to prevent the crew and ship from being taken to mainland Cambodia, thus avoiding a situation similar to the PUEBLO affair of 1968.¹

(S) The only other indication as to the possible location of the MAYAGUEZ crew during the incident, prior to their release, came about 0103Z hours 14 May, when a P-3 observed a "...fishing boat, with possible Caucasians huddled in the bow..." heading from Koh Tang Island toward the Cambodian mainland. Other United States Forces in the area at that time, which had also observed the boat, included four A-7, two F-4, one C-130, two F-111, and one KC-135.²

(S) The flight of A-7s from the 347th TFW was directed to orbit and maintain contact with what they described as "...a fishing vessel of approximately 40 foot length with approximately 30-40 people of undetermined race aboard, seated on deck." They remained on station for two hours and tracked the vessel until it entered the harbor around Kompong Som and docked at 0315Z hours 14 May. At the same time, the flight of F-4s from the 388th TFW reported observing the A-7s attempting to impede the progress of a boat carrying 30-40 people on deck "...thought possible to be Caucasians...." The F-4s were forced to leave the area early to refuel, but not before they had attempted to turn the boat by firing in front of it. COMUSSAG/7AF reported that "...one thirty foot craft with approximately 40 people aboard..." was maintaining course toward Kompong Som harbor in spite of attempts to turn it by firing in front of it and making multiple CBU-30 (riot control agent) passes over it. This boat "...was not taken under direct attack because of the probability of Americans being aboard...."³

(S) In summary, the MAYAGUEZ crew was not positively identified until they came alongside the USS WILSON in a Thai fishing boat about 0308Z on 15 May during the assault on Koh Tang Island. The balance of indications favoring the existence of at least some of the crew remaining on the island

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1. Op. Cit., JCS After Action Report, p. 1.
 2. PATRON FOUR 140140Z May 75.
 3. 347TFW 140707Z May 75; 388TFW 140355Z May 75, 140535Z May 75, 140550Z May 75; PATRON FOUR 140242Z May 75, 140323Z May 75; USSAG/7AF 140235Z May 75; Op. Cit., JCS After Action Report, p. 2.

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was weighted by "...an intelligence source of higher classification..." which indicated that the Khmer Communists intended to take them to Koh Tang Island. The subsequent Koh Tang Island phase of the MAYAGUEZ operation was based on this conclusion.

(U) On the afternoon of 14 May Marine Major Randall Austin, who led the assault on Koh Tang Island, conducted an aerial reconnaissance of the island in a U.S. Army U-21 aircraft, but he noted, "unfortunately, we were limited to a minimum altitude of 6,000 feet and could not see the necessary detail." This restriction was apparently locally established. Evidence leading to this conclusion can be found in Navy Commander J.A. Messegee's (CTG 72.3) recollections of the initial P-3 reconnaissance to locate the MAYAGUEZ:²

* * * * *

In addition to no air cover, we also were concerned about the antiaircraft (AA) armament on the Cambodian gunboats, inasmuch as we had lost a P-3 to this type of boat during the Vietnam War. Although our best intelligence indicated the boats' heaviest weapons were 20mm, one publication indicated they had 40mm. This discrepancy caused me to set a 6,000-foot minimum altitude restriction on our aircraft when in the vicinity of a possible gunboat and to require a one-mile minimum offset. We were to learn that these restrictions did not hamper our ability to visually monitor gunboat movements, except during periods of low cloudiness. At these minimums, however, we could not discern specific details, such as the lettering on the bow and stern of the MAYAGUEZ.

(U) Commander Messegee went on to say, however, that he later directed passes as low as 300 feet, and there was no indication that a 6,000-foot minimum remained in effect for P-3s beyond the initial sortie cited.³

~~(S)~~ Also important was the need for accurate information on the enemy situation, both on Koh Tang Island and on the Cambodian mainland. CINCPAC observed that, to this end, photo reconnaissance provided little order of

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1. CINCPAC 131338Z Feb 76; PATRON FOUR 150258Z May 75 and 150327Z May 75.
 2. NAVY TIMES, 27 Aug 75, p. 15, "The Assault on Koh Tang"; Draft narrative of interview by Colonel Savoy with Major Austin, undated, Subj: Koh Tang Assault/Operation MAYAGUEZ; USSAG/7AF & JCRC History, 1 Apr-30 Jun 1975, dated 22 Aug 75, p. 91; Op. Cit., Proceedings, p. 94.
 3. Op. Cit., Proceedings, p. 95.

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battle (OB) information on the island because of the dense jungle cover. Photo reconnaissance by _____ was not timely enough for use in such a fast-moving situation. As noted above, the Marine GSF commander's visual reconnaissance proved unsatisfactory to obtain OB information, and _____ collection resources provided no OB intelligence due to

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(S) Intelligence shortly after the fall of Cambodia (17 April 1975) reported the existence of 18-20 people on the island at that time. IPAC disseminated this information by an intelligence spot report (SPOTREP) on 13 May. In a second SPOTREP, following closely behind the first, IPAC estimated the maximum of one Khmer Communist company (90-100 men) reinforced with a heavy weapons squad to be on the island; however, this report apparently did not reach the Marine GSF commander prior to the assault on the island, although it did reach the transporting helicopter commander and others. According to Major J.B. Hendricks, Operations Officer of the Second Battalion of the Ninth Marine Regiment (2/9), from which the Koh Tang Island assault force was drawn, their briefings informed them "...that there were 20-30 Khmer Rouge irregulars on the island, possibly reinforced by whatever naval support personnel that were there associated with the gunboats sighted in the area." A DIA appraisal which appeared in the JCS after action report on the incident estimated approximately 150-200 Khmer Communists on the island at the onset of the operation; however, there was no indication that this specific appraisal was generally available prior to the assault.²

(S) Available maps were considered insufficient to plan an amphibious assault or direct naval gunfire in support of the Koh Tang Island phase of the MAYAGUEZ operation. Topographic maps at 1:50,000 or 1:100,000 scale did not extend to the island. The current nautical chart of the island was approximately 1:240,000 scale and there was a Joint Operations Graphic (JOG) at 1:250,000 scale. Standard Naval combat charts were only produced for high priority or training areas; however, other limited areas could have been mapped by the Defense Mapping Agency in 48 hours, exclusive of shipping time, for an amphibious assault.³

(S) During the MAYAGUEZ operation the use of intelligence collection media for timely operational reporting (see also communications section) proved an important source of U.S. force data.

1. CINCPAC 191623Z Jun 75 (EX).
2. Op. Cit., Proceedings, p. 104, and JCS After Action Report, Tab B, pp. 1-2; COMIPAC 131823Z May 75 and 132144Z May 75; CINCPAC 131338Z Feb 76.
3. J3/Memo/00566-75 of 8 Sep 75, Subj: SS MAYAGUEZ/Koh Tang Island Operation; CINCPAC 191623Z Jun 75 (EX).

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From there, CINCPAC received them via operational communications, at times well ahead of COMUSSAG/7AF voice reports. There was some difficulty correlating operations and intelligence reports because of this time differential.¹

(S) As a result of experience gained from the MAYAGUEZ operation, CINCPAC directed a feedback system to ensure acknowledgement of critical intelligence by commanders directly concerned, and further emphasized:²

- The need for accurate photos, charts, and maps of the area for Naval gunfire, close air and assault support forces.

- The need to maintain tactical reconnaissance forces in vital areas to provide timely coverage in fast-moving situations.

- The need for COMPASS LINK or a similar system to [to Washington, theater commanders, and for possible press releases.

- The need to develop procedures to rapidly introduce photography from various sources, such as P-3, into other reconnaissance distribution systems in the immediate area of operations.

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1. J6/Memo/0027-75 of 11 Jun 75, Subj: Lessons Learned-SS MAYAGUEZ/Koh Tang Island Operation.
 2. J3 Discussion Topic, undated, Issue: Lessons Learned Recent Contingency Operations, for discussion at CINC conference held 14 Aug 75 at LANTCOM; CINCPAC 191623Z Jun 75 (EX).

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SECTION V--PLANNING AND EXECUTION

Planning

(S) As CINCPAC's on-scene commander during the MAYAGUEZ operation, COMUSSAG/7AF was tasked to develop, submit for approval, and execute a multi-Service air, air assault, and surface plan for the recovery of the MAYAGUEZ and an assault on Koh Tang Island in little over 16 hours. Time constraints did not provide sufficient time for detailed operation orders.¹

(S) The initial operational concept involved use of the nearest available assets, Air Force security police. They were to make a helicopter assault directly on to the MAYAGUEZ at first light on 14 May; however, as the situation developed, incoming Marines replaced the security police in what was planned to be a simultaneously executed two-phase operation to recover the MAYAGUEZ and release her crew, supported by air strikes on mainland Cambodia.²

(S) Actions taken at the direction of the JCS in support of the evolving operational concept included:³

- CINCPAC move all available helicopter assets in Thailand to U-Tapao.
- CINCPAC move 75 USAF security police from Nakhon Phanom to U-Tapao.
- CINCPAC move two reinforced platoons of Marines from Cubi Point to U-Tapao via MAC airlift.
- CINCPAC place one Okinawa-based Marine battalion on advanced deployability posture for movement to U-Tapao via MAC airlift.
- CSAF task MAC to provide appropriate support to CINCPAC as required and move appropriate MAC airlift to Kadena AB in preparation to lift Okinawa-based Marines.

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1. J5/Memo/00131-75 of 17 Jul 75, Subj: SS MAYAGUEZ/Koh Tang Island Operation.
 2. USSAG/7AF and JCRC History, 1 Apr-30 Jun 1975, dated 22 Aug 75, pp. 87-89.
 3. JCS 9179/131610Z May 75.

(8) Based on these JCS instructions, CINCPAC further tasked COMUSSAG/7AF to move the helicopter assets and security police in Thailand to U-Tapao; CINCPACFLT to move the Marines from Cubi Point and Okinawa to U-Tapao; and CINCPACAF to preposition the required airlift in Okinawa. In addition, the following taskings had already been directed:¹

- USS CORAL SEA [CVA-43] and escorts (TG 77.5) from the vicinity of Indonesia (about 950 miles away) to the vicinity of Kompong Som.

- USS HOLT, Destroyer Escort (DE-1074), and USS VEGA from about 100 miles off the Philippine coast (southwest of Subic Bay) to the scene of the incident.

- USS WILSON, Guided-Missile Destroyer (DDG-7), enroute from Kaohsiung, Republic of China, bound for Subic Bay, Republic of the Philippines to the vicinity of Koh Tang Island.

- USS OKINAWA, enroute to Okinawa, return to the Philippines to reconstitute an Amphibious Ready Group (ARG) (USS OKINAWA, USS DULUTH, USS BARBOUR COUNTY, and USS MT. VERNON) and prepare to proceed to the scene. (This unit was not deployed.)

(8) The essence of COMUSSAG/7AF's initial operational concept was as follows:²

- Arrive on station at first light, 2300Z 13 May/0600G 14 May.

- Effect recovery of the ship and, if possible, the ship's crew.

- USAF tactical aircraft air-drop riot control agents (RCA) on the ship to immobilize any personnel on board.

- Use all CH-53 helicopter assets available in Thailand and all but two of the available HH-53 assets.

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1. Op. Cit., JCS After Action Report, Tab D, Encl 9, p. 1; The Comptroller General MAYAGUEZ Report, pp. 36-38; and Proceedings, pp. 97, 108; CINCPAC 131737Z May 75.
 2. COMUSSAG/7AF 131748Z May 75.

- At ten minute intervals, in a single helo-lift, offload, from a hover, 125 USAF security police, 2 explosive ordnance personnel, 2 paramedics, and 1 Army captain interpreter onto the MAYAGUEZ.

(S) During the deployment of helicopters and 100 USAF security police from Nakhon Phanom to U-Tapao, which began at 1300Z hours 13 May, one CH-53 crashed because of mechanical failure, killing 18 security police and 5 crew members.¹

(S) At 2051Z hours 13 May, CINCPAC directed COMUSSAG/7AF to modify the concept by substituting USMC Ground Security Force (GSF) personnel for the USAF security police, and emphasized that command and control would be maintained by CINCPAC. No execute order was issued.²

(TS) At 0645Z hours 14 May the JCS notified CINCPAC:³

Higher authority has directed that all necessary preparations be made for potential execution early on the 15th to seize the MAYAGUEZ, occupy Koh Tang Island, conduct B-52 strikes against the port of Kompong Som and Ream Airfield, and sink all Cambodian small craft in target areas.

(TS) CINCPAC was now tasked to plan for and execute, when directed, the following operations:⁴

- USS HAROLD E. HOLT seize SS MAYAGUEZ using ships company and or augmenting Marines at U-Tapao.
- Occupy Koh Tang Island with Marine forces at U-Tapao supported by Air Force helo assets and tactical air and naval gunfire support as available and required.
- Sink all Cambodian small craft in the target areas of Koh Tang, Poulo Wai, Kompong Som, and Ream.

(TS) CINCSAC was tasked to conduct conventional B-52 strikes against the port of Kompong Som and Ream Airfield from Guam.⁵

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1. USSAG/7AF & JCRC History, 1 Apr-30 Jun 1975, dated 22 Aug 75, p. 88.
 2. CINCPAC 132051Z May 75.
 3. JCS 1109/140645Z May 75 (EX).
 4. Ibid.
 5. Ibid.

(TS) CINCPAC then tasked COMUSSAG/7AF to provide the detailed plans required by the JCS by 1300Z hours 14 May. CINCPAC further specified that, in planning, maximum emphasis should be placed on use of the USS CORAL SEA for close air support and minimum reliance on the availability of Thai-based strategic and tactical air. Although not mentioned, this specification was probably in deference to Thai sensitivities; however, as the situation actually evolved, this specification was not adhered to.¹

(TS) During the new planning phase, participating units provided input to the plan that was finally submitted. There was general agreement on the need for simultaneously boarding the MAYAGUEZ and helo assaulting Koh Tang Island; however, views differed on the method for boarding the MAYAGUEZ. CINCPACFLT's concept, which was finally executed, was to transfer the boarding party by helicopter to the USS HOLT. The Marine task force commander (CTF 79.9) and COMUSSAG/7AF initially envisioned inserting the boarding party by helicopter directly onto the MAYAGUEZ in a manner similar to COMUSSAG/7AF's previous concept (see page 23). The concept submitted in COMUSSAG/7AF's final plan agreed with CINCPACFLT on the method for boarding the MAYAGUEZ; but, in an apparent oversight in the employment paragraph to the same plan, insertion on the MAYAGUEZ was specified to be by helicopter. CINCPAC approved the final plan, subject to the boarding party boarding from the USS HOLT and clarification that supporting strategic air B-52D air strikes were to be as directed by the JCS. CINCPAC directed that the Marines be put aboard the HOLT and the HOLT brought alongside the MAYAGUEZ because it was unknown if any Cambodians were on the MAYAGUEZ. It was simpler, with fewer risks, to board the MAYAGUEZ from the HOLT than from helicopters.²

(TS) The following were the key elements of the final operational concept developed to recover the SS MAYAGUEZ and influence the outcome of U.S. initiatives to secure the release of the ship's crew:³

- Begin a simultaneous two-phase assault at sunrise 15 May local time (approximately 2300Z 14 May 1975).
- Using eight USAF CH/HH-53 helicopters, execute a combat assault on Koh Tang Island, with 175 Marines in the initial wave, subsequent buildup to a total of 625 Marines on the island, and rescue members of the SS MAYAGUEZ that may be found there.

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1. CINCPAC 140750Z May 75.
 2. CINCPACFLT 141254Z May 75; CTF 79.9 141400Z May 75; COMUSSAG 141515Z May 75; CINCPAC 142112Z May 75 and 131338Z Feb 76.
 3. COMUSSAG/7AF 141730Z May 75 (EX).

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- Using three USAF helicopters, insert 48 Marines, 12 USN/MSC personnel, and explosive ordnance team and a Cambodian linguist on the USS HOLT, close with the SS MAYAGUEZ, and board and secure her.

- Close air support and area coverage against all Cambodian small craft would be provided by USAF and USN tactical air. Naval gunfire support would be available, and B-52 strikes or Naval tactical air would be directed against possible reinforcing mainland Cambodian targets.

~~(S)~~ Subsequent operations followed this concept closely, with tactical air from the USS CORAL SEA being substituted for B-52s in the mainland strikes.¹

~~(S)~~ Experience gained in planning for the MAYAGUEZ operation highlighted the need to maintain and follow adequate, current crisis action procedures in responding to quick-breaking situations. Realizing the impracticality of attempting to prepare explicit plans for every possible crisis situation, and the fact that sufficient planning time would hardly ever be available, CINCPAC observed that those options most likely to be executed should be clearly identified early in the planning process to prevent subordinate commands from "spinning their wheels," planning for options that had little likelihood of being executed. Overall, the requirement for U.S. military assets worldwide to be strategically mobile and instantly responsive was emphasized.²

~~(S)~~ Observing the interrelated plans and operations process, CINCPAC stressed the need to increase the number of joint incident exercises with more imaginative and realistic scenarios, commencing with PACOM Command Post Exercises (CPXs), moving, with JCS concurrence, to higher-level politico-military games (possibly inter-departmental), and then frequent, full-fledged exercises with force participation.³

Execution

The MAYAGUEZ/Koh Tang Island Operation

~~(S)~~ The operation began with the first insertion of Marines on Koh Tang Island at about 2255Z 14 May (0555G 15 May) and the landing of the boarding

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1. Op. Cit., JCS After Action Report, Tab A, p. 2.
 2. J5/Memo/00131-75 of 17 Jul 75, Subj: SS MAYAGUEZ/Koh Tang Island Operation.
 3. CINCPAC 191623Z Jun 75 (EX).

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party on the USS HAROLD E. HOLT at about 2305Z 14 May (0605G 15 May). Although the USS HOLT met no opposition, and the boarding party was in complete control of the MAYAGUEZ within about two hours (0128Z 15 May), the Marine GSF and transporting USAF helicopters met fierce opposition from the beginning. Their ordeal lasted about 14 hours (last Marines extracted at about 1310Z 15 May). The MAYAGUEZ crew had been identified as safe aboard the USS WILSON within about 4 hours (0308Z 15 May) after the initial assault on the island; however, because of the strong enemy opposition encountered on the island, reinforcements were required to stabilize the situation and successfully extract the Marines.¹

(S) During the initial insertion of Marines on Koh Tang Island, concern for the safety of the MAYAGUEZ crew, believed to be on the island, precluded landing zone preparation by air strikes or naval gunfire. Even after confirmation of the crew's recovery, fast A-7 Forward Air Controllers (FACs) were unable to pinpoint locations of friendly units and suppress enemy fire because of the confines of, and confusing situation on, the battlefield. It was not until 0930Z 15 May that two OV-10 "Nail" slow FACs, with loitering ability, were on station to pinpoint friendly positions for effective close air support. Also, it was not until 0735Z 15 May that the first helicopter was able to recover to the CORAL SEA rather than return to U-Tapao (helicopters used were a mix of HH-53 air-refuelable "Jolly Green," and CH-53 non-air-refuelable "Knife" aircraft).²

(S) In summary, the Koh Tang Island phase of the MAYAGUEZ operation involved the insertion of 231 Marines and subsequent evacuation of 227 (there were three missing in action and one killed in action left on the island) in the face of severe enemy fire. A total of 15 USMC, USAF, and USN personnel were killed in action, 49 wounded in action, and 3 Marines missing in action. Participating USAF helicopters incurred three combat losses, four were severely damaged, and six received minor damage.³

(S) As a result of the experience gained from executing the Koh Tang Island phase of the MAYAGUEZ operation, CINCPAC made the following additional observations relative to the means available to support the assault:⁴

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1. Assault on Koh Tang, DCS/Plans and Operations, HQ PACAF, 23 Jun 75, pp. 23, 1-1, 1-3; PATRON FOUR 150327Z May 75; COMUSSAG/7AF 150215Z May 75.
 2. Assault on Koh Tang, DCS/Plans and Operations, HQ PACAF, 23 Jun 75, pp. 2, 4, 18, 28, 29, 1-2.
 3. Ibid., USSAG/7AF & JCRC History, 1 Apr-30 Jun 1975, dated 22 Aug 75, p. 99.
 4. J3/Memo/00566-75 of 8 Sep 75, Subj: SS MAYAGUEZ/Koh Tang Island Operation; CINCPAC 191623Z Jun 75 (EX).

- Helicopter availability dictated the size and composition of forces; thus, the initial insertion was marginal in size, and rapid buildup ashore was not possible due to limited lift capability. Once the CORAL SEA was within 10 miles of the island, and shuttle distance was reduced, adequate support was available for the extraction phase. As we approach reduced force levels in the theater, particular attention must be paid to airmobile support from all services which provides flexibility to force composition.

- Troop lift helicopters should be air refuelable and equipped with fire preventive foam in external fuel tanks, as well as other hardening measures (losses were greater among CH-53s).

- We should use helicopters and low speed FACs to coordinate tactical air assets whenever the tactical environment permits.

Supportive Air Strikes Against the Cambodian Mainland

(S) Air strikes in support of the MAYAGUEZ operation were conducted against mainland Cambodian targets as directed by the JCS, the final decisions resting with higher authority. Cyclic strikes from the USS CORAL SEA against targets in the Kompong Som area were scheduled with first time-on-target about 0045Z 15 May, which closely coincided with the recovery of the MAYAGUEZ. In the midst of the initial execution of the operation, a Foreign Broadcast Information Service report out of Bangkok quoted a Cambodian Government press release to the effect that they intended to release the MAYAGUEZ and crew. This was being discussed by CINCPAC and the NMCC when, about 0044Z 15 May, word was received from the White House to cancel the CORAL SEA strike; however, by 0052Z 15 May word was received to again proceed with the CORAL SEA strikes as planned. The first wave did not expend any ordnance. Then, right after the MAYAGUEZ had been searched and found empty, CINCPAC received information from an unknown Cambodian station saying, "Let the Americans go. We do not want to become prisoners ourselves." This supported the belief that at least some Americans could still be on Koh Tong Island, and shortly after this, the second wave of CORAL SEA aircraft arrived over the mainland to attack Ream Airfield. By 0308Z 15 May the release of the MAYAGUEZ crew had been confirmed and at 0329Z 15 May CINCPAC reported to the NMCC that the crew members had told the WILSON personnel that as a "condition for release they promised air strikes would cease." CINCPAC now queried the JCS as to whether

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or not the third wave should continue on course. The Chairman, JCS discussed this with the Secretary of Defense, and the third and final strike was directed and carried out.¹

~~(S)~~ Finally, at 0455Z 15 May, the JCS notified all participants in the MAYAGUEZ operation.²

Immediately cease all offensive operations against Khmer Republic related to seizure of MAYAGUEZ. Disengage and withdraw all forces from operation area as soon as possible consistent with safety/self-defense.

~~(S)~~ CINCPAC noted that "...the threat of bombing of the Cambodian mainland did, in fact, influence the Cambodian's decision to release the crew..." as was verified by the captain of the MAYAGUEZ.³

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1. JCS Report, Strike Operations Against Mainland Targets During Operations to Recover SS MAYAGUEZ and Crew, dated 19 May 1975.
 2. JCS 2396/150455Z May 75.
 3. CINCPAC 131338Z Feb 76.

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SECTION VI--SUPPLEMENTARY BIBLIOGRAPHY

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