

The Last Battle

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A deadly 14-hour firefight on a tiny island off the coast of Cambodia officially ended U.S. military operations in the Vietnam War on May 15, 1975, two weeks after Saigon fell. The SS *Mayaguez* rescue mission condensed over a decade's worth of frustration, turmoil and heroism into one final, tragic act in a war theater whose curtain may never fully close for members of the Koh Tang Beach Club.

The *Mayaguez* mission pressed young Marines still in training into combat on Koh Tang Island after the war was considered over. "Out of the whole operation, I would say there were 15 who had previous combat experience," says Al Bailey of Highland, Md., a 19-year-old private first class who had just finished a long day of training in Okinawa when orders came to load up and ship out to Thailand, where the mission would be staged. "The whole battalion was green."

The Khmer Rouge had hijacked *Mayaguez*, a cargo ship en route from Hong Kong to Sattahip, Thailand, on May 12. The revolutionary communist militia, which had overthrown the government in Phnom Penh about a month earlier, was believed to be holding the American crew hostage on the island, which lies about 27 miles off the coast of the border of Cambodia and Vietnam. Like many Americans sent to fight in Vietnam, Bailey and his fellow 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines had never heard of the place that would forever change their lives, and etch into the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall its last 41 names.

"We were a bunch of young kids, mostly right out of school, who had no idea what was coming or why," says Dan Hoffman of Columbia, S.C., a newly minted second lieutenant at the time of the mission and now president of the Koh Tang Beach Club, an organization of veterans involved in the operation. "They told us we were going up against 15 or 20 militia/fishermen who might have automatic weapons. Instead, we got a reinforced battalion with heavy machine guns, mortars and anti-tank guns."

Estimates vary about how many Khmer Rouge soldiers, in their signature black pajamas, were on the island at the time – somewhere between 300 and 700. Troops flown onto the island quickly realized that they were badly outnumbered.

Miscalculation of enemy strength was not the only similarity between the *Mayaguez* operation and the broader war. Intelligence reports were wrong. Communications broke down. Delayed decision-making from Washington spoiled the element of surprise. Public opinion and politics were considered in the process.

There would also be American KIAs, MIAs and, possibly, POWs. Like thousands of troops who survived the Vietnam battlefields, *Mayaguez* veterans would later say they owe their lives to death-defying chopper pilots. And many who made it off the island alive would spend years confused and desperate for answers, often tortured by post-traumatic stress disorder. Much of what went wrong during and after the Vietnam War was encapsulated in its final battle.

Little is more important to the Koh Tang Beach Club than the fates of Lance Cpl. Joseph N. Hargrove, Pfc. Gary C. Hall and Pvt. Danny G. Marshall, members of a gun team who, when last seen, were alive and shooting. One theory suggests they were taken as POWs and died in mainland Cambodia. Another claims they were executed on the island. The gunners could have lost their lives trying to hold a defense line together so that others could get away on the night of May 15. All the *Mayaguez* veterans really know is that the three were not there at the end of the ordeal.

“We will die with unfinished business,” says Larry Barnett of Frisco, Texas, a founding member of the club.

“We left three guys on the island,” says Fred Morris of Waterloo, Iowa, a private first class in May 1975. “That haunts all of us.”

“There’s no worse way to die than to think that everyone left you,” adds Tom Noble, a former swift boat captain and Navy petty officer in 1975, who had been rescuing South Vietnamese refugees prior to the *Mayaguez* hijacking.

“We all suffered over the years. We have thought about the 41. We lost more on Koh Tang than we did the first day on Okinawa. And people have never heard of Koh Tang.”

No one is sure why the Khmer Rouge seized the 500-foot U.S.-flagged merchant ship in international waters and kidnapped its crew of 40. “There was no official government in Cambodia at that time,” Hoffman explains. “The general feeling was that some commander on his own decided to attack the ship. It was just a civilian merchant ship, a normal ship, with container cargo.”

President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger described it as an act of piracy. Reconnaissance planes were dispatched to search for the ship and crew, and three CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopters took off from northeastern Thailand to the coast while U.S. officials tried unsuccessfully to persuade China to negotiate a release. One of the CH-53s – code-named Knife 13 – disappeared from radar and crashed en route. All 23 onboard were killed, the first casualties of the operation. By the time U.S. military assets were in place, and Ford, the National Security Council and Congress authorized military action, precious time had been lost. The complicated mission would involve elements of every branch of service: Marines, Navy, Air Force, Merchant Marines, one Coast Guard officer and an Army linguist who spoke Cambodian. Two Navy destroyers, *Henry B. Wilson* and *Harold E. Holt* – along with an aircraft carrier, *Coral Sea* – steamed into the region to provide support.

All eyes were on the irregularly shaped, 5-mile-long, 1-mile-wide island. The problem was, explains Hoffman, “The crew were not on the island and never had been. Intelligence was horrible.”

The same morning the 2/9 Marines and chopper pilots were flying into an all-out ambush by the Khmer Rouge, Marines and Merchant Marines on Holt boarded the U.S. cargo ship, finding it anchored and empty north of the island. At 10 a.m., the crew, located on a Thai fishing boat, was

turned over to *Wilson* after U.S. planes from *Coral Sea* sank three Khmer Rouge gunboats escorting them.

The island operation was supposed to have occurred just before dawn. Instead, due to delays leading up to the insertion, nine Marine-loaded Knives and Jolly Greens (HH-53s) arrived at Koh Tang Island in bright morning sunshine. “They heard us coming,” Hoffman says. “They knew we were coming. They saw us coming. And they were loaded for bear. The first four helicopters were literally shot out of the sky.”

“As we are hovering, and the bird is turning, we’re hearing snap-snap-snap-snap,” recalls Morris, who made it onto the island in the first wave. “You don’t hear the gun report. But all of a sudden there are these holes shooting through. We didn’t even expect resistance. We were just going to go on, sweep the island, get the crew from the ship and be home by noon. When these rounds started going through the helicopter, we realized what it was ... it wasn’t great.”

Those who hit the ground that morning “took heavy fire,” remembers Hoffman, who received the Bronze Star for his actions that day. “The water and the ocean were to our backs. Big, thick, dense jungle was in front of us. The only landing zones were the beaches – a small moon-shaped beach on the east side of the island and another on the west. It was a precarious position. I was supposed to land on East Beach but landed on West Beach, so for the first hour or so, with the water to my back, I assumed that north was south, and south was north. Typical of the craziness that was going on. All of our forward air controllers and air-support people had been shot down and wounded. We were lucky to get into a perimeter and hold back.”

Morris had everything but luck. “We land in this elephant grass, and it’s probably three feet high,” he explains. “We land right in their command hooch, and they are shooting at us. I stand up and get ready to shoot. I put it on full automatic and, Pop! Only one round goes off. It didn’t have an extractor. I get to shoot one time, then I have to break the weapon down to pry the shell out.”

Bailey came in on Knife 21, the first bird to insert Marines that morning. “The first person to step onto that island was Staff Sgt. (Seferino) Bernal,” Bailey remembers. “He had his back (to) the enemy, looking into the chopper, howling to his men, ‘Fire and shoot!’ He had his .45 up in the air and total disregard for his own life. The only thing he was concerned about was his men in that chopper, so an RPG couldn’t come through and kill everyone. By that point, there were at least 200, maybe 300, rounds through the chopper. It was like a knife stabbing through tin.”

Two Khmer Rouge soldiers immediately began firing at Bailey. “They couldn’t shoot,” he says. “I hit one center mass, hit the other one in the right shoulder ... the battle was on.”

As Bailey and 19 other Marines were firing on enemy positions and trying to set up a perimeter, the badly damaged chopper that brought them there lost power and crashed in the water a mile away. They would be on the island alone for nearly an hour before another group landed. Two other helicopters were shot down and lay crashed on the beach. An RPG hit Knife 31 as it approached, destroying it and killing 10 Marines, two Navy corpsmen and an Air Force co-pilot. Survivors swam out to sea and were later rescued by *Wilson*. All morning, Knives and Jolly

Greens flew through a torrent of enemy fire, trying to get men onto the island. A second wave, after *Mayaguez* and its crew were rescued, was deployed at midday to keep the first wave from being overrun.

Hoffman says no more than 200 Marines, airmen and Navy corpsmen had boots on the ground at the height of the mission. Five attempts to extract men in the afternoon were met with fierce ground fire and turned back, knocking two HH-53s out of action. As evening fell, only three helicopters were operational, and they had a big, dangerous job in front of them. “The pilots are our heroes,” Hoffman says. “We owe them our lives.”

One was Bob Blough of Chattanooga, Tenn., who will never forget flying Jolly 44 on instruments through darkness, low to the surface, amid tracer fire, toward a sliver of sand to collect his first group. “Once we started, we couldn’t stop,” he says. “Every time we took a load of Marines, it would shrink their perimeter. We had to finish the job.”

Blough, who spent seven years on active duty after the war and 13 more in the Air Force Reserve, received the Silver Star for rescuing 72 Marines that evening. Knowing time wasn’t on his side, he asked to offload his first group of 35 Marines onto Holt, rather than *Coral Sea*, so he could get back faster. Holt’s helipad, however, was not built to handle the big Jolly. Blough had to hover in the dark above the bobbing destroyer, ease two wheels onto separate corners of the helipad and release men through a side door so they wouldn’t fall into the gulf. “It could have been a big disaster if it hadn’t worked,” Blough says. “The Holt’s captain gave us permission with the unspoken understanding that if I screwed this up, I was going to pay for it.”

Quickly, he was gone for a second load – 37 this time, which he would fly to *Coral Sea*. “I had never landed on a carrier before. The Navy took real good care of us. They talked us right in.”

The three helicopters extracted 196 men from Koh Tang Island that evening, and the *Mayaguez* incident was over. “We had a lot of young people who had never confronted a situation like this before but nevertheless stepped up and did a fantastic job,” says Randall Austin of Charlotte, N.C., a retired Marine Corps colonel who was battalion commander at the time of the incident. “Joint operations was just a fledgling concept back in 1975. We put our joint operations together, literally, overnight. Today joint operations are, correctly, so well-planned. Part of the heritage of our operation is that it was part of the foundation for joint operations that have occurred since then.”

In 2000, Larry Barnett decided to start a website, to recognize the mission and attract those who were a part of it. That led to the Koh Tang Beach Club. “We felt that since we shared a special place in history that it was really important there be defining differences between us and other veterans organizations,” he says during a reunion in Branson, Mo. “Most of these guys haven’t seen each other in more than 30 years. What’s amazing is when you listen to these guys talk, it’s like they’ve never missed a breath ... the same type of conversation they were having in 1975.

“The *Mayaguez* incident was such a traumatic experience for the majority of these guys. You would be hard-pressed to go anywhere and find people who actually know about this operation.

We want to change that. The more important thing is that when we do these reunions, there is a lot of healing here. A lot of these guys have kept these particular events bottled up for 30-plus years.”

“Was Koh Tang a planning fiasco?” asks Noble, who drives a custom-painted GMC pickup that depicts all elements of the operation and the names of the 41 who did not survive. “Yes, planning was a fiasco. What put it all together was the people on the ground. I don’t care how many friends you’ve got in your life – those guys, you are stuck with. If they need me, I will be there. They know. It’s a bond you cannot shake.”

“Most of the details of the mission we didn’t hear about for 30 years,” Morris says. “It wasn’t something we wanted to rehash. We had it in our hearts. We thought about it a lot. We just didn’t talk about it. I’ve seen counselors, but if they have not been through it ... they can’t understand.”

Through their website, the annual reunions and media attention – including seven books, three TV documentaries and numerous articles – the Koh Tang Beach Club has systematically defined itself. They build awareness of the battle. Each year, they uncover new details about it. They honor their fallen comrades and search for answers about the three who were left behind. They help each other deal with the memories.

“I had always felt, myself, that due to our lack of experience with Marine assault operations, that we really let those guys down,” Blough says. “I had a hard time with it for years. I happened to go to a Jolly Green reunion. One of my old buddies saw me unloading my luggage, and said, ‘Hey, Bob ... we’ve got a guy here from the *Mayaguez* operation. He wants to say hi.’ It was one of the Marines I put onto Holt. There were a couple of others.

“They told me we did a hell of a job. That really helped. A year later, Dan Hoffman and Larry Barnett showed up. Apparently, they had been looking for me for 30 years. Dan made a great speech in front of my heroes at this Jolly Green reunion, telling them what a great pilot I was, and that he owed his life to me. That started my recovery.”

In 2006, the club reunited in Washington and, of course, made their way to the last panel of the Wall. “People just moved out of our way,” Hoffman says. “We went down there and saw them. We touched the names. We said a little prayer. We left one of our challenge coins. The guys were all crying.”

Hoffman makes a point to share with members information about VA benefits and PTSD treatment options, including his own secret – registered Papillon show dogs, one of whom is his beloved PTSD therapy dog named “Koh Tang Dan.”

Camaraderie among those who were part of that final battle is even better medicine, Morris says. “There’s a lot of peace in that.”

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