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David Hume Kennerly—The White House

The President's men* cheering a famous victory: 'We got them all out, thank God . . . It went just great'

Ford's Rescue Operation

He sat red-eyed and weary among his crisis managers in the Oval Office, still in his tuxedo after a state dinner, listening to the latest report from the Pentagon on the attempt to retrieve the captured U.S. merchantman *Mayaguez* from the Cambodians by force of arms. There was a moment's stillness as Gerald Ford settled the receiver into its black desk-top cradle. "They're all safe," he said into the hush. "We got them all out, thank God. It went perfectly. It went just great." And suddenly the tension of 65 anxious hours dissolved in a bath of emotion, the President and his chief of staff exchanging whoops of joy, Henry Kissinger beaming ear to ear, the lot of them celebrating what seemed in that taut midnight to be a famous victory.

In a real sense, the *Mayaguez* incident was precisely that—a daring show of nerve and steel by a nation whose will, after Vietnam, had come under question around the globe. Cambodia furnished the provocation, seizing the unarmed ship in disputed waters in the Gulf of Siam and forcing it to anchor off a tiny crescent island called Tang. Ford's answer was a classic show of gunboat diplomacy—U.S. warplanes blasting five Cambodian vessels out of the water, U.S. marines boarding the *Mayaguez* and storming ashore on Tang, U.S. fighter-bombers blitzing an air base

and an oil depot on the mainland. It was swift and tough—and it worked. It liberated the ship and its crew of 39, and it enveloped the Ford Presidency in an almost euphoric afterglow. "I'm very proud to be an American today," exulted Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, and one Republican congressman wrote his own happy headline: MARINES RESCUE SHIP, CREW AND FORD.

'NOBODY CHALLENGES SUCCESS'

The first flush of success paled a shade with the official casualty counts—five dead, sixteen missing and 70 to 80 wounded—and with some sobering morning-after questions as well. The announced aim of the operation was the rescue of American nationals and American property. But its underlying spirit was geopolitical, a demonstration of U.S. power and purpose to a wondering world. Kissinger himself was said by one participant to have told the first National Security Council meeting on the crisis that the lives of the *Mayaguez* crewmen "must unfortunately be a secondary consideration" (Kissinger denied the quotation). The commitment to force accordingly was made early and, in the view of some critics, was carried out even after the Cambodians showed signs of capitulating. Even one Administration official who helped sell the action to Congress called it privately "the sheerest sort of jingoism"; his

argument was that it succeeded—"and nobody challenges success."

Hardly anybody did; the nearly universal will of Washington instead was to concede Ford a four-star political and diplomatic triumph, precisely when he most needed one. His standing as President has steadily ebbed from the Nixon pardon through the collapse of South Vietnam and Cambodia. He has lately fallen under challenge from the hawkish right of his own party, and even some of his friends fairly ached for a demonstration of his own capacity for leadership. Ford, in their eyes, supplied it last week, and his people celebrated the recovery of the *Mayaguez* as though it were the battle of Thermopylae. "Damn, it puts the epaulets back on!" exclaimed one aide, and another who had come to doubt it echoed: "By God, we've got ourselves a President."

Nor were Ford's partisans alone in their exhilaration. The letters, wires and phone calls to the White House were running twelve to one his way. A Democratic congressman guessed that Operation *Mayaguez* would put 15 more points on Ford's next poll. Friends and foes alike on Capitol Hill were overwhelmingly congratulatory; even Kentucky's Rep. Carroll Hubbard, chairman of the House Democratic freshman caucus, was moved to say, "It's good to win one for a change."

The first intelligence readings from

*From left, national-security aide Brent Scowcroft, chief of staff Donald Rumsfeld, Kissinger, Ford.



The marines storming ashore on Tang Island: 'Damn,' said a White House aide, 'it puts the epaulets back on!' AP

abroad likewise suggested that Ford had achieved his purpose, heartening allies and putting adversaries—especially the trigger-happy North Koreans—on notice that the U.S. is not after all a paper tiger. Even the sensitive Thais, whose territory was used to launch the assault, were described as “secretly delighted,” though they recalled their ambassador from Washington at the weekend for a review of all treaties with the U.S. The operation came on the eve of a Presidential visit to a nervous NATO conference in Brussels and a Kissinger sitdown with Russia’s Andrei Gromyko; it armed them with evidence that, in Kissinger’s words, there remain “limits beyond which the United States cannot be pushed.”

The need for just such an object lesson was a dominant theme in the Administration’s councils of war from the first. Other factors impelled them to a swift and surgical military strike—foremost among them an authentic concern for the safety of the captive crewmen at the hands of Cambodia’s xenophobic new Khmer Rouge government. This fear was heightened by a faulty first intelligence reading that the Communists had in fact forced the Mayaguez to the mainland. For the crisis managers, this raised the specter of the 1968 Pueblo incident, in which the North Koreans seized an American intelligence ship and hustled its crewmen inland beyond rescue. But the Situation Room was shadowed as well by the loss of Vietnam and Cambodia, the accelerating slide of Laos (page 40) and the dangers of irresolution in the face of clear provocation. From the first NSC meeting onward, said one participant, “there wasn’t a dove in the place.”

The pre-eminent hawk, by various inside accounts, was Henry Kissinger, though he was backed from the first by Ford himself. Kissinger opened with what one source called a “brilliant” 25-minute disquisition on the Mayaguez incident as a chance for the U.S. to restore its faded credibility with a decisive military show of will. The stakes, Kissinger is said to have argued, were larger than the lives of crewmen; America’s relations with its allies—most immediately South Korea and the Philippines—were likewise at hazard. “At some point,” this source quoted the Secretary as having said, “the United States must draw the line . . . [The Mayaguez seizure] is not our idea of the best such situation, it is not our choice. But we must act on it now, and act firmly.”

‘GIVE THEM A BLOODY NOSE’

One sore point in the aftermath was whether the Administration had tried diplomatic alternatives to force; the evidence is that it had, but with little heart and less hope. Ford attempted a direct public demand for the ship and crew, denouncing their seizure as an “act of piracy,” and private probes were made through the Chinese in Washington and through exiled Prince Norodom Sihanouk in Peking. The dead silence from Phnom Penh only fed the impulse toward an exemplary show of force. “Henry Kissinger was determined to give the Khmer Rouge a bloody nose,” said one Pentagon official—and the failure of diplomacy sealed the case.

The more serious quarrels were whether, once committed, the U.S. recklessly gambled lives in the operation—

and whether it went on bloodying noses even after Cambodia signaled its readiness to give in. Administration sources defended every phase of its escalating military response—the assault on the Cambodian gunboats was required to keep them from shutting the Mayaguez crewmen to the mainland; the landing on Tang was necessary on the supposition that some of the captives were there; the airstrike against Ream air base on the mainland was a pre-emptive raid to protect the Marine operations barely 30 miles offshore. “We are not,” said Kissinger afterward, “going around looking for opportunities to prove our manhood.”

But the official accounting was threaded through with unanswered questions. There was a kind of Attica strain in the attack on the gunboats and the assault on Tang—the conscious risk that the Mayaguez prisoners might be slaughtered by American fire in the first instance or by their Khmer Rouge captors in the second. More puzzling still was why air strikes designed to protect the marines began four hours after the landing on Tang—and three hours after Washington got word that the Cambodians had broadcast their willingness to release the ship. The broadcast, as U.S. officials noted, did not specifically include the crew in the offer. It might nevertheless have warranted a delay in the bombing to see what Cambodia really intended. Instead, Navy planes went ahead with the run on the air base just as the crewmen were being taken aboard a U.S. destroyer—and launched a second raid on a nearby oil depot almost an hour after the rescue was over.

Still, by luck and pluck, the operation

achieved its purposes, and the doubts that surfaced in its wake were overwhelmed by the huzzahs. It was a measure of Ford's political success that the single most common complaint on the Hill was not that he had made the wrong decision but that Congress had been left out of it. The war-powers resolution of 1973, enacted in the ashes of the Vietnam war, requires a President to consult Congress "in every possible instance" before committing United States forces to action. Ford merely announced his decisions to the bipartisan leadership after they had been taken, seeking neither advice nor consent and so irritating some members on both sides of the aisle. The White House ignored the resulting protests. "Some things," said one White House staffer, "can't be decided by a committee. That's why you've got a President. He's President and they aren't."

What pleased Ford's people most of all

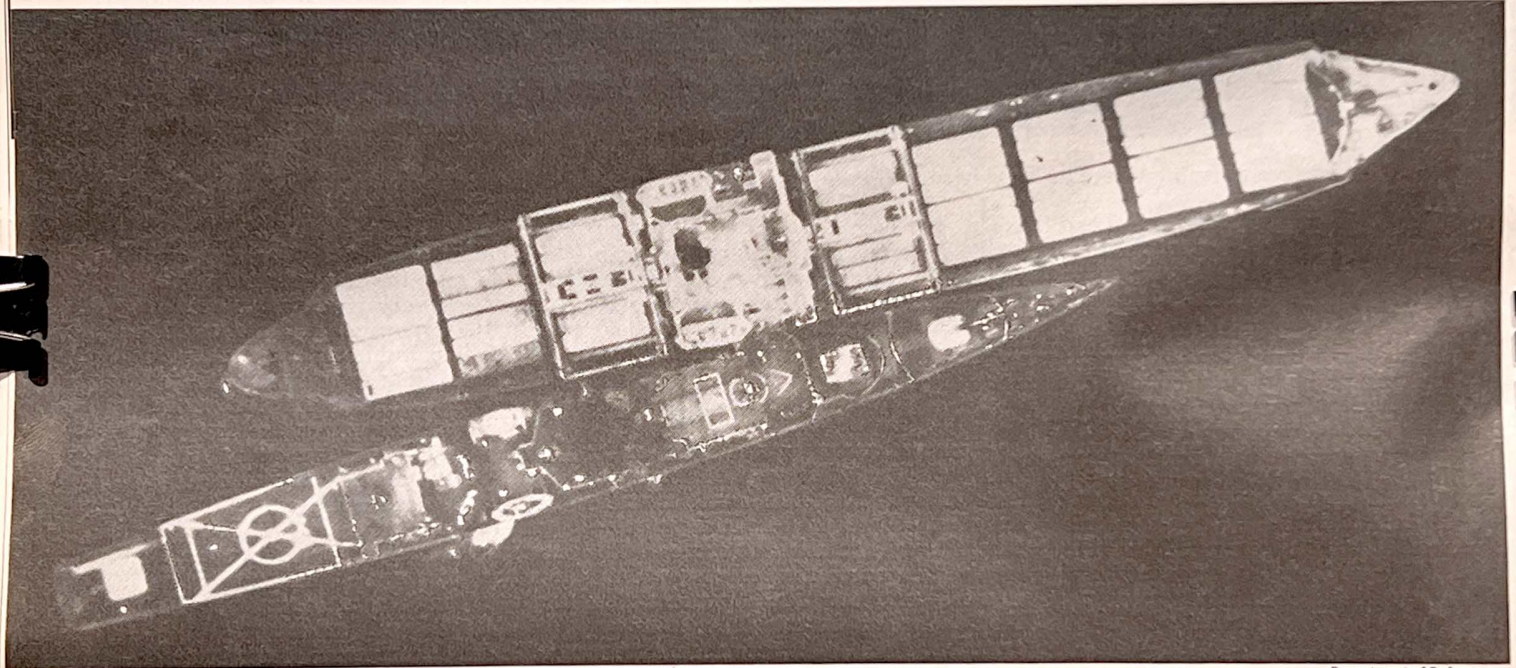
Victory at Sea

From out of the tropic sun, a U.S. Air Force A-7 fighter-bomber swooped in to begin a strafing run on the fleeing fishing trawler. As the pilot prepared to open up with his 20-mm. cannon, he suddenly thought he saw a group of Americans huddled on the deck below. Immediately, he pulled up and radioed for instructions. His message was quickly relayed all the way to the Pentagon, then to the White House—and to Gerald Ford. The President mulled over the choices and then passed the command: hold your fire.

They flew in on a Jolly Green Giant helicopter—25 young, nervous marines in full battle gear. Their orders: secure a landing zone on Tang Island beach. But

the deck of the Mayaguez. Clutching their M-16 rifles, the marines swept through the merchant ship, searching for the missing American seamen and their Cambodian captors. All they found, however, were some plates of warm rice in the mess room and a few cups of hot tea.

Two years after the last American combat troops left Vietnam, U.S. marines were back in the thick of battle in Indochina. This time, their mission was not to save an allied nation—only to rescue 39 captured American merchant seamen. Though the provocation by the new revolutionary government of Cambodia was a relatively small one, the White House viewed it as a critical test of



Department of Defense

Boarding ship, pirate style: Holt (with landing pad at rear) nudges alongside the Mayaguez to transfer American landing force

was that he had in fact behaved Presidentially in his first important test of nerve abroad, and had won. It was difficult to square the real worth of his victory at Tang Island with Washington's euphoria over it; the image of America's despairing retreat from Indochina is likely to count for more in the world over the long run than its two-day punitive expedition against the vastly overmatched Khmer Rouge. But for the short term, Ford did assert his own size and the nation's will when both were under gathering challenge. "Sure there was a lot of luck involved," said one senior staffer. "But he was a cool customer. He didn't waffle, he didn't fence-ride, and he did a hell of a lot of good for the country—and a hell of a lot of good for himself."

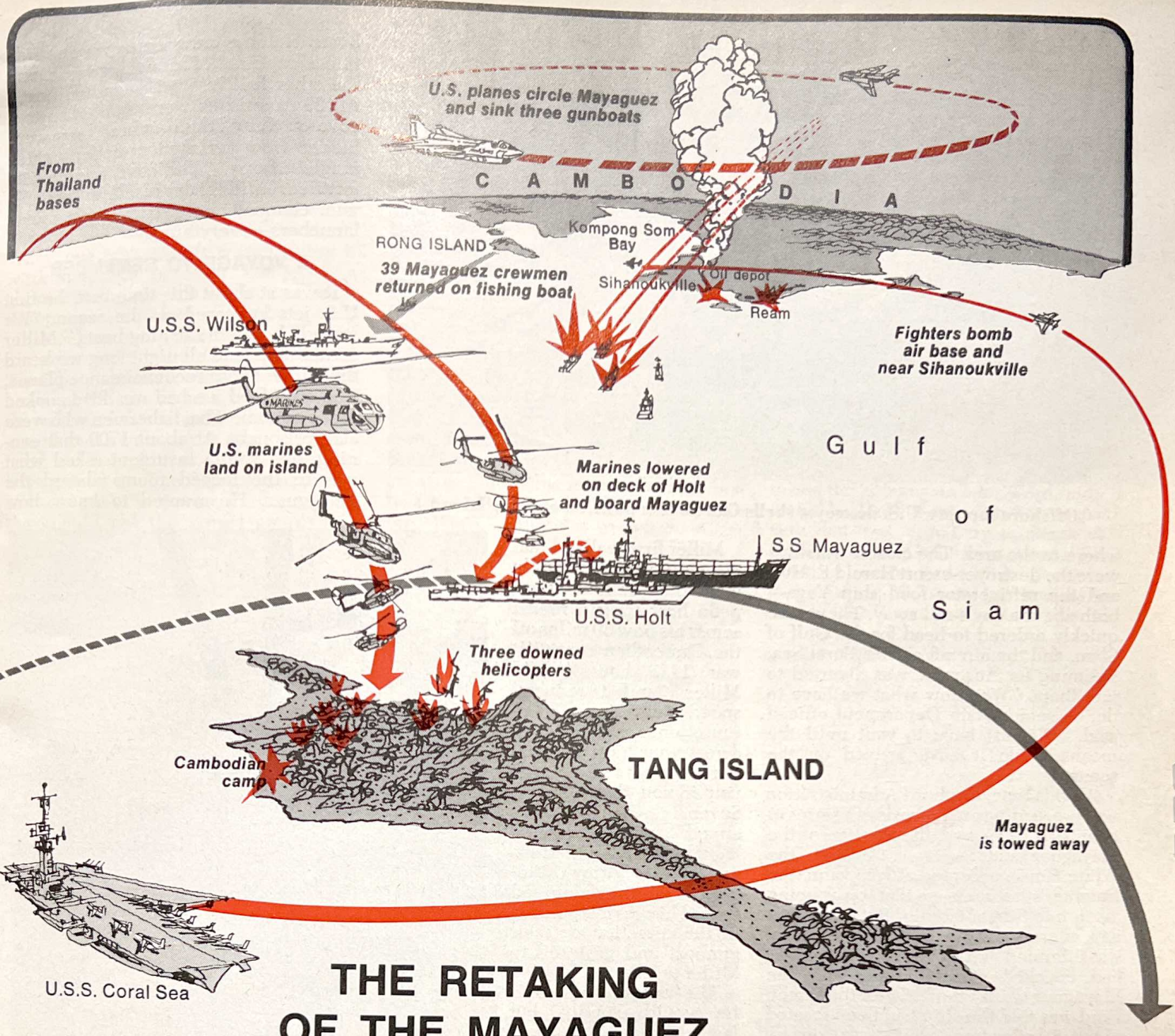
—PETER GOLDMAN with THOMAS M. De FRANK, HENRY W. HUBBARD and BRUCE van VOORST in Washington

as the chopper approached the island, it ran into a withering hail of automatic-weapons fire. "The LZ was too hot for us to land, so they had to get us in the best way they could," recalled Pfc. Larry Yerg, 18. "We wound up landing by the rocks. From the air, all I could see were straw-roofed huts and jungle. And the beach. Suddenly, an AK-47 hit our helicopter and I realized that I was wounded in my left shoulder."

With its engines at full stop, the U.S. Navy destroyer-escort Holt eased up to the Mayaguez, lying dead in the water in the Gulf of Siam. As the Holt's bow nudged up alongside the freighter's stern, 60 marines and sailors—accompanied by an Army translator—boarded the larger ship pirate style, leaping from the gunwale of the destroyer-escort onto

U.S. nerve, and decided to respond in a big way. As warships led by the aircraft carrier Coral Sea steamed into the Gulf of Siam, hundreds of combat-ready marines were rushed to Thailand and then airlifted into action aboard giant CH-53 helicopters. Too late, the new Cambodian leaders realized they had pushed too hard. Even as they were setting the captured American seamen free, waves of U.S. fighter-bombers were on the way.

The White House's demonstration that the U.S. is still a force to be reckoned with in Southeast Asia was mounted on behalf of a rusting old freighter, the Mayaguez, that regularly plies the waters between Thailand and Hong Kong. The 486-foot-long vessel, one of 53 ships owned by Sea-Land Service, Inc., of Menlo Park, N.J., was bound for the Thai port of Sattahip last week carrying truck-



THE RETAKING OF THE MAYAGUEZ

ib Ohlsson

Snatching back the Mayaguez: Two years after American combat troops left Vietnam, U.S. marines were back in battle in Indochina

size "containers" of cargo ranging from mail to liquor and ammunition. As it steamed slowly west in the normal shipping lanes in the Gulf of Siam—its captain, Charles T. Miller of Fountain Valley, Calif., apparently unaware that two other freighters had been fired on by Cambodian gunboats in the same area the previous week—two small vessels suddenly appeared from behind Poulo Wai, a tiny rocky islet. Approaching the Mayaguez, one of the gunboats fired a shot across the freighter's bow. Quickly, Miller ordered his radio officer to send an emergency message: "Mayday, mayday. We are being fired upon and boarded by Cambodians."

It was shortly before dawn in Washington when the first "flash" of the ship's seizure was received in the State Department Operations Center. To duty officers, the situation was perplexing. Nobody was clear exactly who had attacked

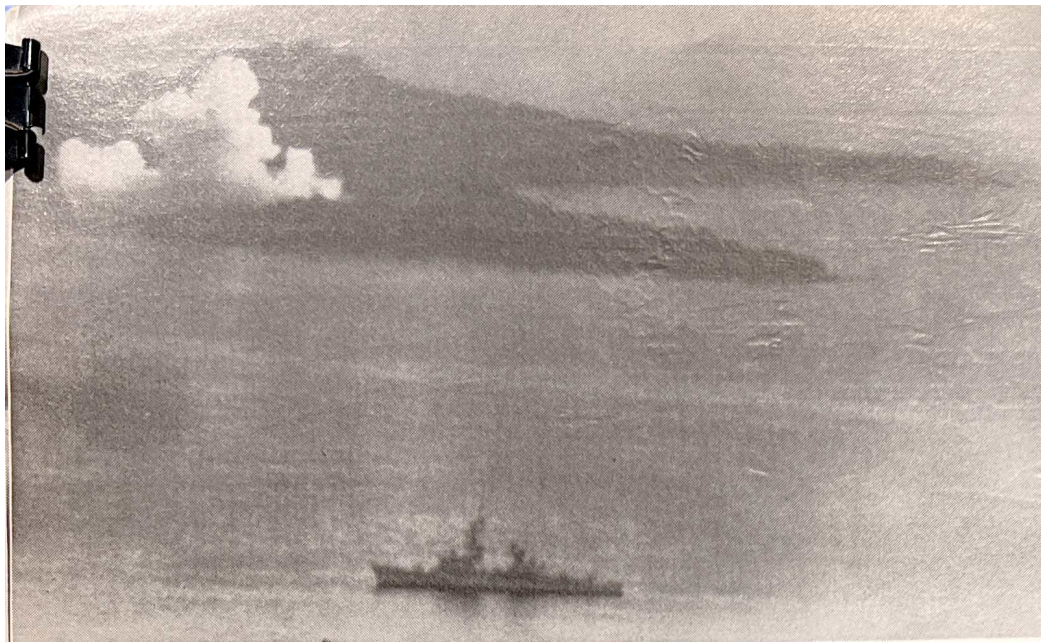
the Mayaguez—or why. So it wasn't until an hour later (6:15 a.m. in Washington, 5:15 p.m. in Cambodia) that Henry Kissinger was awakened with news of the new Indochina crisis. Even more time passed before the word reached Gerald Ford. Lt. Gen. Brent Scowcroft, the President's deputy national security affairs adviser, learned of the seizure when he arrived at the White House at 7 a.m., but decided not to bother Ford since he would be coming down from his residence a half hour later anyway. It wasn't until 7:40 that Ford got the news. At that point, about all the Pentagon could do was order Air Force and Navy planes from Thailand to attempt to locate the ship—and maintain surveillance.

At noon, when Ford convened an urgent meeting of the National Security Council in the Cabinet Room, it was clear that a full-scale crisis was under way. Kissinger, taking command of the

session, argued that what was at stake went far beyond the seizure of a U.S. vessel. For both domestic and international political reasons, Kissinger contended, the U.S. had to react—and hard. By the time the 45-minute meeting was over and White House spokesman Ron Nessen was sent out to break the news of the Mayaguez affair to the press, the tone of America's response was set. The President, Nessen said, was demanding that the vessel be released—immediately. "Failure to do so," he added, "would have the most serious consequences."

The White House even at this early stage held out almost no hope the Cambodians could be persuaded to release the Mayaguez voluntarily. But for the next 24 hours the State Department gave diplomacy a try. The Administration had little choice. To the discomfort of the White House, the Pentagon reported the U.S. had no quick reaction force any-

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Offshore support: U.S. destroyer shells Cambodian position on Tang Island

where in the area. The closest warships were the destroyer-escort Harold E. Holt and the refrigerator food ship Vega—both about a day's sail away. They were quickly ordered to head for the Gulf of Siam, and the aircraft carrier Coral Sea, steaming for Australia, was diverted to join them. "We know what we have to do," a senior State Department official said. "We just have to wait until the means to do it have arrived on the scene."

All this time, the Ford Administration was proceeding on the basis of a series of confusing reports on the location of the Mayaguez and its crew. At first, the White House accepted at face value the freighter's last message that it was being taken into Sihanoukville. But late Monday afternoon Washington time, Ford was informed that reconnaissance planes had checked Sihanoukville—and the Mayaguez wasn't there. Later that night, Ford was told the ship had been located about 30 miles from where it was seized. Apparently, U.S. intelligence experts thought at this point the Mayaguez might stay put. But at 2:31 a.m. Tuesday, Ford was awakened by a call from Scowcroft, who told him the vessel was on the move again. The President, fearful the Cambodians now intended to take the ship to Sihanoukville where recovery would be more difficult, issued new orders: U.S. aircraft were to fire warning shots, if necessary, to keep the ship or its crew from being taken into port.

'PEOPLE WERE KILLED'

Nine thousand miles from the White House in the Gulf of Siam, the Mayaguez's Captain Miller was still frantically trying to save his ship and crew. Last week, after he safely docked the Mayaguez in Singapore, Miller, a weathered veteran of 38 years at sea, recalled the ordeal. Red-eyed and exhausted, the skipper said: "People were killed to save me. Without our Air Force, without our marines, I don't think this crew would be standing before you today."

Miller first realized that his ship was in trouble when the Communist torpedo boat fired a rocket across his bow 60 miles off the Cambodian coast. "It was 1418 hours," said Miller, "and I reduced speed to maneuvering because once a man fires across your bow, international law says he can sink you if you don't obey." Seven Cambodians—armed with grenade launchers, AK-47 rifles and a U.S. Army field-pack radio—climbed aboard his vessel, pointed in the direction of their gunboat and gestured to Miller to follow.

The captain indicated he would comply, but lagged along at half speed—waiting for U.S. jets to respond to his "Mayday." At 8 o'clock, with night falling, he dropped anchor. His captors ordered him in sign language to proceed to wharf No. 2 in Sihanoukville. Miller told them his radar was out (which was true) and that he could not navigate. Throughout the muggy night, the argument continued in pantomime. "No one was allowed to sleep," the skipper said. "I sat up all night on the bridge."

At 6 the next morning, the Cambodians indicated on charts that they wanted the Mayaguez to proceed to Tang Island. After stalling a couple more hours, the freighter weighed anchor and followed at half speed—still hoping U.S. planes would momentarily come to their aid. But by 2 that afternoon, they had arrived off Tang Island. "The insurgents ordered us to get off the ship," Miller said. "We were surrounded by scores of small craft, fishing boats, Cambodian boats, navy

boats. Half the crew went over one side into a [captured] Thai fishing vessel and the other half into a Cambodian boat." All 39 Americans were then taken to a cove on Tang Island, where they were hidden from aerial view under a thick jungle canopy. "The cove was heavily fortified," Miller later recalled, "with 22-mm. cannon, anti-aircraft guns, rocket launchers—everything."

A VOYAGE TO REMEMBER

It was at about this time that the first U.S. jets appeared on the scene. "We stayed aboard the fishing boats," Miller continued, "and all night long we heard the whine of our reconnaissance planes. The only food we had was food cooked for us by some Thai fishermen who were also prisoners. At about 1700 that evening, one young insurgent asked what was in the locked rooms aboard the Mayaguez. He wanted to know how



Assault: Landing on Tang Island in a Jolly Green Giant

many bombs we had, how many guns. So the chief engineer and I agreed to go back to the ship and to show him we had no weapons. But when we got aboard, a recon plane began dropping flares. This scared the Khmer Rouge. They ordered us to get down, and then they quickly took us off again before we had a chance to show them anything.

"At about 0600 on May 14, we proceeded on the Thai fishing boat to the old port of Sihanoukville. We arrived there after 1000, but that voyage was one we will never forget. You know, our jet pilots can drop bombs so close it is like they are putting them through the eye of a needle. I guess we were strafed, bombed and rocketed about 100 times during those four and a half hours. They began by

doing all this, and machine-gunning too, about 50 to 100 yards ahead of us and then 50 to 75 yards on both sides.

"I don't blame the Air Force for what they did. All they were trying to do was to turn our ship around, to send us back. They were afraid we would be sent to some prison camp at Phnom Penh where we would spend the rest of our lives. When our boys saw it wasn't going to work they came in closer. The jets flew about 7 feet above the waves and began dropping stuff 10 feet off our bow, rockets, machine guns, the works. Three of our men were wounded by shrapnel. The Thai fishermen wanted to turn back and once did turn around, but every time they showed this fear the Khmer Rouge would put a gun to the Thai captain's head and force him to sail on. Then our boys gassed us. The first gassing wasn't so bad. I guess they were thinking that if they could gas the armed guards, we

tary area about half a mile away. Then, after another wait, the vessel was moved still again to Rong Island west of Sihanoukville—where the fishing vessel docked in a protected cove. There, to Miller's amazement, he was greeted in broken English with the words: "Welcome to Cambodia." The man turned out to be the interpreter for the Khmer Rouge's No. 2 man in Sihanoukville. For the first time since the seizure of his ship, Miller was finally talking to somebody in a position of authority.

Arguing that his ship was simply a civilian cargo vessel, the captain urged the Cambodians to release the Mayaguez and its crew to spare themselves from U.S. reprisals. If he could get back to the ship, Miller told officials, he would radio the office in Bangkok to try to head off the air strikes and the marine landing that he assured them were otherwise inevitable. The Cambodians promised Miller

stage protective air strikes against Ream airfield and other military targets around Sihanoukville (map, page 19). The White House then sent out the order to start the operation at dawn Thursday Pacific time (only an hour away), and President Ford summoned Congressional leaders to brief them.

'BLOW THE HELL OUT OF 'EM'

When Ford entered the Cabinet Room that evening, the Congressional leaders gave him a standing ovation. But a number of the lawmakers also had tough questions. Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield was worried about bombing the mainland. Ford was emphatic: "We want to make sure their military forces cannot be used against our marines." When Sen. John McClellan of Arkansas raised the point again later, Ford said: "I would be derelict if we didn't try to make sure that they didn't try to attack us." House Speaker Carl Albert asked if Ford couldn't have waited a bit longer before using force. "We waited as long as we could," the President said. Crusty old



Mission completed: Airman in wet suit and marine race toward rescue helicopter

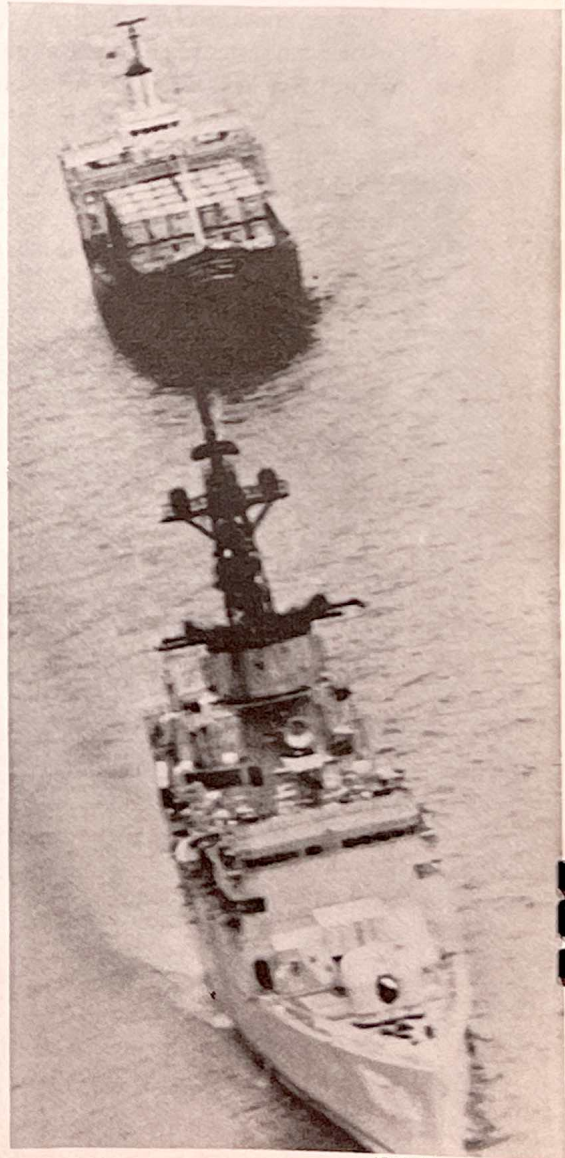
could overpower them. But we were gassed too. We couldn't see. The second time it was worse. I don't know what that stuff was but everyone was vomiting. Our skin and eyes were burning. Our third engineer, who has a heart problem, passed out for twenty minutes and we thought he was dead."

'WELCOME TO CAMBODIA'

Finally, U.S. planes gave up their effort to halt the fleeing boat. But they continued to circle overhead as it entered the harbor at Sihanoukville, tying up alongside a Cambodian fishing vessel. After sitting there for 45 minutes—while several thousand armed Cambodian civilians watched curiously from the shore—the boat was taken to a mili-

that he would have an answer at dawn.

While the crew of the Mayaguez spent a fitful night on Rong Island, back in Washington President Ford and his top advisers made final preparations for the military solution they were now convinced was necessary. The President convened a final National Security Council meeting Wednesday afternoon (early Thursday morning Cambodian time) and Gen. David C. Jones acting chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, presented five options. The President chose option four. This called for a Marine boarding party to retake the Mayaguez; a Marine force to be put ashore on Tang Island, where the Pentagon thought the ship's crew was still being held, and jets from the Coral Sea to



Freed: Mayaguez towed by U.S.S. Holt

AP photos

James Eastland, the president pro tem of the Senate, took little part in the discussion. He sat slouched in his chair throughout the meeting, mumbling several times to himself: "Blow the hell out of 'em."

Eastland's wish came true. First light was breaking over the Gulf of Siam as eleven Jolly Green Giant helicopters lifted off from U Tapao Air Base in Thailand and headed out to sea. An hour and 45 minutes later, three copters peeled off from the formation and descended on the U.S.S. Holt. As the big copters hung in the air—too heavy to actually land on the destroyer's helipad—a platoon of marines and six bomb-demolition experts clambered down

As the eight copters came in two by two, they were hit with a totally unexpected barrage of automatic-weapons fire. Intelligence experts, from reconnaissance photos, had predicted that the marines would find only about twenty people on the island—all elderly. It didn't work out that way. Waiting for the Americans was a well-dug-in Cambodian force of 150 to 300 men. Three of the eight helicopters were immediately shot down. One crash-landed on the beach. A second went down in the surf about 100 feet off the island and its marines swam and waded ashore. But a third crashed farther out to sea. Only thirteen of the 26 men aboard this copter were saved.

The U.S.S. Holt, meanwhile, was

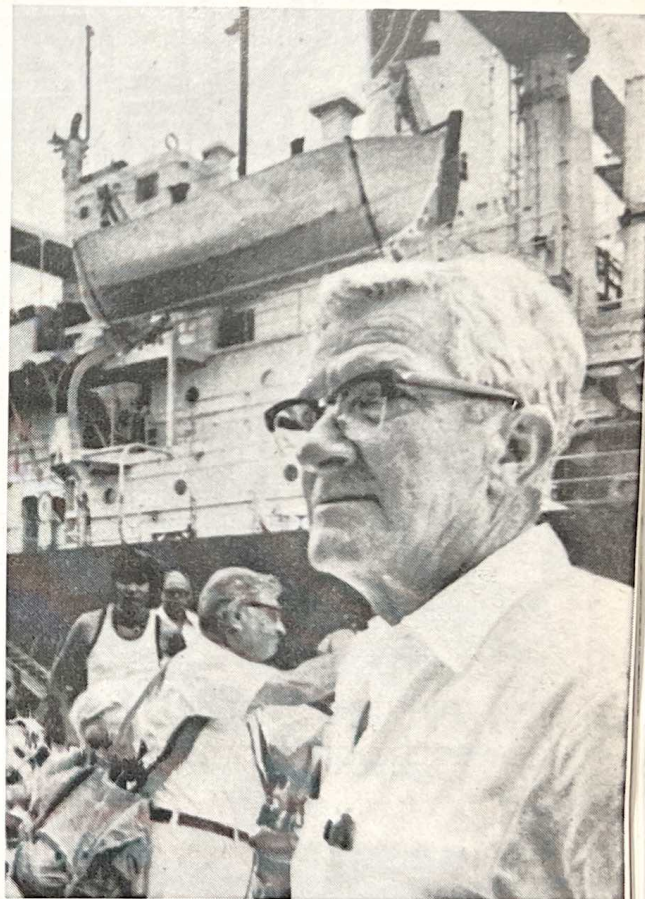
U.S. warplanes that had attacked them repeatedly the day before. "We were worried that if we were not recognized by our own planes, we would be blown out of the water," Miller later said. "So we took off our white shirts and white underwear, anything white—and we put them up on bamboo as flags."

THE CREW WAS SAVED

A little more than an hour later, a lookout aboard the U.S. destroyer Robert L. Wilson spotted a small boat approaching from the Cambodian mainland. (None of the photo-reconnaissance planes chanced to spot the fishing vessel.) Quickly, the captain sounded the call to battle stations. But as the tiny



Capt. Charles Miller (right) and members of the Mayaguez crew in Singapore: "Without our marines, I don't think this crew would be here today"



UPI

ropes ladders to the deck. The other eight copters, with 160 marines aboard, flew on to Tang Island, where the choppers prepared to set down on a long patch of sandy beach.

'SHOT OUT OF THE SKY'

The original hope was that the marines would not have to do any fighting. Three men aboard the lead helicopters were Khmer-speaking language specialists equipped with bullhorns. When they hit the ground, these men were to call out that the marines would leave peacefully if the Cambodian soldiers would simply release the crew of the Mayaguez. "Unfortunately, our language experts never got to do this," a marine officer later said. "Their helicopter got shot out of the sky."

steaming toward the Mayaguez. As the destroyer-escort nudged its bow up to the freighter, the Marine platoon boarded it Barbary-pirate style. With M-16 rifles and tear-gas grenades at the ready, they cautiously made their way along the container-stacked decks—searching for Cambodians who had been spotted on the vessel only a short time before. But though the marines found hot tea and warm rice in the ship's galley, not a soul was aboard. Finally, at 8:30 a.m., the marines ran up the American flag on the vessel, and the Holt took the ship under tow.

At about 7:30 a.m., while the marines were searching the Mayaguez, the freighter's crew was released and made its way toward its ship across the open sea. They kept a close lookout for the

speck grew larger, the ship's crew could see figures waving white flags. Suddenly, a cry rang out from one of the destroyer's lookouts: "Americans!" In seconds, the Wilson's radio officer was flashing the word to Washington. As the fishing boat pulled alongside and men began scrambling up rope ladders to the deck of the destroyer, excitement mounted to a fever pitch. "Thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine!" The entire crew of the SS Mayaguez, captured and held prisoner by Cambodia for three days, had been saved.

Captain Miller and his crew were released by the Cambodians about the same time the major U.S. military assault was getting under way. Indeed, even as the Mayaguez crewmen clambered up the ladder onto the destroyer, 25 fighter-

bombers from the Coral Sea were nearing the Cambodian mainland. Minutes later, the sound of explosions could be heard echoing across the water. The planes, using Walleye "smart" bombs, smashed Ream airport, destroying seventeen Cambodian aircraft on the ground and cratering the main runway. A second wave of American planes later returned for a second raid on Sihanoukville—bombing railroad marshaling yards and an oil refinery.

While the air strikes on the Cambodian mainland were carried out unopposed, the marines on Tang Island were having plenty of trouble. With both the Mayaguez and its crew safely in hand, there was no longer any need for the marines to proceed with the original plan of sweeping across the island. But just leaving Tang posed a major problem. Time after time, heavy fire from the Cambodians drove off helicopters trying to come in to take off the wounded. "All you could hear was constant rounds of fire—mortar," said Pvt. Kendrick Deckard, 19, of Nacogdoches, Texas, who was shot in the leg. "There was all these deep bushes. You couldn't see nothing."

THE LARGEST BOMB

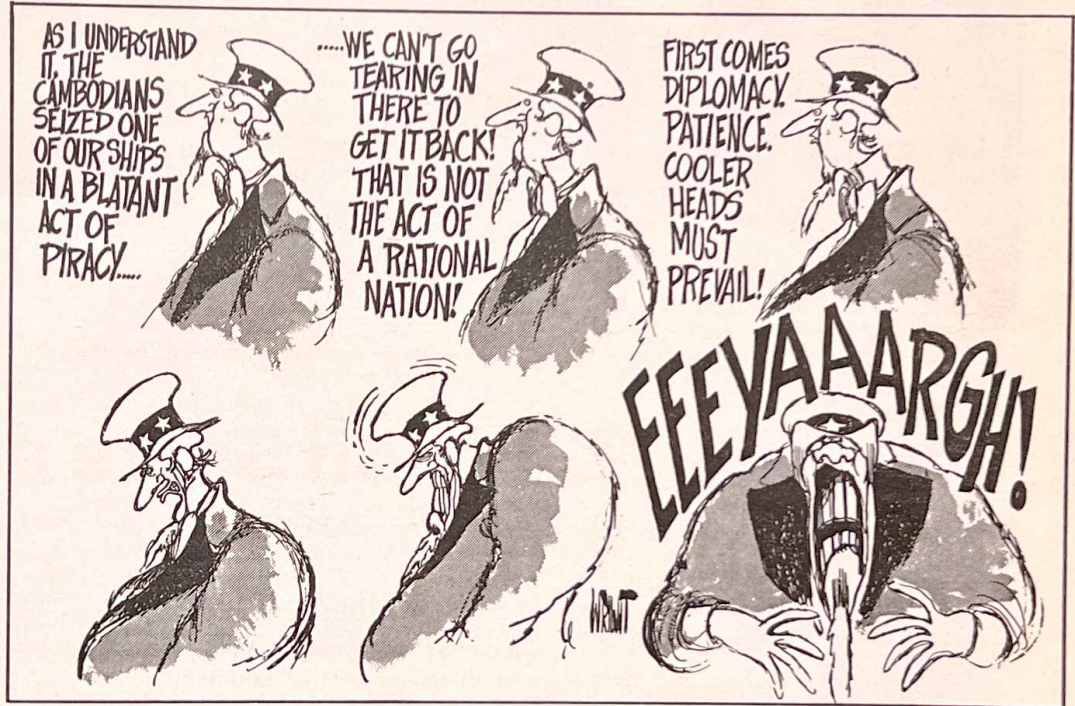
Finally, in an effort to ease the pressure on the marines, a C-130 from Thailand appeared overhead and dropped the largest American conventional bomb—a 15,000-pounder—on a jungle-canopied area where Cambodian troops were believed hiding. Attack planes from the Coral Sea also joined two U.S. destroyers in laying down a rain of suppressive fire on suspected Cambodian positions. Finally, with darkness falling, a rescue helicopter managed to land and take out the wounded. A short time later, helicopters darted in and carried the last marines out to the Coral Sea.

In Washington, President Ford followed the rapidly unfolding action in the Pacific while hosting a working dinner Wednesday night for Dutch Prime Minister J.M. den Uyl. Twice, the President ducked out to take urgent phone calls from Henry Kissinger. The Secretary of State was worked up over a Cambodian radio broadcast, picked up just as the attack on Tang Island was getting under way, announcing Phnom Penh's intention to release the Mayaguez—but making no mention of the crew. Neither Kissinger nor Ford was inclined at this stage to call off the military operation, but they wanted to make some response to the announcement. The question was how to get word to Phnom Penh quickly. The answer, Kissinger decided, was to use the international press. "We've got to use you to get a message to the Cambodians," the Secretary of State excitedly

told Ron Nessen. "They've got to read it on AP," Kissinger said—although he probably meant AFP (Agence France-Presse).

Minutes later, Nessen was standing before the lectern in the White House Press Room reading a statement addressed to the Cambodian Government. "As you know, we have seized the ship," Nessen said. "As soon as you issue a statement that you are prepared to release the crew members that you hold, unconditionally and immediately, we will promptly cease military operations." Then he urged the newsmen: "Go file." No word, however, came from Cambodia in reply. It wasn't until two hours later that the report that all 39 crewmen were safely aboard the U.S.S. Wilson was relayed to the President by

freighters had come under fire in the Gulf of Siam in recent weeks—not put out a warning to American vessels? Others questioned the heavy reliance by U.S. intelligence agencies on intercepted radio communications—the basis on which experts wrongly concluded that the marines would find most of the 39 crewmen of the Mayaguez on Tang Island. Most worrisome of all to the military, however, was the impact of the Mayaguez affair on American base facilities in Thailand. The Bangkok government, embarrassed by use of U Tapao Air Base as a launching pad for the marines, threatened to phase out even more rapidly the last U.S. bases in Southeast Asia. The United States had trouble coming to the aid of the Mayaguez with the Thailand bases; without them, it might not be



Battle cry: Euphoria—and some disturbing questions

Defense Secretary James Schlesinger.

Finally, at 12:27 a.m., Ford himself appeared in the White House press room, red-eyed and perceptibly tired, to read a one-minute statement on live television. The ship and its crew, he announced, had been rescued. After praising the troops for their "valor and sacrifice," the President stepped down from the podium and left. As he walked out the door, Ford told Nessen: "Sleep well." "You, too," the press secretary replied. "I sure will," Ford said. And the President did. Instead of rising the next morning at his customary 5:30, he didn't wake up until 7. He later sheepishly said he thought he had forgotten to set his alarm clock.

In the wake of the Mayaguez affair, Pentagon officials were euphoric. Yet at the same time, they were troubled by a number of military questions raised by the operation. Why had U.S. intelligence—aware that at least two foreign

able to respond at all to a similar crisis.

One thing nobody questioned, however, was the courage of the young marines who took part in the Mayaguez rescue operation. "If it hadn't been for the marines hitting the beaches," said Captain Miller, "I don't think we'd be alive now." As other members of the freed crew paid tribute to the men who were wounded and killed trying to save them, the 62-year-old sea captain's eyes filled with tears. "On the Wilson, I talked with a Marine Corps major who had a quarter of his back blown off by shrapnel," Miller said. "I cried. People were killed trying to save me." Then, noting that all the members of the Mayaguez crew are getting a \$1,000 bonus from their company for their harrowing experience, Miller said: "My bonus is going to the families of the killed marines."

—MILTON R. BENJAMIN with PAUL BRINKLEY-ROGERS in Singapore, BERNARD KRISHER in Okinawa, RON MOREAU in the Philippines and LLOYD H. NORMAN in Washington