The 56th Special Operations Wing played a pivotal role in the *Mayaguez* rescue operation.

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THE LAST AMERICAN forces left South Vietnam in April 1975, in what President Gerald Ford called a "humiliating withdrawal." U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia had ended. Or had it?

Some of the Americans extracted in the last hours before the fall of Saigon were pulled out by Sikorsky CH-53 helicopters of my unit. I was a captain, serving as the senior company-grade aircraft and avionics maintenance officer for a strange fleet of World War II–vintage Douglas EC-47 signals intelligence aircraft, some 40 North American Rockwell OV-10 Bronco FAC aircraft, 13 CH-53 helicopter gunships armed with miniguns and 40mm grenade launchers, and several other assorted craft, including Laotian T-28 fighter-bombers.



A Sikorsky CH-53 of the 56th Special Operations Wing at Nakhon Phanom Air Base, Thailand, in 1972. In May 1975 the unit paid a high price to recover the U.S. merchant ship *Mayaguez* (National Archives).

Within weeks of the fall of Saigon, however, U.S. troops conducted one more operation that became the last battle fought by Americans in the war. The forces engaged included my unit, the 56th Special Operations Wing. For years I carried with me the guilt of surviving that last battle. But then I received a letter dated September 20, 1999, from my former commander, now retired Lt. Gen. Harry A. Goodall, who had become a senior vice president at AT&T. His message to me was: "Dear Glenn…one thing that I don't think you know is that the military maintenance folks of the 56th Wing had no part in, nor opportunity to prevent, what happened on that dark night in 1975."

What General Goodall was referring to was the May 15 crash of one of the first CH-53s launched from Nakhon Phanom, Thailand, in the joint attempt to rescue the crew of an American merchant ship, SS *Mayaguez*, which had been captured by Khmer Rouge naval units off the coast of Cambodia. I was supposed to be on that particular CH-53, aircraft number 933. But I was pulled off the flight at the last minute by my chief of maintenance, since I was the senior maintenance captain and could go on one of the later flights. So I signed off the helicopter's forms signifying that it was safe to fly, and watched it lift off with 23 of my close friends, dragging on the perforated steel runway.

I blamed myself for signing off the CH-53 as safe and then missing my flight to hell.

The CH-53 was overloaded with thousands of rounds of 7.62mm minigun ammo, CAR-15 ammunition and boxes of 40mm grenades. It had also been freshly fueled with thousands of pounds of JP-4 jet fuel. Within the hour, that CH-53 with all 23 aboard crashed and burned in Thailand en route to Cambodia. I never got over that crash. I blamed myself for signing off that CH-53 as safe and then missing my flight to hell.

Surviving seemed worse than dying. I returned to the States in July 1975 and promptly resigned my Air Force regular commission. Having first gone to Southeast Asia in 1970, I decided that this was the last year I could handle. But I was not allowed to resign out-

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right. I was given a reserve commission and finally officially retired in June 1999, after 30 years' total service. In my last reserve assignment I served as senior military counsel for the National Security Agency and as the senior reserve judge advocate general for the Air Intelligence Agency.

What I would like to stress in this account is how Vietnam special operators took care of their own and still do. For some reason God saved me from dying with my comrades in the *Mayaguez* rescue attempt. Before that, the buddy system in the person of my good friend Chief Master Sergeant Bill Nelson had saved me from dying from food poisoning, which killed a 19-year-old airman I had worked with. Chief Nelson stayed with me 24 hours a day, keeping me from dehydrating, forcing tetracycline into me and not giving up until I was over the illness. As I have pointed out in many talks to cadets at the Virginia Military Institute, new officers must never treat enlisted people with disrespect. That gold bar they wear is nothing but a learner's permit. I tell the cadets to find a chief master sergeant at their first Air Force assignment and quietly tell him or her that although you are supposed to be in charge, you need help. Let that chief teach you and mentor you. The same advice applies to all branches of the military.

The final name inscribed on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., is that of my friend Richard Vandegeer, a 27-year-old first lieutenant. The "V" in his name placed him at the bottom of the casualty list for May 15, 1975. I had offered him a ride to the flight line before he was killed in Cambodia. I still can see him walking along with his helmet bag and CAR-15. That was on the day U.S. involvement in the Southeast Asian conflict officially ended.

Lieutenant Vandegeer's name follows that of 17 other servicemen lost on the shores of an obscure Cambodian island that day. Special operations forces often fight and die in remote places, without recognition. There is no glory to special operations, only the sweet smell of burning human flesh and the coppery smell of blood. The smell of human waste also permeates the battlefield. That was the case on Koh Tang Island during the final battle of the war and also in the Thailand jungle when CH-53 number 933 went down.

For more than two decades Richard Vandegeer's remains lay trapped inside the sunken hulk of another one of my CH-53s, which he was co-piloting when it was shot down by .50-caliber machine gun fire from well-dug-in Khmer Rouge troops on Koh Tang. On May 12, 1975, *Mayaguez*, a merchant ship carrying 274 large containers of freight, was hijacked in international waters by the Khmer Rouge. For three days, the plight of its 40-man crew held the attention of the world. After intense negotiations between Phnom Penh and Washington failed, President Ford alerted the U.S. military to be prepared to rescue the crew and the ship.

The alert order came as a shock to my unit. We had just evacuated the last Americans from both South Vietnam and Cambodia. Our spirits were down because we had been forced to abandon Laos as well, leaving thousands of brave Hmong and Montagnard tribesmen who had been the most loyal allies the United States had during the entire war. We also left thousands of loyal Vietnamese and Cambodians to be slaughtered or imprisoned for years to come.

A ship-seizure team from the destroyer escort *Harold E. Holt* initially assaulted *Mayaguez*. The Marines boarded the ship, found it abandoned and took control. Simultaneously, a helicopter assault on nearby Koh Tang's two small beaches was launched in an effort to free the crew thought to be there. They were not.

On the morning of May 15, 22 Marines and two Navy corpsmen sat in webbed seats facing one another inside one of our CH-53s, call sign "Knife-31." Because hostages were involved, the Pentagon had ruled out a night attack. That was a bad decision. The pilot, Major Howard Corson, and Lieutenant Vandegeer nosed down the giant twin-engine CH-53 to begin the attack on the small eastern beach of Koh Tang. But there had been a major intelligence failure. The *Mayaguez* crew was understood to be held in a compound just behind the beach. A force of only 20 Communists was anticipated, but more than 150 heavily armed Khmer Rouge lay in wait.

As the CH-53 approached, Air Force Sergeant Randy Hoffmaster stood at his cabin gun port, swiveling the minigun sight toward the beach. Suddenly tracers flamed, and rounds slammed into the CH-53 as it attempted to hover just offshore. The fuel tank on the port side of the helicopter exploded from a direct rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) hit.

In the cockpit Major Corson tried vainly to reverse course. As the CH-53 swung away, Hoffmaster fired at the Khmer Rouge with his minigun. Vandegeer grabbed that same CAR-15 that I had seen him carrying at Nakhon Phanom, chambered a round and fired from his open cockpit window. Another RPG blew away the instrument panel, and the helicopter crashed into Cambodian waters. With the interior of the helicopter burning and onboard ammo cooking off, the heat became so intense that the magnesium in the main rotor head ignited. The flight engineer broke open a submerged forward hatch from the outside and pulled out wounded Marines. Three Marines rushed ashore but were cut down by .50-caliber machine gun fire. Others swam seaward and were later rescued by U.S. Navy ships. Vandegeer, my friend and a special operations hero, died in his seat. Twelve others aboard also died.

A second 56th Wing CH-53 was destroyed as it attempted to land on the beach. All 25 men aboard scrambled for some ragged trees. On the west beach, just a short distance away, additional helicopters successfully landed the remaining troops. Our OV-10s, McDonnell F-4s and Ling-Temco-Vought A-7s provided air support, but it was too little and much too late.

Ironically, the crew of *Mayaguez* was no longer on Koh Tang Island when the fighting started. The hostages already had been released and were aboard a fishing trawler docked at another island. The guided-missile destroyer *Henry B. Wilson* captured the trawler and recovered the crew.

For 14 hours, the American troops lay pinned down on Koh Tang's two small beaches. After dark, most of the 231 airmen, Marines and corpsmen were finally extracted from the island by helicopter. During the fight three CH-53s had been shot down, six sustained heavy damage, and three others—barely flyable—crash-landed in Thailand near U Tapao. One sustained light damage. My own CH-53 had taken 23 lives with it when it inverted and crashed in the Thailand jungle. Sometime later I was asked by a visiting headquarters colonel where my aircraft were, and I felt like Brig. Gen. George Pickett at Gettysburg when I replied, "I have no aircraft, sir."

In August 1998, I learned that a joint U.S.–Cambodian team had gone to the island and had located some American remains, including those of Vandegeer. I was horrified to hear that a former Khmer Rouge medic told the team that a week after the battle three U.S. Marines and a Navy corpsman had surrendered after putting up heavy resistance. They were never seen again and were presumed murdered by the Khmer Rouge. Unfortunately, Lieutenant Vandegeer apparently was not the final casualty of that last battle of the Vietnam War. ☆