

THE PRESIDENT HAS SEEN

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MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON

INFORMATION

~~SECRET~~

May 19, 1975

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MEMORANDUM FOR: THE PRESIDENT  
FROM: HENRY A. KISSINGER *HK*  
SUBJECT: Debrief of the MAYAGUEZ Captain and Crew

We have received a report (TAB A) of the debrief of the MAYAGUEZ Captain and crew, including chronology of events and a report of Singapore developments regarding the ship.

Chronology

The MAYAGUEZ Captain and crew present the following sequence of events (all times in Washington EDT):

- The vessel was challenged and stopped by a Cambodian gunboat off Poulo Wai (see map at TAB B).
- Their engines stopped at 0021 on Monday, May 12. They were, however, able to send out several distress signals.
- The gunboat crew that boarded the vessel ordered the Captain to proceed to Kompong Som, which he refused by claiming his radar was broken.
- The MAYAGUEZ remained at anchor off the island of Poulo Wai from 9:00 a.m., May 12, until 9:30 p.m. that evening, and was then instructed to proceed to the island of Koh Tang.
- The crew observed reconnaissance aircraft before "nightfall" Cambodia time (or by dawn EDT).
- After the vessel had moved to the vicinity of Koh Tang, an English-speaking Cambodian came aboard and asked the Captain about the ship's mission and about whether it carried military cargo. The Cambodians even brought the Captain, the Chief Engineer, and several crewmen back to the vessel the following night to open locked rooms for the Cambodians to inspect. But U. S. aircraft dropped flares which frightened the Cambodians and they turned away from the vessel.



DECLASSIFIED  
E.O. 12958, Sec. 3.5  
NSC Memo, 11/24/98, State Dept. Guidelines  
By *let*, NARA, Date *12/20/99*

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- After the ship had arrived at Koh Tang, the personnel were taken off the ship to the island and were put aboard a Thai fishing boat. That is when they first observed U.S. tactical aircraft.
- The Thai fishing boat proceeded to the mainland about 7:00 p.m. on May 13. U.S. aircraft tried to intercept the boat, "placing weapons with great accuracy" (in front of the boat) and also using some type of gas which made all aboard the boat vomit. Several U.S. crewmen sustained burns. A second gas attack followed about half an hour later. The boat almost turned back but was forced ahead at gunpoint by the Cambodian guards.
- When the crew landed at Kompong Som, they were asked by another English-speaking Cambodian about CIA or FBI affiliation and about arms shipments. The Cambodians still appeared to believe that the ship had military cargo.
- The Captain tried to negotiate their release, telling the Cambodians that if the crew was released he would intercede with U.S. authorities not to take military action.
- The Kompong Som commander said he would pass this information to the Phnom Penh commander, and indicated that the crew would probably be released at 7:00 p.m. May 14. The Captain and the Chief Engineer were told that they (though not the crew) could return to the ship, but no boat was available and they decided to stay on Koh Rong Sam Lem (an island about 10 miles from Kompong Sam) for the night with the crew.
- At 6:30 p.m. on May 14 the crew was ready to return to the ship. They got on the Thai boat and, after the Cambodian guards left, they made and displayed white flags so that U.S. aircraft could recognize them. The Master said that an American reconnaissance aircraft observed them (he did not say when) and apparently recognized them as white men. They pulled up alongside the USS WILSON at about 11:30 p.m. and then proceeded to the MAYAGUEZ at 1:05 a.m. on May 15.
- The crew was unaware of the U.S. Marines landing at Koh Tang until they were on the USS WILSON.



Developments at Singapore

- The Captain gave a press conference at which he thanked you and the American military forces for our actions, saying that if it were not for the efforts of the U. S. military the crew "would be in prison or dead now."
- The press zeroed in on the question of whether the Marine landing had taken place after the crew had been released.
- The Captain said that he had received substantial offers of money for his exclusive story of the incident but replied that any money should go to the wounded Marines.
- The Chief Engineer, in a private interview, said that he believed U.S. commanders must have known the crew was not on Koh Tang Island but on the boat returning to the ship. He also said that the Captain had assembled the crew before docking at Singapore and they had all agreed to present one story to the press, praising U. S. Government actions in securing their safe release.
- The Captain also said that the crew had not been mistreated by the Cambodians.

Comment:

- The account given by the MAYAGUEZ Captain generally substantiates the chronology that we have been able to develop. It shows that the vessel actually remained near its point of capture for 21 hours before it was moved to Koh Tang Island. It also shows that the crew was released before our Marines landed on the island, though not before they left their stations or before you made the decision to proceed with the landing.
- The account does not, however, offer any explanation of what motivated the Cambodian authorities. They appear to have hoped-- or perhaps expected--that they would find evidence of a spy mission or military cargo. This may explain why they originally wanted to take the boat to Kompong Sam. But they did not search the vessel thoroughly when they boarded it and were rather easily dissuaded afterwards.



- The account also suggests that the Cambodian authorities had decided to release the boat and crew well before the crew was actually permitted to leave, but it does not explain why they did not announce the release in advance or even when it was made.
- From the Captain's account, it appears that the decision to release the vessel and crew was not triggered by our military actions on Wednesday evening (EDT) but was probably tied to the threats of those actions and to growing American military presence and activity. That is, presumably, why the Cambodians responded to the Captain's offer to turn off the American military if they released him and the crew.
- The account given by the Chief Engineer, which was given in a private interview and will presumably be published later, may produce some further questions about our knowledge of the crew's actual movements. He apparently thinks we knew more about the crew's whereabouts and movement than we did.
- The Captain appears to be a remarkable man.

Attachments  
TABS A and B

