

The Last Man



Captain Harry Cramer Jr., the first man, was an obvious pick for the new Special Forces concept the Army had in mind after the Korean War. While secretly training South Vietnamese in the art of ambush, Cramer was killed near Nha Trang on October 21, 1957. His death was 'an accident' because officially, America had no combatants in Vietnam. He was quietly buried. We moved on.

.In that same year, Danny Marshall, the last man, was born. He would be quietly abandoned. We moved on.

End of an Era

Sgt. Bobby Weldon and Airman Tom Lindow sat down together for midnight chow. The two Air Force H3 chopper mechanics had just finished a maintenance shift at Hill AFB in Utah. Weldon had just become a Flight Engineer, a mechanic that flies as part of the crew. Both were bound for Thailand shortly.

"In the middle of our meal," says Lindow, "Bob looked over at me with a very serious look on his face and told me he knew he wasn't coming back home. I asked him to explain and he just basically felt he had a one way ticket."

Lindow tried to reassure his friend that such thoughts were irrational. Weldon was unmoved.

Ted Whitlock arrived in Thailand that January. This was his fourth tour with the Air Force in Asia but his first in this country. In April, 1975 America ended its official involvement in the Vietnam War when it pulled out the last remaining Americans and many Vietnamese in 'Operation Frequent Wind'. He was assigned to the 388th Security Police Squadron as law enforcement Flight Chief for deployment purposes at Korat RTAFB (Royal Thai Air Force Base). He commanded a unit of 110 U.S. and 200 Thai AF guards, "primarily [as] a resources protection mission."

"We probably would be closing down bases in Thailand," recalls Whitlock. "I assumed this tour would be a piece of cake."

TSgt Whitlock would just miss having it thrown in his face. Other Air Force personnel wouldn't be so fortunate.

One of them was 1st Lt. Bob Blough, an HH-53 pilot with the 40th Air Rescue and Recovery Squadron or 40ARRS based at Nakhon Phnom (NKP) in northeast Thailand. Blough commanded two crews which rotated twice weekly to Korat since this base was centered between NKP in the north and Utapao RTAFB on the southern Thai coast. One of the most experienced pilots of the 40th, Blough had been in Thailand almost a year supervising and training other pilots, many of whom were on their first assignments out of flight school.

The 40ARRS as well as the 21st Special Operations Squadron (21SOS) which flew CH 53s out of NKP had had a busy month that April. They were called on to assist in evacuating the American Embassy in Phnom Penh when the Khmer Rouge overran Cambodia. Two weeks later they participated in the evacuation of Saigon. By then both Weldon and Lindow had arrived to catch the action.

Tom Lindow, a mechanic now assigned to the 40ARRS echoed the assumption of TSgt Whitlock and many others at the time. After the evacuation of Saigon, “common thinking was that the war was now officially over and ‘what are we going to do now?’”

So on the 13th of May, less than two weeks after the fall of Saigon when Lt. Blough’s two choppers arrived in Korat, it seemed that the pilots, crews and their stressed machines could lay back a little.

That evening PFC Gale Rogers stared up at the night sky from his perch at the crest of a large hill. Thirty years ago to the month, Marines who had fought over this very ground were being pulled off to be sent south to help a battered Army take Shuri Ridge. Ever since then U.S. Marines have been training on this old battleground.

Rogers’ watch on this routine training exercise would end at midnight. Tonight however, the routine seemed disturbed. PFC Rogers had been looking south and noticing an increasing amount of traffic at Kadena Air Force Base. He didn’t know it at the time but that increased air traffic was for him and his Battalion. In just a few hours he and the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines (2/9) would be taken off this old battleground of Okinawa to create a new one.

As it turned out, the official end to the long and grueling Vietnam War would have to be postponed for a couple of weeks. There was an unexpected job to be done. With a Stand Down atmosphere enveloping the post war military, their mettle would be tested when their leaders flipped the war switch back on.

The battle these men and those they represent were to experience shortly would be a bookend to the Vietnam War. It would not take place in Vietnam nor would it be a mission to keep an ally free. It would be a successful mission to free American citizens. It took place in the predictable bath of blood that defines communist conquest. Perhaps Congress thought that pulling all support for South Vietnam in 1973 would result only in a blood bath there? That is an appalling indictment in and of itself. But abandoning an ally to a known fate also dishonored those Americans who were sent there, by Congress, to prevent that very result. And for those who were lost there and left there, how could they know their leaders would abandon their sacrifice? It had never happened before on such a national scale.

The American leader in this last, violent act of war would abandon men who did his will; both where they fell and where they were recorded—in the history books. The ‘High Point’ of his Presidency would not have looked so good had he paid too much for it. So he simply transferred 23 lost Airmen to another account. Years and peers would bring them back.

In the end, the predictable blood bath did indeed occur in Southeast Asia. In Cambodia it even exceeded the most pessimistic assumptions. It was so bad that the brutal, godless Vietnamese communists had to invade the country to stop it while their own citizens risked their lives fleeing in dilapidated boats!

The ‘killing fields’ were in their infancy then. And three U.S. Marines would be among the first victims. Did you know that? Few did.

An Act of Piracy

After their victory in Cambodia the Khmer Rouge were anxious to secure some disputed islands in the Gulf of Thailand while the Vietnamese communists were distracted with their own conquest. This resulted in a higher number of Khmer troops being sent to these islands in anticipation of a Vietnamese claim and possible invasion.

At the time the Khmer Rouge regime could be described as organized anarchy. Its army mainly consisted of young, rural, semi-disciplined peasants who were brutally forcing their own citizens out of the urban areas and into the countryside to starve. The Paris educated political leadership was hardly stable as Pol Pot assumed the office of Prime Minister. Its navy consisting mainly of captured American patrol boats, amphibious vessels and auxiliary craft were harassing commercial shipping in the Gulf. It was perhaps a rogue naval unit with no orders from the chaotic government that seized the U.S. merchant ship *SS Mayaguez* on the afternoon of May 12, 1975.

When word of the piracy reached Washington, President Ford called in his advisors to discuss the situation and assess the resources available for military action. America had been humiliated just two weeks before in Vietnam and the ‘*Pueblo* Incident’, the North Korean capture of an American intelligence ship was still fresh after only seven years. Henry Kissinger, the architect of the American abandonment of South Vietnam as well as hundreds of U.S.POWs who had served there, was called back from an engagement in Missouri. He had remained Secretary of State as he was under the disgraced Nixon.

Given the chaotic conditions in Cambodia and the retention of Kissinger, diplomatic resolution was given only a cursory glance by the Administration. Had the U.S. not been forced by Congress to significantly downsize its assets in the region, such a cowboy approach to the crisis might have been justified. But even so, subsequent records declassified over the years give a more focused view of the priorities set by the White House. In the following excerpt from a National Security Council meeting on the subject of using B-52s to bomb Cambodia, White House advisor Robert Hartman appears to affirm the priority of the mission when he says to the President:

“This crisis, like the Cuban Missile Crisis is the first real test of your leadership. What you decide is not as important as what the public perceives... We should not just think of what is the right thing to do, but what the public perceives.”

What the President eventually decided to do was to deliver a quick and violent blow to the pirate nation even if it had to be done by his military surrogates with scarce resources, little or no useful intelligence within an impossible time frame. It may not have been the 'right thing to do' but that was a lesser priority. The public needed to perceive a hero---Mr. President.

At NKP the choppers were on the ground but the rumors of home were flying. Tom Lindow bought them and the assumptions were that they were to pack up and ship people and aircraft out of Thailand. He was working on aircraft in the early morning hours of the 13th, having already been awake for some time prior to his shift.

Over the radio in the maintenance van he and his crew got the word that the Cambodians had just seized an American merchant vessel. "I thought the Navy and Marines were going to be busy again after all the work they just did in Saigon."

But Lindow too, would be busy. The Air Force mechanics wouldn't get any substantial sleep again for another 60 hours.

A Fog Drifts In

TSgt. Ted Whitlock had just settled down after a midnight shift. He hadn't been out long before a rude knock on his hooch door woke him up.

"Sgt. Whitlock! You need to report immediately to CSC (Central Security Control) with your mobility gear ready for deployment."

Groggy from lack of sleep, Whitlock shook it off, got his gear and headed for CSC. There he found 25 Airmen ready to deploy to Utapao RTAFB on the south coast. Whitlock was assigned squad leader under a Lieutenant who would serve as Officer-in-Charge (OIC). They were told nothing else.

Upon arrival at Utapao, the Air Force police were housed at the base gym while Whitlock reported to a General Officer for deployment orders and further instructions. At that meeting Whitlock learned that he and his men were assigned to rescue a merchant ship off the coast of Cambodia via helicopter assault. What hadn't been apparent to the planners but what Whitlock recognized immediately is that the wrong unit had been deployed from Korat. Whitlock was the leader of a law enforcement flight (unit). They were Security Police armed with .38 revolvers, nightsticks and handcuffs. Hardly the gear you would want to take on a military assault mission. It was the Air Base Ground Security Flight at Korat that had the equipment and training for such a mission. How could they miss that? Whitlock was witness to only the tip of a very large goof berg floating through the planning of the soon to be *SS Mayaguez* rescue operation.

Unsure if his men really would continue with the mission armed only with revolvers, Whitlock assumed they would and made preparations to carry on. But there was another glitch. The lieutenant who was supposed to lead the unit never deployed from Korat. It seemed to Whitlock that the 'fog of war' was settling in way too early.

Shortly after word of the Mayaguez capture reached the maintenance crews at NKP, every bird was to be made serviceable. Every shift was involved. By the evening of the 13th most were ready to fly and Airman Tom Lindow turned twenty.

"I stood in front of the aircraft I was assigned to 'run up' and watched the crews come out heavily armed with their weapon magazines taped back to back giving each other hand shakes, back slaps and thumbs up. It really sunk into me then and there that these people were going into danger.

"I thought to myself, 'don't screw up, make sure you get your aircraft launched successfully, *AND DON'T GET RUN OVER!!*

"I looked up and down the flight line, past our row of HH-53C 'Jolly Greens' and onto the CH-53C aircraft (call sign 'Knife') from our sister squadron the 21st SOS - 'Dustys'. Slowly each aircraft began its startup procedure. [Auxiliary power units] came on line breaking the night's silence with their high pitched whining noise followed by engines lighting off. Rotors began to slowly turn building up to a steady roar from an entire flight line of H-53s; something I have never, nor believe anybody will ever see again.

"The noise was incredibly deafening. I laughed to myself that we certainly weren't sneaking up on anybody tonight. Having got my aircraft run up complete without any hiccups, I took a position further out in front of the aircraft getting ready to marshal it out. Looking up and down all I could see was silhouettes of H-53s with their anti-collision lights spinning and navigations lights on. The rotor tip lights making circles in the dark night that ran up and down the long flight line was mesmerizing.

"In the background, OV-10 after OV-10 aircraft from the 23rd TASS (Tactical Air Support Squadron) were taking off from the runway to stage [at Utapao]. It was an incredible scene of power. Slowly each aircraft made its way out to the runway to take off. They all lined up behind one another on their way out. Shortly thereafter the flight line went from a deafening roar to silence as we watched the last of them disappear into the night sky.

"I stood there feeling hopeless wishing I could be with them, wherever they would eventually go. Crazy thoughts ran through my mind - thinking, 'did I do the right thing when I was working on them? Was I sure I checked and double checked

everything?’ I thought they would be busy enough with their mission, and didn't want to think something mechanical would go wrong.”

There were more birds to service so Tom went back to work. Happy birthday.

At 21:00 Lt. Blough, still at Korat was summoned to the Tactical Unit Operations Center (TUOC) and handed a phone by an NCO. It was the Pentagon. Because of the communication quirks at the time, the Pentagon Captain will forever be known to Blough as Donald Duck.

“Lieutenant, can you land your helicopter on a ship?”

“What type of ship, sir?”

The NCO showed Blough a photo of the fully loaded *SS Mayaguez*.

“I don't think I could land on the containers, sir. We'd be too heavy. But we could hover and pick up any injured seamen with the rescue hoist.”

“Could you hover and off load troops?”

“Do we expect any resistance from the crew?”

Donald Duck paused for a bit. “Only some small arms and maybe a couple of RPGs (rocket propelled grenades).”

That was an abrupt switch in this rescue pilot's internal imagery.

Bob took a deep breath, “Sir, I think you should be talking to my commander at NKP.”

Before Donald Duck could answer one of the crewmen rushed in. “We've been scrambled! One of our 53s went down near NKP!”

When TSgt. Whitlock realized he was expected to lead a unit on a ship assault with handguns (revolvers, no less) in gas masks and no officer, he called his command in Korat to explain the situation. He was there, Whitlock was told. Make the most of it. Whitlock and his men had a green light, but a very fuzzy one.

Regardless of what the planners had in mind, Whitlock was not going to lead his men on a suicide mission. His team would be one of five 25 man teams from bases in Thailand to meet up at Utapao then on to... well, wherever. Wherever wherever was, this Law Enforcement unit wasn't going there with pistols. It took some time but Whitlock finally persuaded the armory to *lend* his team the proper weapons. His three NCOs had been through Air Base Ground Security Defense training which is combat oriented, but the rest of his men had not. But they would be. The four NCOs gave their sleepy men a crash course.

Whitlock's suicide mission was concocted by Lt. General John Burns, Commanding Officer (CO) of the 7th Air Force based at NKP. It was obvious that the political will was to solve this crisis quickly. A sea rescue of individual sailors was within the scope of the Air Force rescue choppers. Air assaults were doable as proven by the Son Tay POW rescue attempt in North Vietnam five years earlier. But these assault missions had to be carefully planned and rehearsed. Boarding a ship at sea in a hostile action however, is the Navy's job. Even so, the Navy had not done so since 1826!

Command confusion began at the top with the Commander-in-Chief himself. With the U. S. humiliation in the *USS Pueblo Incident* fairly fresh, Ford was pressing for an immediate response; a public perception of a man of action. Immediate meant local assets. Those assets were Air Force and they had been stressed with their involvement in two Embassy evacuations in the past month. General Burns was literally inventing a new amphibious Air Force mission and tactics in the span of a few hours!

For the first time in history President Ford had what is now called real time access to tactical battlefield information and it can be reasonably argued that this new capability could not have debuted on a more inappropriate mission. The overall Command of Pacific Forces (CINCPAC) is properly tasked with *coordinating* all Pacific military assets in response to a crisis. Unfortunately, this mission called for the *comingling* of Air Force and Naval assets. Air and Naval Commands clashed due to this confusion. In the end, with speed essential to the mission and all local assets in the hands of 7th Air Force CO Gen. Burns, the 56th Air Force Security Police Squadron was the only local unit capable of improvising an amphibious assault. In this hazy improve, it's not too surprising that Whitlock's 388th Law Enforcement unit was deployed inadvertently with the 56th SPS.

Although the Navy had ordered ships to the area and made plans to ready a Marine Battalion Landing Team (BLT) as early as the evening of the 12th, it wasn't until the loss of the AF chopper near NKP and the convoluted intelligence concerning the whereabouts of the *Mayaguez* crew that made deployment of the Marines the most practical option.

Still, Gen. Burns would have to get them there. So let's invent another Air Force mission out of thin air. Let's invent a joint Air Force/Marine Corps amphibious assault mission and try to accommodate everyone of rank who has an opinion on how that should happen.

The senior command structure is still ambiguous in the histories of this event. The CINCPAC Command History includes a command chart for this mission, which after the CINCPAC designation, resembles an etch-a-sketch drawing. It is certain however, that the President was commanding the mission at the White House throwing sporadic fuel on a tactical command structure fire. As if to emphasize the bizarre nature of command, the Commander-in-Chief was hosting a black tie dinner party for a Dutch diplomat while the most intense portion of the battle raged. He would excuse himself from time to time to be briefed and give orders—then go to sleep.

An Inconvenient Loss

Seventy-five volunteers from the 56th SPS were hastily assembled and waiting at NKP to link up with Whitlock's group and another 25 men in Utapao by late afternoon on the 13th. The mission required *five* CH 53s to land on, or hover over the containers on the ship one at a time covered by the other four choppers and discharge the AF Police in a fog of riot control gas! Far earlier in the day, the White House had consulted an engineer who said the containers would crumble under the weight. Apparently it wasn't ruled out because the Pentagon decided to consult with a pilot, Bob Blough. It doesn't appear that General Burns was informed of this.

None-the-less, twelve choppers loaded with men and gear took off toward Utapao that evening for an assault planned for the next morning, the 14th. At about 2130 one of them went down killing all aboard. It would be years before these men would be included as Mayaguez veterans. Their number exceeded half the number of the crew to be rescued. Essentially, they made the loss numbers look bad for the Ford Administration.

It would also be years before a consensus of the cause of the crash was settled upon; a defective sleeve on a rotor blade. Guilt causes casualties among those that survive tragedies, combat or otherwise. This is a common wound for men with such a close bond but is often overlooked and untreated; and just as often, unjustified. If it is self-inflicted it is harder to heal. For those in a stateside factory with a government contract there is no guilt. It is the rare worker who realizes that lives depend on his competence. Hopefully, he will now.

When I tell you I'm leaving, permanently, it scares you. You don't know where I got that information and it is the fear of the unknown, my unknown that makes you anxious. So what do you do? You try to convince me that I'm being irrational and you believe that. But you also believe I know what I'm talking about. I saw my future and you should be honored that I would let you in on such a personal matter. I don't even tell my family, but I have to tell someone---you.

I didn't do it to burden you. I told you because I wanted someone to carry me through the rest of a life I will not have. I believe you would do that for me. I'm putting my memorial in your hands. If you'll do that for me, it will make my destiny easier to accept.

To sense the presence of your own demise and continue the physical duties that will likely bring it about is valor. That is what you leave as your legacy if only to one other human being.

Bob Weldon died with 22 other airmen in that crash at NKP doing their duty. He told Tom Lindow he would. Thirty-five years later Tom was asked about his experience—for the first time. Bobby Weldon's premonition in Utah was part of it.

"I have a hard time with this," said Lindow in the initial contact. "Because nobody ever asked for the maintenance perspective before. I feel a deep responsibility to all the other mechanics, 'The Swamp Folks' to get their story told and told right."

That "maintenance perspective" is only found between the lines in the Mayaguez histories

Save Them—Kill Them

With one-fifth of the assault team already dead and other choppers diverted to assist, the mission was still on. However, new plans were formulated which called for a Marine battalion to take the place of the Air Force Police. The Air Force would ferry them in. Such a joint Air Force/Marine operation had never before occurred; nor had an amphibious helicopter assault. Here would be an improvised, completely unique mission with limited assets, useless intelligence and questionable off-scene leadership.

Whitlock wasn't told of any new plan or even of the loss at NKP. He was still going to war with a hastily trained crew on a mission not yet written in the training manuals.



This photo was taken an hour before these volunteers were lost in the crash at NKP. Two days after the disaster on the very day of the Koh Tang battle, Pacific Stars and Stripes reported they were not part of the Mayaguez mission.

When the remaining Air Force Police units were assembled at Utapao, they were briefed and assigned certain levels of the ship. They were given a few hours' sleep before boarding buses to take them to the flight line. Whitlock's crew was already asleep which is why they missed the news of the crash at NKP.

Once airborne and headed north to NKP to assist at the crash scene, Lt. Blough's crew was informed that the CH 53 had gone down with 18 passengers aboard. These were tight knit units. Everyone knew everyone else, at least casually. Naturally their thoughts drifted to whom they may have lost. Blough's chopper began to hear radio traffic of other birds headed *south*. Soon his bird would be ordered south too. Not to Korat—to Utapao.

About mid-night, as the date turned to the 14th, senior NCOs began to shut down the Marine training exercise and ordered the men to break camp. There was an urgency to this order confirmed when they were trucked back to Camp Schaub.

"Empty your footlockers and pack your gear in your sea bag," the Gunny shouted. "Write down the names of your next of kin and attach it to your sea bag. You will then secure your gear and line up to draw weapons and bayonets."

If PFC Rogers had sensed a disturbance in the routine before, now he could see it turning up-side-down. The Marines did what they were told and made quick about it. They were off to Kadena AFB.

While Ted Whitlock was aboard a bus to the flight line at Utapao, Bob Blough was en route and Gale Rogers was packing his sea bag, U.S. aircraft were flying over the *Mayaguez* dead in the water about a mile off the coast of an island. Koh Tang, as it was called was about 35 miles off the coast of Cambodia. There, pilots on station saw people being ferried to the island from the ship. It was assumed the crew was being transferred to Koh Tang. That's when the plans changed.

Actually, all of the *Mayaguez* crewmen were on a Thai fishing vessel pirated by communists along with its captain five months earlier. The crewmen would be headed toward the Cambodian mainland a few hours later.

At the White House, the National Security Council was meeting on the evening of the 13th; or 1000 on the 14th Koh Tang time. One of the pilots reported the fishing boat headed toward the mainland and thought he saw 'Caucasians' on board.

When the White House was informed Kissinger remarked, "We have a pilot who thinks there may be Caucasians. It would have been a much better position for us to take that we will simply hit anything that leaves the island."

President Ford replies, "Right."

Kissinger then makes a stunning revelation, "Now we are debating with the pilot."

To which Ford replies, "I gave the order at the meeting to stop all boats. I cannot understand what happened on that order."

From the records it is never clear what the pilot and the White House were debating about during a combat mission. This incredible passage from the minutes of the meeting weren't declassified until 1996. And while the meeting swung wildly from topic to topic, this excerpt is not out of context. It appears Ford was willing to take out the crew to avoid another *Pueblo* Incident on his watch and the pilot may have been debating the legality of the order; if, in fact he ever got it.

As if to confirm the psychopathic obsession at the White House, one of its aides, John Marsh asks later in that same meeting, "Supposing some of the boats near the island have Americans on it? Should we send some order to use only riot control agents there?"

"I think the pilot should sink them," the consistent Kissinger replied. "He should destroy the boats and not send situation reports."

It was an alarmed Defense Secretary, James Schlesinger who delayed that action long enough to allow the boat holding the crew to escape to the mainland. Their execution became moot then, as far as the political strategy envisioned by Kissinger was concerned.

Even if Schlesinger had not delayed, it is inconceivable the pilot would have murdered Americans, even under direct orders to do so by the Commander-in-Chief. However, that pilot recognizing 'Caucasians' on the Thai vessel gassed and peppered it with shrapnel, firing fore and aft in an attempt to keep the boat at sea. That effort was unsuccessful. When the crew reached the mainland it appears the Cambodians didn't know what to do with them.

The American captives were never on Koh Tang Island. What the air crew saw were reinforcements ferried to the island because the Americans had been flying over it continuously, beginning a few hours after the crew was seized. The White House assumed the crew had been split up between Koh Tang and the mainland. The new plan had to wait for the Navy to arrive late on the 14th. A detachment from the 4th Marines based in the Philippines would board the Destroyer Escort *USS Harold E. Holt* by chopper and mount a ship to ship assault on the *Mayaguez*. Simultaneously, 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines would assault Koh Tang and free the crew. Bombing of mainland targets was to commence dictated by the situation. This included a plan for B-52s. The command would come from CINCPAC, the 7th Fleet in Hawaii or from the 7th Air Force in Nakhon Phanom or maybe it would come directly from the White House. Who knew?

Duty Guilt

PFC Gale Rogers and his unit laid propped up on their packs next to the airstrip at Kadena. Everyone had been in the field for two days; some three. It was 0300 when the black and white turbo prop taxied toward them. A C130? Maybe a C5? What do grunts know about aircraft other than get in, sleep and get out? This one wasn't a sleeper though. No seats. Just cargo nets. But they had their packs and improvised. Sleep and anticipation traveled with them to---wherever.

Rogers was in the air when Ted Whitlock's crew was waiting to board the choppers that would take them each to their own personal destiny. Then the word came. One of their choppers went down en route to Utapao; none survived. Was it an accident? No one knew; or weren't saying. There had been casualties already? For the superstitious, that was a bad omen. For the practical, having been originally assigned this mission armed with only handguns—that was a bad omen. But Whitlock's NCOs had equipped and prepared them. They were going to war with NCOs that knew how to solve problems. With the deaths now of their guys at Nakhon Phanom they were all determined to do their best on this mission so that none of those men would have sacrificed in vain.

"The adrenaline was really flowing then," said Whitlock. "We were ready to kill these bastards that we thought had caused the chopper crash. We were pumped!"

That mindset was justified for there had always been communist activity surrounding U. S. air bases in Thailand.

Preparing for combat, a rookie soldier will entertain many thoughts. If he recalls those thoughts later, he may be surprised at how different the scenario he played out prior to his upcoming experience was from the actual experience he would remember. He's preparing with others in his unit. He watches them as they do him. His first thought may be how he handles himself in front of them; will they be able to count on him? He will wonder if he will be able to kill another human being. If so, how will he handle that burden? He reviews the 12 years or so he remembers from his eighteen or twenty year biography; his family, his school, the freedoms and pleasures of impending adulthood which he is just now entering. And for the first time, he considers his own mortality. He finds it a stranger.

There is only so much to prepare. Now he waits. His mind, now less occupied with the task of preparing for battle lets the stranger in. He anticipates it. Oracles and fortunetellers practice the second oldest profession due only to man's obsession to rid himself of anticipation

But man is base. His will more often than not act as if his survival is of utmost importance. If he is trained well in his army, he will learn to subdue his ego to a point. But no army has ever trained the knot out of the human stomach that has time to anticipate the mystery of impending combat. And no soldier can be his own oracle to predict how he will act when it is his time to fight.

For those who go on into action they need no oracle; they know. They become part of the written history. They satisfy or disappoint themselves. And if satisfied, they free themselves of that uncertainty of character.

For those who prepare, anticipate and are willing to assume a looming risk and for some reason are called back on its brink, the burr stays in the shoe. There will be no actual experience to compare to the scenario he has already invented. Most will get over their untested character. That knot though, is always remembered and respected. More importantly and perhaps more common is duty guilt. There is no more helpless feeling among soldiers than to sit by idly while friends are forced into danger. A soldier's worst enemy is helplessness. No order is more despised and no duty is more dreaded than the order to stand down when brothers are ordered to stand up.

The Mayaguez operation was full of these unsung heroes. They went where they were sent; they did what they were told. That was their duty; but it wasn't their call. They would have gone if it was. Still, they feel guilty.

For the law enforcement flight of the 388th Security Police Squadron, their combat experience would end at this juncture. They had all walked through its prelude but they would not be going to war. Their mission was canceled in part due to the loss of their men at Nakhon Phanom; in part because their highest leadership had botched its way into a need for more time; time enough to call in the Marines.

Those Marines would soon see other Air Force personnel of the same stock.

Whitlock's unit had been only moments away from flying off into the unknown. Still, there was some anxiety. Given what they had been through up to that point, would it be proper to ask how much longer they kept those borrowed rifles?

The Players Assemble

Blough's crew arrived at Utapao at about 0200 on the 14th. They were fueled up and Bob went to find out what happened to the chopper (a CH 53, Call Sign, 'Knife 13') that went down that evening. He and his crew lost some friends. They would remain on alert and sleep in the chopper.

That morning the crew was called on to rescue a Navy A-7 pilot who had gone down in the Gulf of Thailand. The flight took an hour and a half to reach the rescue coordinates only to find out they were actually looking for survivors of a

Khmer gunboat sunk by the A-7. Their search pattern took them near the north end of Koh Tang Island when crewman David Ash informed Blough that they had just been fired at from the island.

A seasoned combat vet might have taken evasive action. But Bob simply pondered the implications. The crew's 'seasoning' would come the next day. It was probably an RPG. Had it been an anti-aircraft missile they would have been seasoned in salt water.

But the surreal moment of the near death experience and the wonderment of why someone would want to kill him passed quickly. It was the training that kicked in. The crew was now in combat mode.

Reporting the incident to the command aircraft resulted in an admonishment to stay clear of the island. "No kidding?," or more accurately, the military phrase to that effect.

It is quite possible that Gale Rogers was flying over the island that wanted to kill him as well as the pilot who would save his life 30 hours hence on his way to Utapao during this time. The two would become lifelong friends. But for now, Rogers didn't know where he was when the Marines landed in Thailand. No one was told anything. Only later he found out. Charlie Brown, co-pilot of a chopper who would later take Marines from the 4th Regiment to the *USS Holt* was asked by a Marine boarding his chopper, "Where am I?" Brown told him he was at Utapao. "I know that," the grunt replied. "But what country am I in?" Such was the level of information all Marines were given throughout this mission—and after.

The Marines of 2/9 settled down on the tarmac at Utapao, stowed their gear and were herded down to the mess hall. Rogers assumed it was morning because the facility "had [breakfast] food you could identify" in addition to silverware and plates.

After chow the Marines were organized and assigned into helicopter transport teams. They drew ammo and waited.

Blough's chopper returned to Utapao in the afternoon. He and his crew were told to get some rest. Nothing was in the works for that night.

While Gale Rogers ate breakfast at Utapao on the 14th, the U.S. was bombing targets on mainland Cambodia; particularly the airbase that posed a threat to the upcoming assault. The *Mayaguez* crew was on the mainland at this time and perhaps because of the bombing, the Khmer Rouge decided to release them. The crew reported later that their captors kept asking them if they could stop the bombing. "Well, yea. Send us back. We'll tell 'em."

It was a common communist obsession that set the crew's release back a full day and subsequently forced a battle. The Khmer Rouge wanted the crew to sign a document of friendship between the crew and the peace loving butchers of Democratic Kampuchea, Cambodia's new name. This day long drama on the 14th was hampered by document revisions, translation delays and one crew members' refusal to sign. By the time all was in order it was evening and the crew would have to wait until morning to be released. The war was on.

Airman Tom Lindow arrived at Utapao on the afternoon of the 14th.

"When we arrived, there were C141's coming and going and the flight line was busy with young Marines standing or lying about with their gear. Most looked pre occupied within their own thoughts and all were pretty much quiet and keeping to themselves. We were told to stay clear of them.

"I had to pass them going to and fro on the flight line while doing my duties. When I passed, I gave them a nod or a wave or thumbs up. What else could I do?? I knew these guys were pretty much going to take the brunt of whatever was going down [and I] felt helpless not being able to contribute. Later on we mingled with a few who wanted to talk or bum cigarettes. They asked us some questions about our weird looking helicopters, which did look quite different than the Marines' traditional, slicker looking H-53s. I was tempted to kid them about it and play some jokes on them but refrained, knowing this was going to be a hectic day for them. We told them to take care of themselves.

"Again, I felt stupid. What do you say to someone about to go into combat? We worked into the night getting the aircraft ready and finished sometime around mid-night."

May 15, 1975

The Trip to Bad Intelligence

Up early on the 15th, Lindow, his fellow crewmen and mechanics and the Marines began preparing for the assault.

L/Cpl. Joseph Hargrove, an E Co. machine gunner must have said to himself, "What a birthday party!" He was 24. Just three weeks prior, he and Rogers had made a trip into Henoko, the Okinawa village outside of the 9th Marines base at Camp Schaub to purchase a gift for Hargrove's new wife. But that was so long ago. Now he had to find out which chopper he and his team, PFC Gary Hall and Pvt. Danny Marshall had been assigned. The only thing for certain Hargrove knew was that they weren't taking him anyplace to celebrate.

Rogers was part of a two man 3.5 rocket team and it wasn't until an officer drew an island map in the sand and pointed to the spot he wanted the team to cover, that Rogers had any inkling of where he was going. Accounts vary as to how many Marines were intended to take part in the assault. However, only 11 CH 53s and HH 53s were available; eight for the beach

assault for the first wave of Marines on Koh Tang and three assigned to the 4th Marines to take the ship. Those choppers were to ferry in three waves of Marines. That would never happen.

Tom Lindow became part of the frenzied flight line that morning. Lt. Bob Blough wouldn't.

"Again, I watched as my squadron flew off, feeling helpless and guilty for not being able to go along and join in," said Lindow. "From the looks on the faces of the flight crews and Marines sitting in the back of the aircraft, it wasn't something that was going to be fun."



The first wave of Marines exit the choppers. This is the Command group which had to land some 1000 yards south of West Beach to avoid being shot out of the sky.

"When I woke up early in the morning [of the 15th] the other crews had already left," recalled Blough. "I woke my guys, and told them to meet me at Base Ops. When I got to the flight line, all the helicopters were gone, including our two alert birds!"

"When I found Assistant Operations Officer Capt. Vern Sheffield, he said, 'We had to launch at 04:30. You guys were out on crew rest, so we assigned your aircraft to other crews. Maintenance back at NKP is working on getting two more aircraft operational. As soon as one becomes available, I'll let you know.'"

The accepted intelligence concerning the island's defenses originally came from a single source, a former Cambodian Naval officer in a refugee camp. The man had escaped the Pol Pot regime in April and was unaware that reinforcements and defenses at Koh Tang had been prepared for a *Vietnamese* invasion. He told planners to expect only about 60 irregulars. The Marine ground commander was told to expect 20-30; no one knows why.

Subsequent estimates of the number of defenders range from 80 to

300. The most realistic is between 120 and 150 simply because the island had to be supplied daily. The defenders were chronically short of everything except ammunition.

A military map of the jungle island didn't exist; only photos. There were only two suitable landing sites, small beaches opposite to each other on a small peninsula jutting north at the island's north end. Another small peninsula bordered the south end of the east beach and ran to the east. This formed an 'L' shaped defensive position; a flank. Perhaps that's why planners determined a diversionary assault should take place here. It was the better of the two beaches to land on but even if there were only 20 Khmer on the island, this would still be dangerous terrain for an assault force. And so it was.

Almost all of the five mile long island was thick jungle. This put *all* of the defenses between the east and west beaches at its narrow northern prong; exactly where the landings were to take place.

Air reconnaissance disagreed with the refugee's assessment of enemy troop strength. Although little could be seen under the jungle canopy, what was coming up out of it was pretty intense. What *could* be determined is that the ground fire directed toward the aircraft was concentrated north, south and between the planned invasion beaches. Where the reports from these pilots stopped in the chain of command is uncertain. What is certain is that the chopper pilots and the Marine planners never got them.

Gale Rogers and L/Cpl Hargrove's machine gun team stood with the men assigned to a helicopter waiting to go in on the second of three planned insertions. The first wave of the eight choppers had taken off for Koh Tang at 0330 for the four hour round trip. Three others took 70 Marines to the *USS Holt* to prepare to board the *Mayaguez*. For three bound for Koh Tang, it would be one way. Four would limp back with one of them barely able to make the southern tip of Thailand with all the Marines still aboard, including the G Company Commander,

About 0720 on the 15th of May, Marines from Delta Co. 1/4 aboard the *USS Holt* came aside the *Mayaguez* and boarded her; the first ship to ship Marine assault since 1826. The *Mayaguez* was deserted.

At Utapao Rogers watched one of the Koh Tang CH 53s return with a gaping hole in its side. Now

Casualties



A 'PJ' in his 'skivvies' ready for action over water as Marines board his H-53 at Utapao.

reality set in, or was it sureality? Was he dreaming or did he see a crewman waving them onboard another chopper wearing only a helmet, boots and skivvies? What he saw was a para-rescue/Jumper or PJ, a highly trained medic appropriately dressed to pull Marines out of the water if need be.

Rogers boarded with twenty-five or so other silent Marines and in short order watched the air base disappear beneath them.

He came out of a trance to the sound of the now partially dressed crewman (he had donned a wet suit top) firing off a burst from the mini-gun. Some time passed when he noticed a large fixed wing aircraft approach from the rear. Since he was told little of his mission, Rogers wasn't quite sure if his enemy had large aircraft capable of shooting down his helicopter. Does our enemy have an Air Force? Are we sitting ducks? These are the things that pester the mind of an uninformed Grunt. It turned out Rogers was fortunate to be on board the more heavily armored, less flammable HH 53 witnessing an in-flight refueling. His pilot and two others had earlier dropped off a detachment of the 4th Marines aboard the *USS Holt*. In his pre-battle trance Rogers hadn't noticed his chopper reverse course twice.

The first assault wave of eight choppers ran smack in the face of bad intelligence; or perhaps more accurately, bad dissemination of intelligence. Two were shot down on the East Beach, one of which lost 13, or half its men killed. The other chopper managed to get the Marines and crewmembers on East Beach after its tail was shot off. Another went down a mile offshore on the western side with the loss of one crewman and a fourth barely made it back to Thai territory with its troops still aboard. All of these 110 men who landed were pinned down in three separate pockets on the beaches. To those who were informed about the number of enemy to be expected, it was obvious a CF had occurred (an acceptable translation for CF would be: *convoluted orgy*). But it would get worse. The *Mayaguez* crewmen were free.

Mission Accomplished

How can things get worse when the mission is accomplished? That's exactly what happened to the first wave of Marines when the *Mayaguez* crewmen were discovered aboard that pirated Thai fishing vessel headed back to their ship. They were intercepted by the newly arrived Destroyer *USS Henry B. Wilson* and brought aboard during rescue operations for survivors of the first chopper shot down.

Word reached Washington quickly and the Koh Tang mission was aborted. But the order never reached the Khmer Rouge on the island. They kept fighting. The second wave of Marines in the air with Rogers on board was ordered back to Utapao.

Thirty-eight men had died to this point; all but one of them in choppers. Twenty-three died due to a faulty manufactured part assembly while deploying to Utapao, thirteen in the water off East Beach, one lost in the water off West Beach; all due to bad intelligence in the first hours of the assault. One Marine died on the island that morning attempting to link up the two separated groups on the west side. Forty civilian crewmen were free and the *Mayaguez* was in the hands of the 4th Marines.

Waste Management

One-hundred and ten Marines and five Airmen were now scattered in pockets on an island outnumbered by and blind to enemy capabilities. That's where they would remain for another eleven hours; a few, forever.

Many young boys, if not most are fascinated by the story of war. And why not? These are stories of courage, conflict—good and evil. The Vietnam generation grew up on the stories of WWII. Their fathers had served. But more often than not the stories came from books, magazines and movies. If their fathers told any stories of war it was more likely the adventures rather than the combat. This is because the true story of war is not so much the story of glory; but the story of waste.

Our fathers and grandfathers conquered Europe and Asia. These victories are recorded in books. But they were rarely chronicled by the participants on a personal level. Why?

Perhaps our fathers were reluctant to talk about their victories because it reminded them of the waste. Their silence betrayed the priorities they had set; of regret over glory. They may have done us a disservice for had they warned us of the waste we may have been more prepared for it when it came our turn.

Perhaps one of the most despised personalities of our era prior to Mr. Fonda's daughter was John Wayne. He lied to us. His wars were scripted. Ours were not. In his attempt to honor us he was showing us how little he knew about our work.

General Robert E. Lee commented to a Lieutenant during the battle of Fredericksburg, "It is well that war is so terrible, lest men grow fond of it."

He was talking about the intoxicating aroma of glory and adventure which green men seek and the devastating surprise in store for those who attain it.

Still, there is evil that must be tamed and we must have men willing to attack it. We must reserve honor for them. It is only a small homage though. What they see and experience in their sworn duty is beyond payment of accolades.

The Mayaguez rescue was no more. It had ended successfully but at a high cost. However, this operation would never be widely known as a battle. If it was known at all it would be called the 'Mayaguez Incident'. Pick any famous battle and call it an 'incident'. Four-hundred years from now would historians get a true sense of 1944 if history called it the 'Normandy Incident'? It would take twenty-five years before an author, Ralph Wetterhahn would correctly identify this day for posterity when he called it The Last Battle. The Mayaguez Incident was closing as the Battle of Koh Tang Island was opening. In that overlap, Marine PFC Ashton Loney would lose his life in that battle to Khmer gunfire. When Washington ordered all offensive operations to cease, the battle of Koh Tang Island would become one of the most successful missions in U.S. history--- to prevent waste.

President Ford would later call it the defining moment of his Presidency. But he slept through most of it.



A 'Jolly Green' leaves Koh Tang's West Beach after inserting Marines from the second wave.

When President Ford ordered the mission aborted, he went back to his dinner party. The Marines in the second wave were called back—and headed back. What was to become of 2/9; Lt. Col. Randall Austin's men without reinforcements?

The fact that the second wave was called back at all is an indication that no one in the higher ranks argued the order. It was Austin that had to slap someone awake after he was informed that his reinforcements were headed back to Utapao. Even so, a call had to be made back to the White House to rescind the order recalling the second wave. It was in this bizarre command atmosphere that the mission would be changed. Since there was no longer an objective, the mission would be to prevent the destruction of the Marines on Koh Tang.

The President would soon finish his dinner and go to sleep.

As usual, PFC Rogers and the rest of the Marines in the second wave didn't have a clue.

"Lock and Load!" The HH 53 descended over the water and began erratic maneuvers, sort of like a carnival ride. The Marines of the second wave could see the ocean over the back ramp come up to meet them. All remembered the hole in the chopper

back at Utapao and wondered if they were about to see one in theirs. As the ramp came down the scene resembled a movie; one of those sets where the background moved to simulate travel. First, blue water and sky, then a blurry beach scene complete with lush tropical décor. When the beach scene became a snapshot, Rogers remembers thinking, "How could a place this beautiful have people on it who are going to try and kill me?" The thought was fleeting. Rogers stopped thinking and started moving. It was 1230.

It's a beautiful day on this lush tropical island. It looks like those remote vacation spots you see in the brochures. It's hot though. That's the first thing you notice. And there's that smell. It's cordite—burnt gunpowder. You've smelled it before; most recently from the door gunner testing his weapon. You don't realize it now but from here on out whenever you smell that smell, you'll think of this place because it hangs over your wonderment. It's like honeysuckle. You think about springtime back home in elementary school whenever you smell honeysuckle.

This vacation spot has a movie quality about it. That's how contemporary man assesses many of his new experiences. He compares them to related fake ones he's seen in the movies. This was like a John Wayne movie. Green clad men moving into a green shag carpet, all in a strange slow motion. The movies though, never had the smell. That's important for some reason. You don't seem to get a true sense of mortality unless you can smell it.

Someone blows in your ear. Then a whip cracks. It takes a moment to realize that it was a bullet speeding by your head. Now the movie's over. Now you realize if you can smell it, it can kill you. If it can blow in your ear, it can blow your head off. Now you're a combat veteran.

You roll over and watch that big, fat light bulb that brought you here attract every mosquito in the swamp as it makes its exit. Just seconds ago you were inside never realizing how attractive it was. You see pieces coming off of it as it lifts away. You file the scene in your memory to marvel at it later because there are people trying to kill you from the other direction. Comparatively speaking though, you feel safe because you can dig a hole.

If your fate is kind, before this day is out you will be amazed at the amount of fire, stone and steel that can surround the human body without contacting it. But of course, sometimes it does.

Waiting

Back at NKP TSgt. Maynard Franklin, a mechanic watched crews working feverishly to get some unserviceable choppers ready to fly. Then he was whisked away to Utapao. They would eventually put one in the air during the battle at Koh Tang. Bob Blough would get it. It is most likely because of that effort at NKP the names of quite a few Marines would be written on employment applications and marriage licenses rather than on a memorial to appear a decade later.

Bob Blough and his experienced crew sat idle at Utapao helpless listening to reports of their friends' plight.

“As the morning wore on, the mission aircraft would return to Utapao in ones and twos to refuel, pick up some of the Marine reinforcements along with supplies of ammo and water, and head back to Koh Tang. News trickled in slowly, and a mobile blackboard was used to track the status of each aircraft by tail number. Cryptic notes in the Status column became more ominous: ‘Shot up,’ ‘Down on the beach,’ ‘Shot up,’ ‘Shot up,’ ‘Down in the water,’ ‘Down in the water.’ This was starting to look like a disaster! Then I saw my best friend, John Schramm’s name with ‘Down on East Beach.’ I recall yelling, ‘DAMMIT, VERN. GET ME AN AIRCRAFT!’”

Tom Lindow’s information was mainly second hand.

“Throughout the day we would hear of a ‘Dusty’ going down now and then and we all were very concerned for the ‘Jolly’ crews that we knew. I do remember a few times praying - ‘just bring them home’ as if I was talking to these bastard machines that might hear me. I didn’t ask for much, no heroic deeds, not the impossible, just ‘bring them home’. We took great pride in our aircraft and squadron. Although we would swear and ridicule these H-53s that caused us [many] hours of maintenance in near impossible heat conditions, they still were ‘our H-53s’. We wouldn’t stand for anybody else to criticize them or our squadron. We looked at our aircraft as a living thing, almost a person. It might have been ‘a bitch’ or [some] other self-deserved adjective, but it had a personality and a temperament peculiar to each and every machine, just like people. But now we were exposing machines and crews to combat, how do you control that?? Even the best running machine can get shot out of the sky. We took some comfort knowing these aircraft and crews had proven themselves just recently before in the Phnom Penh and Saigon evacuations. They successfully worked together as a squadron, and this was definitely the best squadron I had ever been in. A few times throughout the day I would exchange silent concerned looks with the other mechanics after hearing of an aircraft going down. We could only shake our heads silently and wonder.”

Depleted Assets

Ominous news and idle crews; for Blough’s, it was maddening. The frustrated crew would get its chance to shake that helpless feeling of duty guilt.

“As the afternoon progressed, the news on the helicopter status board in base operations continued to deteriorate.

It was beginning to look like we would run out of helicopters due to enemy gunfire before we could extract the Marines.

“Late in the afternoon, Vern finally called me over and told me Col. McMonigle, our squadron commander, was en route from NKP with a helicopter just released from Maintenance. If he was willing to give up the aircraft, I could take it.

“My crew and I were waiting on the flight line when Col McMonigle taxied to a stop. As soon as he shut down the engines, I ran up to the cockpit window and said, ‘Sir, my crew is rested, briefed and ready to go if you’re willing to turn over the aircraft.’ Col McMonigle looked me in the eye. He and his crew had been up all night helping maintenance with engine runs and test flights to get this aircraft ready. He and his crew were exhausted, but eager to give their comrades at Koh Tang some much-needed help. I, on the other hand, had a fresh crew and more experience flying the H-53 than he had. He could have filled out his skeleton crew with one of my flight engineers and the PJ’s, or he could have taken over my entire crew for his own. But Col McMonigle gave me a sad smile and said, ‘It’s all yours, Bob.’ I have always respected him for that decision.

“We ran a quick preflight check while the helicopter was being refueled, and soon we were airborne with our tactical call sign “Jolly Green 44.” We headed southeast and ran through all our combat checklists, including test firing our three 7.62mm miniguns. None of us had fired the miniguns since our training in the states. Due to our ‘Status of Forces Agreement’ with Thailand, we had been prohibited from live-fire training in Thailand.”

With the full Mayaguez crew safely in U. S. hands, air support could now be called upon to cover the extraction from the island. However, it was still a dicey proposition given the grenade throwing distances between the combatants. Gale Rogers was on the West Beach perimeter most of the day. They were ordered inland shortly after landing but the jungle proved impenetrable and they fell back to secure a beach perimeter. !

The battle raged and receded all afternoon. The sound of aircraft and helicopters was constant. Gale remembers watching the OV-10 Broncos, armed observation planes with twin tail booms which arrived about three hours after his second wave. They “looked like angry bees” turning tight to dive and fire into the jungle in front of him. He was amazed at the silence of the jet aircraft he could see overhead; until they came toward the island in a slow, steady scream. They would always turn right after dropping their ordinance, then the concussion and fire.

The helicopter sounds were rescue attempts for the twenty Marines and five Air Crewmen that had crashed on East Beach only about 200 yards in front of the West Beach perimeter across the narrow neck that separated the two beaches. Each time the pilots were driven off East Beach by heavy gunfire. One of them, ‘Jolly Green 43’ had a fuel line shot up and had to make an emergency landing on



The OV-10 Bronco

the *USS Coral Sea* thirty minutes away. It would not have made the flight back to Utapao.

TSgt. Billy Willingham and the crew of the *USS Coral Sea* got the chopper back in action by 1700. It would become one of only three flyable aircraft available to recover more than two-hundred Marines before dark.

The 25 East Beach men were completely cut off the entire day. The third attempt at 1800 was successful supported by the OV-10s and small arms fire from the *USS Wilson's* gig. The chopper however, was badly shot up. The 16 hour day for 1Lt. Dan Blacklund and his crew was finally over.

The 'gig' is a small boat is normally used to ferry the Captain to shore or to other vessels. The *Wilson's* gig was pressed into service at the start of the battle rescuing survivors of the first chopper shot down, Knife 31. It then intercepted the crew of the *Mayaguez* returning from the Cambodian mainland, then back to rescue. When that task was complete the gig took part in the battle harassing enemy efforts to impede the East Beach rescue.

It was essentially an impromptu, successful combat mission by volunteers who, two days prior had been on routine liberty in Taiwan.

Shortly after the East Beach extraction, Rogers heard the now common, "Get down!" He was already down but felt himself lifting up about a foot off the ground. He was slammed back down for what may have been over a minute before jungle pieces and shards of hot metal came raining down. An Air Force C-130E had just dropped a 15,000 pound 'Daisy Cutter' bomb to the south of his position. He could hear agonizing screams. Just the concussion of one of these bombs could make your head explode; or wish it had. Fortunately, none of those screams came from Marines.

The Forward Air Controller (FAC), Capt. Greg 'Growth' Wilson flying overhead in an OV-10 was blown into a dive from the concussion.

The daisy cutter is also called 'Instant Landing Zone' and indeed it does that. Its use here was to relieve pressure on the West Beach by drawing enemy forces south in anticipation of another landing. It was a surprise to almost everyone; and it was getting dark.

In the Marine Corps the most respected men are not Marines at all. They are Navy Corpsman. They are all volunteers. Since every Marine is by tradition a rifleman first, this morally precludes him from trumping that duty. Therefore, they must seek Navy men who vow to be healers first.

In battle, any weapon carried by a Corpsman, if at all is for self-protection only. He will depend on the Marines for his overall defense and he will go where they go and expose himself as they do; many times even more. In turn, the Marines depend on him for their very lives.

In the Air Force the respected man is the PJ, the para-rescue/Jumper. He is the Super Medic cross trained in all terrain including the watery kind.

When you join the 'Armed' Service your 'arm' may be a box wrench. But if this mission left only one legacy it should be the importance of every cog in the wheel. If a man's on the ground waiting for darkness to kill him, there are no words to describe the elation he feels when that big machine arrives to take him away.

But the PJ can't save that man if the pilot doesn't bring him. The pilot can't deliver unless he has something to fly. It is the mechanic, the 'Machine Medic' that will make any rescue possible.

When the commanders foul up or the intelligence officers make mistakes, lives are lost—sometimes in great numbers. These are Generals and Colonels, important people with great responsibilities. You are just an Airman or a Seaman 2nd Class but with responsibilities just as great. Like the General, you may not be exposed to combat and you will worry about the men who are. But unlike the General, you know the men that depend on you personally. The success of your part of the mission and the lives you may have saved will be known to few. And so it will remain. That is simply your duty and on this particular mission, you did it well.

You will not make the history books. You will receive no medals. What you do have is the respect of those who did.

The Extraction

For the Marines on the beach, the situation was worse than it was when the second wave was called off. Lt. Col. Austin needed reinforcements to consolidate his men. With that done with the arrival of the second wave, he could withdraw. But now a different concern loomed. Men *were* being extracted. If they weren't all off before dark, the weakened remaining Marines were sure to be overrun by the obvious superior numbers the Khmer Rouge had on the island. Air support would be a crap shoot.

Gale Rogers watched a flare pop. It made an eerie green glow as it meandered back to earth. Darkness would be here soon. He started to dig anticipating a night time stay when he heard a ping off a rock in front of him. Then the jungle opened up. He hugged the ground as green tracers passed him on their way to the gulf.

He could hear a chopper coming in off West Beach and someone shout, "Fall Back!" In a low crouch, he ran as fast as he could. When the tracers inched closer, he fell in a hole in the sand next to Pvt. Paul Davis. It was almost dark now.

The OV-10 flown by Capt. Greg 'Growth' Wilson (call sign NAIL 69) was on station to coordinate what was hoped to be a complete withdraw of all Marines on the island. Two choppers available to remove them, 'Jolly 43' piloted by Capt.

Wayne 'Buford' Purser had a fuel line jury rigged with rubber hose and duct tape on the recently arrived carrier *USS Coal Sea* and 'Knife 51' flown by 1Lt. Dick Brims was relatively intact for the amount of flying it had done that day; since early that morning, 1Lt. Bob Blough flew 'Jolly 44' which had just been put into service that afternoon at NKP. That was all.

To throw in a little more challenge, none of these pilots were trained in night landings with no lights. Nor had any of the pilots ever landed on a carrier, day or night as they would be forced to do here. The darker the sky became, the more improvisation was required. They would have to go in one at a time to the tight, West Beach LZ and each were to make a 40 minute round trip to the *Coral Sea* in order to do a necessary second extraction. It would be another new Air Force mission created by junior officers devised in minutes.

Bob Blough would be the last in on the first extraction.

"With darkness approaching rapidly, Nail 69 (the OV-10) cleared 'Knife 51' into the beach LZ. We all silently wished him good luck, and sat back with our own thoughts to wait our turn.

"It was too dark by now to see Brims in the LZ, but he soon called clear and Nail 69 cleared Jolly 43 into the LZ. Purser responded, 'I'm turning off my lights to make a blacked-out approach.' It was rapidly getting darker, and any lights on the helo would only make it a better target. But as Purser turned off his position lights, I experienced an instant of vertigo. The aircraft I had been calmly flying formation on had suddenly disappeared into the night, and I had to quickly transfer my attention to my flight instruments to assure myself that my aircraft was still upright and level.

"My plan [on approach to the island]was to descend to just above the water to avoid a silhouette. It would be tricky flying on instruments at low speed just above the water.

"I knew that Army and the Marine helicopter pilots had made blacked-out approaches into the jungles of Vietnam, but they were practically unheard of in the Air Force at that time. My personal heroes of the Son Tay prison camp raid in North Vietnam had done it, but only after intense training and with good moonlight. During the time I flew Air Rescue helicopters, blacked-out approaches were strictly forbidden, so we had no experience with them. Quite frankly, they could be downright scary. But in this case, a blacked-out approach was a necessary risk. I counted on experience, a good copilot and crew, and a little luck to make it work.

"Nail 69 cleared us into the LZ. We hadn't heard Purser call clear, but we assumed we'd just missed it. I acknowledged, called for lights out, and began a descent toward the water. By this time it was getting really dark. No moon, no stars and an overcast sky. We descended on instruments. My copilot, Hank Mason gave me a warning call at 150 feet. Absolute concentration was required, with help from Hank's occasional, 'Ten feet and descending' warning. I couldn't believe Hank sounded so calm, but that's why I had picked him.

"We groped our way through the dark with all hands straining to see anything looming out of the dark. Even with the instrument panel lights turned down to minimum, they still interfered with our ability to see anything in front of us in the dark. Flight Engineer, Bobby Bounds was hanging out the right door where instrument panel lights didn't glare. Just as he announced the beach up ahead, a bright light flashed right in front of us.

"'Helicopter in the LZ!' Bobby yelled as I pulled in max power and turned hard away from the island. Jolly Green 43 was still in the LZ loading Marines. Her copilot, 1Lt Bob Gradle, had heard our call on the radio but was apparently unable to contact us. When he saw the salt spray being kicked up by our rotor wash, he flashed his landing lights as a warning. He risked exposing his own aircraft to the Khmer gunners with his light flash, but he prevented a midair catastrophe that would have wiped out two helicopters, blocked the LZ, and left only one helicopter to try to evacuate almost 200 Marines.

"By the time we had collected ourselves, Jolly 43 had cleared the LZ and we started another approach to the island. It was even darker now, and I was having difficulty maintaining our altitude. Hank's warning calls of 'Ten feet and descending' were still calm, but more frequent. And occasionally I'd feel a slight tug as one of the landing gear contacted a wave. I was still trying to clear the vestiges of that bright landing light from my eyeballs' memory, and I was fighting vertigo.

"The ground fire became more intense - red and green tracers. One trail looked like big red balls. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion. I remember thinking in a detached way, 'Wow. So that's what incoming ground fire really looks like at night. That Khmer gunner is really disciplined; he's walking his tracers right up toward the cockpit!'

"At that instant, Bobby Bounds yelled, 'Break Left!' I immediately rolled left to 45-degree angle-of-bank and pulled in power to keep from smashing into the water. Almost immediately, the normally stoic Bobby Bounds screamed, 'Dammit Break Left - Tree!'

"I racked the H-53 over to 90-degree and pulled in max power, hoping that we had enough altitude that the rotor blades wouldn't dip into the waves and drag us into the water. Miraculously, we got clear to the west. I took several deep breaths to calm down. I can only imagine what the rest of my crew was feeling.

"I briefed the FAC on what had happened, and asked him for a heading back to the LZ. He said, 'I saw the 50-cal. Follow my tracers.' As we headed back toward the island, we could see the tracers coming down from the OV-10's four M-60s at what seemed to be an impossible dive angle.

"The ground fire was still intense, but not as accurate this time. The Khmer could hear us coming, but they couldn't see us. Finally Bobby called, 'Beach at 12-o'clock.' The beach loomed as a lighter shade of grey in the darkness. A darker line of trees and vegetation loomed to the right-front, so I eased the nose left to land parallel to the narrow strip of sand and rock. The trees were on the right, and the left landing gear was in the water. Now we had to wait for the Marines to climb onto the aft ramp. I just hoped the Marines found us before the Khmer did.

“We could do nothing now but wait, feeling naked in the darkness. The entire crew strained to see human silhouettes against the lighter beach, then try to identify them as friend or foe. I reminded my crew, ‘Don’t shoot the good guys,’ but in this darkness it would be almost impossible to make the distinction until they were boarding the chopper. Sitting there in the cockpit surrounded by Plexiglas, I felt vulnerable and mentally urged the Marines to hurry. “

PFC Rogers and the group nearest Blough’s chopper wasted no time.

“A minute or so later,” recalled Rogers, “I could hear another chopper coming into the LZ, still to my left some yards away. I would try to make it to this one. As I ran to the sound, I realized it was hovering over the water. I continued to run toward the sound in about knee to thigh deep water. Next thing I knew I looked up into the cockpit of the pilot and co-pilot. Wrong end!

“I made my way to the rear and dragged myself in. One or two more Marines then climbed in. I felt the chopper moving when a red light came on in the rear. My first thought was that we were hit, but not so. I then felt something cool on my back. It was an open top ice cooler with ice in it. I began scooping the ice out by hand and handing it out to those inside the chopper.”

The Air Show Only One Man Saw

Blough’s ‘Jolly 44’ was the last chopper the Marines would see until ‘Knife 51’ could drop its Marines on the *Coral Sea* and return. But Blough was concerned it might be too late.

“It seemed like hours, but was actually only minutes until the crew reported we had a full load of Marines and no more could be seen coming. I called, ‘Jolly coming out’ to the FAC, and he replied that he was clear. I took off using my instruments and gratefully climbed out over the water. Now for a chance to calm down during the twenty-minute flight to the *Coral Sea*.

“I can’t remember who first suggested diverting to the *USS Holt*, but I think it was the OV-10 FAC, “Growth” Wilson. The *Holt* was less than five minutes flying time from Koh Tang instead of almost 20 minutes to the *Coral Sea*. If we could off-load our Marines onto the *Holt*, it would reduce our round trip time by a good half-hour. We had enough fuel to do this and still get to the *Coral Sea* if necessary.

“There were good reasons none of the other aircraft had off-loaded their Marines onto the *Holt*. Foremost was the size of the helipad. It was designed for a helicopter much smaller than, and half the weight of, an H-53. Earlier in the day, three H-53s had off-loaded the Marine force later used to board the *Mayaguez* from the *Holt*, but these helos had just hovered over the pad crosswise with their rear landing gear resting lightly on the pad and their noses hanging over the side. The Marines had then jumped off the aft ramp onto the helipad.

“We changed radio frequency to the *Holt* and asked for permission to land. They responded with, ‘Jolly Green 44 cleared to the helipad, but do not land! You’ll have to hover over the helipad at 90-degrees like the other helos this morning. The pad is not stressed for your weight.’

“This was not an option for us. If I attempted to hover at 90-degrees over the *Holt*’s helipad, I’d have been unable to see anything but a dark void. And the H-53 was too big to hover facing the ship without our crew door and ramp hanging out over the water.

“I made a low pass over the pad to check it out. As we approached the *Holt*, the only thing we could see was a small square of light floating in a hundred square miles of black void and one couldn’t distinguish the black sky from the black ocean. I flew low and slow just to the left of the *Holt* so Bobby Bounds in the right door and I could both get a good look at the helipad. We could see why the Navy didn’t allow its H-53s to land on it. It was tiny! At the front of the pad, the vertical wall of the super-structure rose just inches from it. I asked Bobby if he thought we’d have rotor clearance if we landed 45-degrees to the pad. We’d have to offload the Marines through the right door. Bobby said he thought it would be tight, but possible.

“I called the *Holt* with our proposed plan. ‘Stand by,’ was the response. I assumed he was conferring with the *Holt*’s Captain. The Captain and I both understood that this was definitely a high-risk proposal. If I screwed up, it would probably total my craft and do substantial damage to his ship. More importantly, it would kill or injure my crew, my Marines and the sailors on the flight deck. But I wouldn’t have proposed it if those Marines still left on the island weren’t in such jeopardy. The *Holt*’s Captain, Commander Robert Peterson, had been monitoring all the radio traffic and he apparently agreed with my assessment. But if I screwed up, we’d both probably be court martialed.

“The *Holt* radioed, ‘Jolly Green 44 will be cleared to land. We completed our landing checks and I briefed my crew on my intentions. Only I and Bobby Bounds in the right door would be able to see the *Holt* on short final. Hank would help me out with altitude and rate-of-descent calls. Flight Engineer Jim Howell would monitor rotor RPM and key engine and transmission instruments. PJ, Bruce Daly in the left window wouldn’t be able to see anything until we were over the pad, then he’d be responsible for making sure our left wheel was indeed over the pad before we set down. David Ash on the aft ramp wouldn’t be able to see anything during approach. He was to prevent the Marines from exiting off the aft ramp hanging over the water.

“Depth perception and closure rate were difficult to judge without any visual references except the small, bright helipad floating in the darkness. Finally, on the third try, I got the angle and rate of descent right.

“On short final, Bobby switched to “hot mike” so he could give me a running commentary on approach speed, rotor clearance on the right side and altitude above the pad. From the H-53 cockpit, the pilot has a very restricted field of view to either side or below the helicopter. And because the rotor mast is so far behind the cockpit, the pilot is totally dependent on his crew in the back to keep him advised of how much clearance is between his rotor tips and any obstructions to the side.

“As we neared the pad, I had doubts about whether we’d have enough rotor clearance to the ship and still get onto the pad. It was really tight. But Bobby kept up his commentary, confirming our clearance to the ship, and guiding me verbally to a hover over the pad. I was totally tuned to Bobby’s voice and a light touch on the controls, trying to sense what my helicopter was going to do before it did it. We needed only a sudden wind gust to drive our rotors into something hard. Finally Bobby, and Bruce on the left side, cleared me to a soft landing with the rear wheels. I let off just enough power for the nose wheel to lightly touch the pad, figuring we were putting only about half the full weight of the H-53 onto the helipad.”

This was a trick you might see at an air show by a stunt pilot with a carefully scripted and well-practiced routine. In reality it was an improvised tactic by a crew who had never landed on a ship. In fact, Blough’s crew was the first ever to do that—and the last with his type of machine.

Gale Rogers and the other Marines on board, as always didn’t have any idea that they were participants in one of the most amazing feats of teamwork in naval aviation history—performed by the Air Force! At the time, no one was checking the record books.

Trust

At the same time, Blough was adding a stranger to his team.

“One of my most vivid memories of the Mayaguez operation is the sight of the LSO (Landing Systems Officer) standing upright in the corner of the helipad with his lighted wands to guide us into a safe landing. I have to admit that my concentration and my reactions were to Bobby’s guidance because I trusted him. I had no idea how much experience in guiding helicopters the LSO had. However, I was ready to react to him immediately if he had given me a wave-off.

“The reason I remember him so vividly was that he seemed so naked and vulnerable standing there while everyone else on his crew was behind something substantial. To this day, I admire the courage of that LSO who had no idea if I had the skill to pull it off, and most likely would have sacrificed his life had I erred.”

And vice-versa, Lt. Blough.

The Marines aboard had already been exposed to Air Force tactics that baffled them. Here’s one more—don’t go out the back ramp!

“I felt the chopper hovering,” said Rogers about his very short trip. “We stood to exit the rear when shouting began, telling us to exit the front door. Good thing we did. The back end of the chopper was hanging over the edge of the ship above the water.”

After a count of the exiting Marines was confirmed, Blough carefully eased off the *Holt* and got airborne. Blough adds, “With a silent salute to the LSO...”

The Night Ends...

‘Jolly 44’ went back to the LZ while the other two were returning from the *Coral Sea*. It was pitch black so someone on the island had tossed a strobe light at the water’s edge to guide the chopper in. Bob landed on it to deaden its effect. This last run was just as hectic and just as dangerous.

Here, again flight protocol would have to be violated for the sake of urgency. The machine, like the men on board would have to exceed its limits.

“Last one’s aboard. We’re gonna be heavy. Let’s get outta here!” shouted Bobby Bounds to anyone who was listening.

Lt. Blough pulled in full power for an instrument take off.

“I planned to take off straight up initially, then lower the nose while turning right to clear any trees that may be in front of us. But something was wrong! I was pushing full forward on the cyclic stick, but the nose kept rising! That H-53 felt like it wanted to roll over on its back! ‘Guys, I can’t get the nose down,’ I reported.

“Bobby replied with a breathless, ‘All the Marines are stacked up in the tail, we’re throwing them forward as fast as we can.’ As the Marines had clamored up the aft ramp in the dark, they had tripped over David’s gun mount and were literally stacked up on the floor at the rear of the helicopter. Their combined weight was enough to exceed the center-of-gravity limits of the aircraft, so I didn’t have enough flight control authority to lower the nose.

“Nail, we’re coming straight up out of the LZ,” I radioed. ‘Nail’s clear,’ came the response. All we needed now was a mid-air between a blacked-out helicopter and an OV-10 rolling in behind us to protect our withdrawal.

“But now the cockpit was lit up by the bright yellow glare of numerous caution lights. I had inadvertently jerked the controls when the mini-gun went off, sending a surge through both hydraulic systems, and momentarily activating the by-pass function in both hydraulic systems.

“We were still climbing, and the controls were responding normally, except for the nose-high attitude. In fact, the nose was slowly starting to come down as the weight of the Marines was shifted forward.

“I reset the breaker and the CAUTION lights went out. Good. That verified that we didn't have a hydraulic problem.

“I reclaimed the controls from Hank and was glad to see we were regaining flying speed. The PJs reported several of the Marines were wounded and asked for the white cabin lights to be turned on so they could better treat the wounds and start IVs. I said, ‘Hold off on the white lights for a minute; go ahead with the red lights for now.’ The white lights would destroy everyone's night vision, and I wasn't sure yet what our next step would be.”

There were Marines still on the island and with ‘Jolly 43’ and ‘Knife 51’ on the way, Blough made a quick assessment as to whether another *Holt* landing was wise. He was low on fuel which is why he could pack almost twice the number of Marines on board than the bird was designed to carry. Leaving the scene with men in distress was a hard but practical decision. He had 42 men aboard, some of them wounded. Those were his immediate concern.

‘Jolly 44’ headed for the *USS Coral Sea* to make its first carrier landing—at night.

‘Growth’ Wilson in his OV-10 was still on station when ‘Knife 51’ and ‘Jolly 43’ returned from the *Coral Sea*. Dick Brims, ‘Knife’s’ pilot had allowed a PJ from the ‘Jolly’ squadron to talk himself aboard. When Blough’s crew in ‘Jolly 44’ off-loaded its Marines on the *Coral Sea*, refueled and returned to Koh Tang, Brims was already on the beach.

With no reference points and the resulting vertigo threatening the extraction, Brims made a desperate move. He turned on his landing lights.

So what is it that overrides self-preservation? Certainly there are those who would risk their lives for riches or fame. There are also those who welcome extinction through the fog of alcohol or drug addiction. But here the spirit is depleted by ego and hopelessness.

We can forever argue the rank between man’s two strongest drives—to survive or to procreate. But aren’t they really one and the same? If a man is willing to forgo his drive to survive for the purpose of saving others, isn’t he simply procreating an extension for those saved? It is a mother’s instinct to risk herself for the survival of her child. She is born with a spiritual superiority in that sense. A soldier however, must develop it in his character. It is a spiritual discipline, or lack thereof which creates the character. Most live their lives unaware of how much of it they have attained. How much of the soul they have cleansed and polished may only be revealed for certain when mortality beckons.

On this long, grueling day every pilot flew into a known carnage willingly. Moreover, he flew in with a crew. They may tell you they were so focused on their duties that they didn’t really think about the danger. That may be true to a point; and that point may have been reached when the first tracer flew by. But before that they had to make a cost assessment. Their own lives had to be part of that assessment, and in addition, the lives of the crew weighed against the lives of the Marines who would surely die without them.

You won’t find assessments this intimate in corporate boardrooms or political offices. In these places the stakes might be higher but the faces of those put in jeopardy are never seen. On a personal level there can be no greater burden than to take friends to death’s door with you.

This mission produced the most awards for valor in a single day in U.S. Air Force history. The citations chronicle the actions taken yet leave silent the burdens accepted.

On the Koh Tang evacuation, each chopper crewman flew into his potential last day at least once; most many times. Not a single Airman was lost. All that were shot to bits still managed to get their Marines safely extracted. Some were repaired and went back. Others would fly no more. Not a single Marine was lost.

Brims steadied the chopper over West Beach and cut the landing lights. His stowaway, TSgt. Wayne Fisk left the chopper and searched for Marines. He would get different versions from those stumbling up the ramp.

“Any more?”

“I don’t know.”

“Any of your guys still out there?”

“Maybe one or two.”

The last Marines on the shrunken perimeter scurried onto the aircraft under withering fire. It was so bad that they had to leave the body of PFC Ashton Loney on the beach where it had been prepared for extraction. When it was determined that all Marines were off the island, Fisk held up the flight for just a moment. He thought he saw something. He did. Out of the brush came PFCs Willy Overton and Emilio Trevino. They owed their lives to Fisk’s keen sense and the entire air crew’s willingness to accept it.

Wayne Fisk had been a part of the Son Tay POW rescue attempt in North Vietnam in 1970. The POWs had been moved prior to that well planned raid. Then, as now, the whole operation had been compromised by bad intelligence. This time however, Fisk was able to free the men he came for.

A final check with the Marine CO confirmed all were now off the island. Fisk was the last man to leave. But he wouldn't be the last man.

...The Nightmare Begins

Aboard the *Holt* now, Rogers and the rest of the Marines deposited there by Blough were led to the mess hall and ordered to dump their gear. Once they were less dangerous they were given free reign over the ship's store.

"A sailor by the name of Muse gave his bunk to me and slept in a hallway. For this I was moved and very grateful. To this day, I would still like to personally thank him for this act of kindness."

Bob Blough and the two other remaining choppers were assured that all Marines were off the island and ordered back to Thailand. There, Tom Lindow waited.

"Near sunset we were told the operation was over and aircraft started returning back to the base. At the moment we were just concerned with getting everybody back safely. Park the aircraft and get ready for the next.

"As we walked about the parked aircraft I was amazed at some of the battle damage. The H-53 is a very big aircraft and you have to get up close to appreciate all it was exposed to. The majority of the main rotor blades had holes in them. Fixed cabin windows were broken out where somebody used the butt of their rifle to hastily create a firing position

"Around [2100] we got a call of the last aircraft coming in that called an in-flight emergency with hydraulic problems and unsafe 'landing gear down' indication. I was a bit worried as I thought we had been very lucky so far, don't blow it now. I watched as the aircraft hovered over the ramp as one of the maintenance sergeants walked underneath it and inserted the landing gear safety pins, typically used when the aircraft was on the ground. The aircraft slowly and gently settled down and we all let out our breaths. The aircraft was a mess. The right auxiliary fuel tank had a hole in the front of it the size and shape of a football. The explosive proof foam in its tanks obviously did its job keeping it from exploding. The cabin floor was covered everywhere with spent cartridges from the mini-guns. Fluid was leaking all over. It was amazing it flew at all. I stepped outside and patted the side of her saying to myself 'good job'.

"We spent the rest of the night patching up aircraft and getting them ready to fly again. Parts were coming and going as we replaced what we could while assessing the damage."

With the Marines scattered aboard three ships and the base at Utapao, it took a while to account for them all. The results were disturbing. Although fairly sure of the fates of those on 'Kinfe 31', the first chopper shot down, there were three unaccounted for. Word spread quickly that Danny Marshall, Gary Hall and Joseph Hargrove, the machine gun team covering the right flank could not be found. Just as quickly, any inquiries from the ranks were firmly squashed.

It was hard to hide that fact since on the morning of the 16th it seemed to everyone aboard all three ships in the area that preparations were underway to revisit Koh Tang. But nothing happened.

Speculation among the Marines was that the rescue for the missing men was cancelled because the brass didn't want to risk any more Marines. However, no one asked them.

That soupy dread even engulfed Utapao.

"Every one of those pilots wanted to go back and get [the missing Marines]," said Maynard Franklin. And perhaps that's why he, Lindow and all the other mechanics were pressed to put some damaged birds into service throughout the night and early morning after the battle. But here too, nothing happened.

"When we were pulled out, and on the destroyer that night," PFC Rogers recalled. "Someone, a staff NCO, I think asked if we had seen the gun team and mentioned the names.

"We replied 'no'.

The following morning, Marines were once again asked by senior NCOs if anyone could account for the machine gun team. Rogers was with Curtis Myrick when they were, "approached by someone and asked if we knew of anyone missing. Then we were asked if anyone had seen Hargrove, Hall or Marshall. None of us had. Rumor then had it that we were going back in to recover those left behind. That never developed. Why, I'll never know, I suppose. But it is those types of decisions and memories that keep me up at night. That machine gun team was left out on the right flank, to my right, still defending while everyone else was being pulled out. It is at this point that it gets difficult for me.

"[That's the] last word I ever heard of it, *period*."

Lies by Omission

TSgt. Ted Whitlock found himself back at Korat on the morning of May 16. His unit was told nothing, but the rumors were that the Marines had lost a lot of men. Whitlock, as with most of the participants, got most of the information on his mission from rumor and the *Pacific Stars and Stripes* newspaper.

On May 15th, the day of the Koh Tang battle, that paper published a short article on the crash of the CH 53 (Knife 13) from NKP; specifically quoting a Pentagon spokesman that it was *not* involved in the *Mayaguez* mission. For those Airmen who knew the truth, this false report bore a sinister air.

That was an intentional lie proven once the National Security Council (NSC) documents were declassified. The Ford Administration was considering public perceptions of his own heroics in the rescue mission even while the planning was in progress. What might cloud those anticipated accolades were too many American losses. These were to be minimized if at all possible and 'Knife 13' was possible to minimize as a non-mission loss.

However, Assistant Secretary of Defense, William Clements made a prophetic declaration at the NSC meeting when he said, "Sooner or later you will get a linkage [of the *Mayaguez* operation] with the 23 already lost at NKP." Indeed we did.

The loss of those 23 Airmen, all volunteers on their way to battle was no different than the loss of a landing craft sinking before reaching the beaches of Iwo Jima. No one was written off as an accident loss at 'Sulfur Island'.

After the battle, with a secure *Mayaguez*, the task turned to public relations. At the time it must be remembered that any military action in Southeast Asia was a hard sell. America as well as its leaders were simply sick of war in the region. The Cooper Church Amendment, passed in 1971 severely hampered the President's discretion concerning military action specifically tied to Southeast Asia. This proved to be a major distraction as planning was underway. Now however, the Administration had a successful mission with the rescue of the entire crew which it could tout to minimize criticism of military action. But the cost might be perceived as too high to reap any political rewards.

From witness reports of preparations to return to Koh Tang, it appears senior officers were aware of men left behind on the island and serious about getting them back. Those preparations could not go forward without this authority. But just as quickly, those preparations ended.

"I know the flight crews all wanted to go back to get [the missing Marines] immediately after they were confirmed MIA, but were told to stand down," Tom Lindow remembered. "They were close to having a riot and I saw some of the pilots cursing at this order. For the Jolly Greens, rescuing people in need was our business and we took great pride in that, so leaving those guys behind really left us feeling dejected."

There is little to research in the Ford Administration records concerning Hargrove, Hall and Marshall, the missing Marines. Who decided to cancel preparations for a rescue could not be determined. However, subsequent evidence points to a political decision which came from the very top; and it came rapidly. The *Holt* did stay on station in the waters surrounding Koh Tang on the day after the battle but was ordered to depart shortly after. Why?

Consider a speculative but supportable account.

All of the men who died on or surrounding the island were left where they fell. Koh Tang Island is relatively small and isolated. Additional U.S. Naval Forces could have been sent to the area to wait out its garrison if for no other reason than to retrieve the remains of those men.

American air power could have easily prevented any attempt by the Khmer Rouge to reinforce or resupply their garrison from the mainland. Thus, the objective could have been achieved with little or no casualties.

Basically, the U.S. could have laid siege to the island. Money and manpower costs to do this would be justified. After all, we spend this kind of capital on retrieval of wreckage from civilian aircraft disasters over water. Doing so to retrieve the remains of servicemen and live ones as well compels greater urgency.

But had this been done it would have extended the mission. Congressional complaints and press inquiries were sure to follow. With those inquiries it may have been embarrassing to the Ford Administration to admit that it was possible Marines had been left alive on the island. This was only two years after American POWs were released by North Vietnam and already there were some serious charges that not all of them held came home. The loss of 'Knife 13' too, might be linked to the mission which would send the loss numbers higher than the pirated crewmen. Ford's 'defining moment' would be compromised.

Throughout the NSC meeting records is the fear that the crew of the *Mayaguez* could be held hostage and "used to twist our tails," as Vice-President Nelson Rockefeller put it. Of course, three live Marines could also do the same. Is it conceivable that live men were abandoned purposely to avoid degrading the Commander-in-Chief's 'defining moment'?

We get a clue from the *American Forces Press Service* where President Ford was quoted in eulogy in 2007:

"I got a call from the skipper of the *Mayaguez*," Ford said, "and he told me that it was the action of me, President Ford, that saved the lives of the crew of the *Mayaguez*."

But did the skipper know he was a serious target—at least for a moment? And who saved the Marines?

An ego can be a dangerous thing. Perhaps we can forgive a President a little puffery and defer to his need to be remembered as a great leader to posterity. Manipulating facts after an event is dishonest, not deadly. Unfortunately, the power to manipulate actions (or in this case, inaction by abandoning the three Marines) to falsify the cost of an event to obtain a complementary blurb in a history book is quite despicable.

The Ford Administration's willingness to separate the loss of the Security Police at NKP from the *Mayaguez* mission did not kill those men, it dishonored them. The decision to abandon missing men known to be alive ten minutes before the last chopper departed signed their death warrant.

All of the information concerning their fate came from Khmer sources. The details vary greatly and some are obviously self-serving. But all accounts agree that Hargrove, Hall and Marshall were captured alive and executed.

The Lie Becomes Official

There is no smoking gun to directly tie the White House to the abandonment of the three Marines. To believe they didn't know about them is ludicrous.

Within weeks, on June 7th the 3rd Marine Division presented the results of its investigation concerning the missing Marines ordered by the Commanding General Kenneth Houghton.

In its 'Finding of Facts:'

25. That a physical search of Koh Tang Island was not made after Hall, Hargrove and Marshall were discovered missing as the conduct of such a search was not authorized.

In its 'Opinions:'

20. That Hall, Hargrove and Marshall could have been fatally wounded subsequent to the last time they were seen by Sgt. Anderson at about 2000 and the time when the final helicopter lifted off, since there was firing by both enemy forces and the Marines awaiting extraction from Koh Tang Island.

And in its 'Recommendations:'

1. That the status of Hall, Hargrove and Marshall be changed from 'Missing in Action' to 'Killed in Action/Body Not Recovered.'

An investigation is supposed to solve mysteries. In just these short excerpts we find more.

Who made the decision not to search the island? Someone had to in order to stop the obvious preparations. It is possible but highly unlikely that a military commander made that decision. The phrase, 'could have been fatally wounded' is not, 'known to be fatally wounded.'

Now let's speculate, reasonably on the political advantage to abandoning dead men rather than live ones.

The risk of maintaining MIA status for the three Marines would be realized if they turned up months later as hostages or political pawns. Ford's rescue of the Mayaguez crew would be dampened by the addition of American hostages. If these men are officially dead, their reappearance would be problematic, but still, the Administration could feign surprise and lessen their complicity in the abandonment. The Marine Corps' own investigation would take the political hit.

If we can believe the worst in our leadership than we can believe that the best political outcome would be for Hargrove, Hall and Marshall to make their actual status their official one. With their deaths the thorny issue of future White House embarrassment is substantially diminished.

Is such treachery is beyond comprehension?

When a young man joins the Armed Forces he assumes he will be serving his country. For the majority, that assumption is valid. For the minority that find themselves in combat, they quickly learn that they will be serving their brothers. The President won't be dragging you to safety. The Constitution will not cover your advance or withdraw. Your brothers will.

L/Cpl. Joseph Hargrove, Pfc. Gary Hall and Pvt. Danny Marshall were covering the withdraw of their fellow Marines. How long after the sound of the last helicopter did they realize there would be no more? What was their conversation like?

Speculating on the actions of the missing men may be inappropriate. But there are few if any servicemen involved in that mission who did not at least briefly, put himself in that dilemma. They would have expected a count and a discovery of their absence. They would have expected plans to be drawn up to return for them. They may have cursed themselves for the spot they found themselves in. It is almost a certainty that they would have agonized over the safety of those risking their lives to come get them. Hargrove, Hall and Marshall, like any other serviceman of that era would have expected at the very least, an attempt.

But this was 1975. Only a few then, suspected government treachery concerning Vietnam MIAs; most of them families of the missing left alive in Vietnam. This was before some damning documents were declassified. This was prior to any reasonable grasp on the part of American citizens that its leaders would be capable of purposely leaving live men behind in the custody of communist butchers.

These expectations of the missing Marines were met. Their recovery was being planned by their brothers; the ones who understood their plight. But something happened. Those plans were abruptly canceled. No one knew why.

The Week That Went Away

On May 20th CINCPAC ordered its Fleet and Air Forces to ‘resume normal operations.’

“Once back at Okinawa, Capt. Miller, the [Skipper] of the *Mayaguez*, came to the Orawan Theater (at Camp Schaub, 9th Marine Regiment) to personally thank all of us,” recalls Rogers, “It was during this time that we held memorial services for the dead. The pamphlet, which I still have, is void of the names of Hargrove, Hall and Marshall.

“A day or so later we were all assembled and a Major General Houghton came to shake everyone’s hand and make some on the spot promotions.

“Then, life as a Marine resumed as normal with virtually nothing else being said about the operation or those left behind. That is how I spent the next 20 something years until I read an article in *Popular Science* (by Ralph Wetterhahn) where I learned that the JTFFA (Joint Task Force, Full Accounting; which are various agencies working the MIA issue) was on the island looking for remains.”

At the time of the memorial Rogers speaks of, Hargrove, Hall and Marshall were not part of the memorial service nor did they appear on the program honoring the fallen because they were non persons. The White House policy makers had not yet determined which status they should hold. After all, they could turn up on radio Khmer Rouge at any time. Senior Marine commanders said nothing.

The report of June 7th was concluded after the memorial services and recommended that the missing men be reclassified as KIA. Yet passages from that same report could have earned each a Silver Star.

Caution is in order to reach such damning conclusions about the President’s attitude toward those who fought under his direction. Again, there is no direct path to such pathology. A preponderance of evidence though, does wind its way to a conclusion which supports these assumptions.

A man left behind alive on a battlefield is such an egregious event that it is likely to create a new mission to retrieve him. Senior officers were once junior officers and surely understand the morale factor of abandoned men. Vietnam is full of stories where Para-rescue/Jumpers are taken deep into enemy territory to rescue one downed pilot or crewman. To scratch a live, downed pilot off the manifest and pretend he doesn’t exist would be cause for mutiny. In the famous “Bat 21” episode in 1972, nine Airmen were lost attempting to recover LtCol. Gene Hambleton. Although the air rescue was abandoned, Hambleton was eventually rescued via ground extraction led by Navy Seals. There was never a shortage of volunteers to go get him.

Nor do civilians spare any expense to save lives. When a mine caves in, no one opposes the money, manpower and risk involved to retrieve trapped miners; even if their fate is unknown.

But that is exactly what Marine senior commanders did when they scratched Hargrove, Hall and Marshall off the memorial roster. It is inconceivable that they would do that of their own accord. There had to be pressure from higher command and that pressure had to be intense.

Were there protests? Who knows? But no one of senior rank resigned a commission. Which is the more valuable asset; a lifelong carrier or personal integrity? We must withhold judgment until we have walked through the facts in the boots of those senior officers; because there is a scenario where integrity requires silence and the critical speculation it breeds.

No such accommodations should be made for the President and his entourage.

Returning now to the question of treachery, the NSC meeting records show the presence of Henry Kissinger, Ford’s Secretary of State. Those records show an obsession for military action over diplomacy throughout. They wanted quick and heavy action to prevent the *Mayaguez* crew from being taken to the Cambodian mainland; apparently, even if it killed them.

With those declassified records it is easy to see just how meddling the White House was in the tactical details of this mission and more alarming, their cynical attitude toward American lives. So it becomes easier to believe the unbelievable—that three U.S. Marines were inadvertently left behind in the heat of battle and their brothers were forbidden by the highest authority to go get them.

The men who fought in this battle were fighting evil on both sides; one known, one to be known only much later.

The cover up pertaining to the missing Marines as well as the circumstances surrounding the crash of the CH53 at NKP corrupted the true history of the last battle of the Vietnam War or more accurately, the War in Southeast Asia. With the exception of the average Grunt, most participants saw their mission as a gigantic failure. More than half the men who died were Air Force personnel and many believed it was poor and hasty planning as well as bad intelligence that killed them. There were some comments and criticism of senior commanders on the scene, some of which may be justified.

Few however, knew the big picture. Few knew that these senior commanders were being tugged and dragged like puppets over a tactical stage by their masters in Washington. Few knew that tactical missions were changed and changed again; intelligence issued and rescinded, bad and good. And all of this in a time frame of just hours.

For the average Grunt on Koh Tang or the *Mayaguez* itself, he knew for certain only one thing—he was alive.

For the Air Force Security Police, they knew they were set to go, but didn’t.

For the chopper pilots, crews and mechanics, they knew their part in the *Mayaguez* rescue itself was fairly ambiguous. It was Koh Tang that set their adrenaline.

For the Ford Administration, only the few hours it took to recover the *Mayaguez* was important. There would be medals and citations but there would be no crash at NKP, no bad intelligence, no talk of targeting Americans, little talk of Koh Tang or its Marines and absolutely no mention of missing men. Except for President Ford’s decisive and heroic action that saved the *Mayaguez* and its crew, it would be a week that went away.

The Decades of Ignorance

This writer was attached to 2/9 on a field operation on Okinawa just weeks after the mission. These were the Koh Tang Grunts. Their stories as told to me were exciting and perplexing and in hindsight, void of any context. Why was the Air Force involved? Why did we assault the island? What was its value? Where was the Naval Gunfire support?

There was no mention of missing Marines. No one had met an Air Force Security cop or even heard of one much less known that these cops were their predecessors.

The fog of this little war traveled with me throughout my last year in the Marine Corps. Misinformation, half-truths, rumor and ignorance followed this topic until I had acquired a bit of a chauvinistic attitude toward the Air Force. 'Had they let the Marines do this, it would have been done right,' would be an accurate title to my condescension. To be clear, the Koh Tang Grunts did not convey this attitude themselves. They knew little or nothing beyond their own personal experiences.

It would be thirty-four years before I would have to eat that attitude.

It came in a submission to the newsletter I edit for the Vietnam and All Veterans of Brevard by Ted Whitlock. He wrote a short tribute to those who served on that mission from his single point of view—as an Air Force Security cop. Until then, I had never known about those men. I knew vaguely that there had been a crash at NKP prior to the mission but only through the article in *Pacific Stars and Stripes*. What reporting there was about the incident in magazines at the time were largely unavailable to us overseas. I spent 6 months at sea with the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines and various other units as a forward observer and not once heard a word about missing Marines at Koh Tang.

Prior to being deployed, I tried to imagine the places I would be assigned. I read a few books, saw a few pictures and conjured up my vision. When I finally arrived in Asia, the countries where I was assigned bore little resemblance to my preconceived daydreams. In the opposite sense, neither were my assumptions acquired throughout the years regarding the *Mayaguez* Incident.

Whitlock's story perked my interest. During my research I came across the Koh Tang Beach Vets website. These are *Mayaguez* veterans of the Air Force, Navy and Marines who put together their individual experiences to finally bring some order to this complex and convoluted story. Here they honor their fallen and never forget. I relied heavily on them to make my amends to the U.S. Air Force. Let what you are now reading be those amends.

The Three Stories of May, 1975

With my own ignorance behind me, I couldn't help but think of how many others carried false assumptions; rational assumptions encouraged by the purposely convoluted history pertaining to this event.

In 2009 the merchant ship *SS Maersk Alabama* was pirated by Somalis in the Indian Ocean. Reporter after reporter appeared on newscasts stating that this was the first act of piracy on an American vessel since President Jefferson defeated the Barbary pirates at Tripoli in 1805.

Hadn't anyone ever heard of the *Mayaguez*?

If not, then the reader should know that there are actually three *Mayaguez* stories.

The first story begins when *the Mayaguez* is seized off the coast of Cambodia. We shall call this the *Mayaguez* Piracy. President Ford meets with his National Security Council and they make plans to teach Cambodia a lesson. This will be personal and President Ford himself will be leading the Army. He orders Gen. Burns to invent a new tactic of Air Force Security Police to be dropped aboard a vessel full of enemy soldiers by Special Operations and Rescue choppers to be drawn from three Thailand bases.

CINCPAC is to oversee the operation and it orders CINCPACFLT (the Navy) to the area.

The President will be in direct contact with the pilots of some aircraft who will be assigned to bomb the Cambodian mainland and keep all small boats near the *Mayaguez* from reaching the mainland. On the recommendation of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, there is a brief period when Ford orders all boats sunk even if they contain the crew of the *Mayaguez*.

In the haste ordered by the President a chopper goes down with 23 men aboard. All are lost.

The President then changes his mind and orders Gen. Burns to develop yet a new tactic of an Air Force/Marine assault on an island that may house some or all of the *Mayaguez* crew he was willing to sacrifice just a few hours ago.

Gen. Burns complies as best he can since he has no Marines as yet to work with to plan the new mission.

There are no useable maps of the island and the intelligence is conflicting. There are 20 to 30 irregulars waiting for the Marines on the island but there are also 120 to 150. Then there are as many as 300. Each of these figures is handed to several different officers. The Marine ground commander gets the 20-30 version.

There are not enough choppers to take all the Marines in on one insertion on Koh Tang so three phases are planned with four hour, round trip intervals.

Early on the morning of the 15th of May, Marines are flown to the *USS Holt* to prepare to board the *Mayaguez*. Simultaneously, other Marines are flown to Koh Tang Island to rescue the crew; or just to determine if any of the crew are on the island. The previous morning the White house had been debating with a pilot on the wisdom of sinking a boat full of 'Caucasians' headed for the mainland. The pilot tries to intimidate the boat but will not murder 'Caucasians'.

Marines on board the *Holt* board the *Mayaguez* and find it empty. The Marines also assault Koh Tang and find it full. Two choppers are shot down on East Beach with thirteen lives lost, 25 pinned down and more floating in the water hoping to be rescued.

One chopper goes down off of West beach with the loss of one man. Another chopper barely makes it to Thailand with all its Marines still on board. They will come back. The chopper will not.

The Marine ground commander, Lt. Col. Randall Austin's chopper had to land 1000 or so meters south of West Beach due to heavy fire. He has to link up with the men on West Beach and does. In the process one Marine is lost.

The *USS Wilson* notices a boat full of 'Caucasians' headed for the *Mayaguez* and intercepts them. It is the crew of the *Mayaguez*. Mission accomplished. The crew is free.

President Ford orders all military action to cease. He has his victory.

This is the story of the *Mayaguez* piracy; the first story. Under President Ford's direct leadership with the assistance of the NSC, the 40 crewmembers are free and make plans to get underway.

The cost? Thirty-eight American servicemen lost, twenty-three of which wouldn't count.

Now begins the second *Mayaguez* story; a story more accurately named, the Battle of Koh Tang Island.

The second wave of Marines is in route to Koh Tang when President Ford orders them to return. The mission is over. Lt. Col. Austin finds out and objects. He needs to get his men off the island and he needs more men to secure and organize a withdraw. The President is presumably persuaded to allow the second wave of Marines to return to Koh Tang as planned and Austin gets his way. The second wave will be coming.

With victory secure, President Ford wraps up his White House dinner party and retires for the evening. With the departure of the Commander-in-Chief from overall tactical command, the military must be trusted to extract the Marines on its own. These on-scene commanders would consist mainly of junior officers and enlisted men many of whom had never seen combat.

Now that there was actual intelligence, complements of the Khmer gunfire and the ability of those on scene to interpret what it meant, the choppers in the second wave knew what they were up against and landed their second wave of Marines successfully.

Throughout the day the East Beach men were the priority because their position was most vicarious. Several attempts, including one to scout for survivors of the first chopper hit that morning, were unsuccessful and the machines were put out of action—but not lost.

Mechanics at NKP had worked feverishly to ready one more chopper which headed to Koh Tang with a fresh crew.

Later that afternoon air support came from two OV-10s that could remain on station for hours. With their assistance and cover fire from sailors on the *Wilson's* gig, the East Beach was evacuated.

As darkness drew near the Air Force was down to only three flyable choppers, one of which was held together by duct tape and rubber bands.

Perhaps it is not well known but there were plans from senior command to leave the Marines on the island overnight. The chopper pilots and the FAC in the OV-10 didn't consider that option.

Those three choppers made two extractions each, under fire, in complete darkness and overloaded. One of them cut his trip time by making an air show quality landing on the *Holt's* postage stamp.

Only when they were assured that all Marines had been recovered did they leave the scene.

This was the second *Mayaguez* story; the Battle of Koh Tang Island. This was done without any guidance, direction or leadership from Washington.

The cost? NOT A SINGLE MAN LOST. NOT A SINGLE AIRMAN, MARINE OR SAILOR LOST HIS LIFE WHEN THOSE THAT WERE ON SCENE WERE ALLOWED TO ASSESS AND CONDUCT THE MISSION IN THE MANNER THEY SAW FIT. NOT A SINGLE MAN DIED FROM THE LACK OF SPECIFIC TRAINING OR PRECEDENT BY MEN WHO COULD THINK, ADJUST, ACT AND CARE.

The third *Mayaguez* story which we will call the *Mayaguez* Aftermath, has the President awake once more. In the noise, confusion and the blackness three Marines didn't get picked up. They were missing. This means the Battle of Koh Tang Island is not yet complete. Preparations are made to go back and get them. But a mysterious stand down engulfs the third *Mayaguez* story. No one can tell where it came from.

Why not let the men of the second story go after the missing men? After all, they have an excellent track record and they all volunteer.

Wait. Wait. Wait. Maybe the mystery will change its mind. But it doesn't. It never does. In fact, it erases those men--- or tries to. In doing so it corrupts the story. The three *Mayaguez* stories will be consolidated into just one; an 'official' one

which appears in the Pacific Stars and Stripes; where the three missing men will cease to be until a fate for them can be determined, not by facts but by expediency. The president must look good. And it appears he succeeded.

The cost? Three missing—then executed. One thousand carrying a burden they do not deserve. Millions denied a story they should hear.

These consolidated stories are called the 'Mayaguez Incident.' It will leave in its wake a perpetual confusion that even those who participated are left wondering about.

"I got a call from the skipper of the Mayaguez," Ford said, "and he told me that it was the action of me, President Ford, that saved the lives of the crew of the Mayaguez."

"Supposing some of the boats near the island have Americans on it? Should we send some order to use only riot control agents there?"

"I think the pilot should sink them. He should destroy the boats and not send situation reports."

In retrospect, the *Mayaguez incident* was much like the war it closed. Vietnam had a 'Tonkin Gulf' incident. Both began with a noble mission. Both were conducted from Washington and both deteriorated from noble cause to survival for the duration.

Both left live men behind—purposely, to spare political egos.

There were differences, however.

In Vietnam there were great military strategists who sent back daily situation reports to the American people. One of them, Walter Cronkite declared the War unwinnable after the communists suffered a defeat so devastating after Tet, 1968 that it took them four years to recover. George Orwell called it 'newspeak'. America called it 'reporting'. The communists called it 'strategy'. How else do you turn the complete destruction of your offensive military assets into the turning point of your eventual victory? This was strategic Kung Fu; the art of using your opponent's power against him; in this case, the power of the press. Lenin referred to people such as these American and foreign reporters as 'useful idiots'.

The Battle of Koh Tang Island had no observers to report American strategic flaws to the home folks. This allowed its participants to adjust to the initial failures. They devised and executed a plan to fit the situation and they were flawless (and lucky) until their Commander-in-Chief woke up.

But this lack of press involvement also allowed the Commander-in-Chief to write his own history. It is not surprising that President Ford considered himself a hero and accepted the accolades of a hero-starved country.

The Last Man

In WWI an armistice was to take place in France at 11:00 AM on the 11th of November 1918. The Germans and the Allies in the trenches knew this. Who would stick his head up at 10:59 AM? Moreover, who would be the first to stick his head up at 11:01 AM?

As the Vietnam War progressed, the practice of sending complete cohesive units was gradually discontinued, deferring to replacement troops, temporary assignments and other means to meet manpower needs. An individual soldier would serve a set period of time, usually 13 months as a 'tour of duty.'

The Vietnam era spawned a lot of new entries for the military dictionary; among them, 'short-timer'. A short-timer was one who would be getting close to his stateside rotation date; his ticket home. So on an individual level, a soldier knew the date of his own armistice.

Many kept a short-time calendar, perhaps drawn on his helmet cover or scratched in a notebook. As the date of his departure from Vietnam grew near, so did his dread. For one thing the Vietnam soldier had in common with the men in the trenches of WWI to the exclusion of all others was advanced notice of the exact date of his war's end. No one wanted to meet his maker at 10:59 AM on the last day. The soldier in WWI kept his head down well past 11:00 AM because he did not want to be the last man. Who is it though, that ever considered a fate as the last man lost during the Vietnam War? It seemed like it would go on forever.

There has to be a last man, just as there has to be a first. The Mayaguez Incident is considered the last battle of the Vietnam War. PJ Wayne Fisk is officially the last soldier to engage the enemy in that war. Who was the last man lost?

The last man is actually three men, Joseph Hargrove, Gary Hall and Danny Marshall. So we can never be sure of who the last man actually was. Does it matter?

Who was the last to die in the Civil War? WWII? Do you know?

Perhaps it doesn't matter. But the Vietnam War consumed an entire generation. Danny Marshall was born in the year the first soldier died in Vietnam. Would that not be the most potent symbol of that War?

Perhaps it's fitting to not know. For all three of these men will forever define the most tragic and grievous symbol of that War---the political will to purposely abandon those who were willing to sacrifice so that others might enjoy the freedom they gave up, and the absolute resolve of a government to prevent their brothers from going after them.

Bill Sauerwine, a Vietnam veteran who divided a career between the Marines and the Army pointed out that the Vietnam soldier is the only soldier to demand an accounting of his missing comrades. Perhaps this is because the Vietnam soldier was the only soldier left behind purposely by its government. America should seriously reconsider the wisdom of coming to the aide of an ally and allowing Walter Cronkite the power to predetermine the mission's outcome. There is a lot of waste generated in such a strategy. If you don't win your war, you can't demand your people back.

The Mayaguez story ends with the abandonment of Joseph, Gary and Danny by the same evil that abandoned over 600 others before them and if any one of them is alive today, when the last one passes on, he will be the last man .Who is he, or who will he be? God will know and we will not.



L/Cpl. Joseph Hargrove



PFC. Gary Hall



Pvt. Danny Marshall

***Postscript:** The Vietnam War Memorial starts with the names of those lost in 1959. It ends alphabetically on May 15th, 1975 with 2Lt. Richard Vandeger who was lost early on the Koh Tang assault. It was inevitable that a monument of this scope would contain some inaccuracies especially when subsequently declassified documents reveal some earlier covert operations. However, 'The Wall' remains the most powerful monument of its kind. Searching one of those names, a name you knew, that you can touch brings that individual back into the life force; the life force of the one who touches it. For this reason some Vietnam veterans have yet to stand in front of it. It is that powerful.*

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I would also like to thank a personal friend, Ted Whitlock who submitted a tribute to those lost on the mission and opened my eyes to the misconceptions I had carried all of these years. It was The Vietnam and All Veterans of Brevard, Inc. who restored my pride in my own service and its newsletter editor, Ken Baker who handed me his twenty year duty and mentored me through my desire to explore new avenues to honor those who served and serve today. Without that freedom this article would never have been written.

And finally, to those lost on this mission and the survivors who formed the Koh Tang Beach Vets website; like the unsung mechanics who put those birds in the air, it is your continuing efforts that will put your true and complete story in the history books.

*Dick Lancaster
USMC
April 17, 2010*