

John Francis Guilmartin, Inc. NetLibrary. *A very short war: the Mayaguez and the Battle of Koh Tang.* College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995. xxi + 238 pp. ISBN 978-0-585-17507-2.

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In *A Very Short War*, John Guilmartin provides a rich examination of the last episode of the U.S. war in Indochina--the multi-service operation to recover the merchant ship *Mayaguez* and her crew from the Khmer Rouge less than a month after the final U.S. evacuations from Phnom Penh and Saigon. Through a detailed operational-tactical study of this discrete political-military event, Guilmartin seeks to illuminate how the modern "communications revolution will create as many problems as it solves" (p. 29), rather than being an undiluted good as many may think.

In April and May 1975, the U.S. military conducted a series of three discrete military operations that put an end to the (U.S.) Vietnam War: Frequent Wind (the evacuation of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 12 April); Eagle Pull (the evacuation of Vietnamese and Americans from Saigon, South Vietnam, 29-30 April); and the *Mayaguez* recapture (12-15 May). Guilmartin opens the book with a discussion of Frequent Wind and Eagle Pull; then, after setting the scene, he turns to the events of the *Mayaguez* capture and the U.S. response to the Khmer actions. President Gerald Ford "quickly settled on three overlapping objectives: recover the ship and the crew; avoid...hostage negotiations; and mount a demonstrative use of US force to bolster America's international credibility" (p. 38). The interaction of these three objectives created a time imperative and determined the forces to be used: U.S. Air Force helicopters from Thai-

land to carry Marines airlifted from Okinawa to recapture the ship and rescue the crew; air support from Air Force aircraft operating from Thailand and Navy aircraft from the aircraft carrier *Coral Sea* conducting retaliatory strikes against the Cambodian mainland. In the intense operations over the next three days, U.S. forces killed perhaps a hundred Cambodians and bombed a variety of Khmer facilities. This came at a high price, with fifteen Americans killed in action, three more missing in action, and fifty wounded; four helicopters shot down; and another helicopter crashed with twenty-three killed (p. 28).

The *Mayaguez* operation raises many points to consider in regard to the "communications revolution" in a period when at least some in the U.S. military believe that the "information revolution" might allow total knowledge at higher command. President Ford and others in Washington certainly had reason to believe they had (nearly) perfect information for decision-making. As one of the earliest actions during the crisis, a U-2 strategic reconnaissance plane was put in the air to act as a communications relay between forces on the scene and higher headquarters. Despite (or because of) these efforts to have improved communications, White House attempts to control the tactical situation caused near disaster on at least two occasions during the operation.

-- At one point, the White House had issued orders to sink anything coming off Koh Tang Is-

land. Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger stalled for time, unsure of the propriety of this sort of tactical control. His delay perhaps prevented an attack on a Cambodian fishing boat carrying the *Mayaguez* crew from the island to the mainland (pp. 55-56).

-- As soon as the White House learned that the *Mayaguez* crew had been released, orders went out to cease all offensive operations and "to disengage and withdraw all forces...as soon as possible." This order almost prevented a reinforcement of the forces on the island that was crucial to ensure the withdrawal from Koh Tang (p. 107).

As these examples suggest, the realities of this *Very Short War* should serve as a cautionary tale for anyone expecting that the increased communications capabilities are an unadulterated good.

Within this book are many other fascinating insights into the U.S. military in the waning days of Vietnam involvement (and, perhaps, militaries in general). For example, Guilmartin discusses the changes occurring in the training and tactics of the helicopter squadrons as they moved from a wartime environment. Not surprisingly--but perhaps dismaying--even by 1975 USAF helicopter training was constrained by peacetime restrictions. Guilmartin's emphasis on the differences between specific units suggests the point that these differences might be opaque to higher headquarters and the civilian leadership not familiar with "tactical" details that are crucial for making tactical decisions.

Guilmartin, then a U.S. Air Force officer, was a "participant-observer" in this operation, handling maintenance for one of the two USAF helicopter squadrons. Although this book is published twenty years after the event, Guilmartin brings an immediacy to the work that only someone so close to it could. Guilmartin was not, however, simply a participant in the events discussed in this book. In 1975, he had just returned to the operating forces after three years at Princeton University completing his Ph.D. dissertation [1], followed by four

years teaching at the Air Force Academy. Thus, Guilmartin was a trained historian and data gatherer, as well as a decorated rescue pilot with 119 combat missions in Southeast Asia. With his academic background, Guilmartin began gathering information as the operation proceeded and began interviewing with the idea of helping preserve (and, in part, create) a historical record of the operation that provides a key basis for this book.

This aspect of the work is one that fascinates. As Guilmartin phrased his approach, "Even before the smoke cleared, I was automatically trying to find out what had gone wrong and why" (p. xvi). This near-participation in the actual events allows him to provide a much richer context than archival material or (with more modern events) interviews alone can offer.

In a way, Guilmartin's strengths create the basis for some of the shortcomings of *A Very Short War*. After finishing the book, readers will feel confident that they have a deep understanding of the U.S. Air Force's helicopter forces involved in the *Mayaguez* affair, and a long appendix on the principal helicopter involved (the H-53) provides important technical background. When Guilmartin moves on to other USAF elements and other services, however, the depth of description and, therefore, understanding decrease. For example, Guilmartin describes the differences between the two involved helicopter squadrons--one a special operations and the other a rescue squadron--and how their H-53 helicopters were equipped, how their tactics differed, how peacetime training rules since the end of the war in Vietnam had affected their readiness, and their differing philosophies to life and combat.

In contrast to the treatment of the USAF helicopter forces, *A Very Short War* contains almost no similar details about the Marines who were, after all, the principal combat troops on the ground and who suffered the majority of the casualties. We learn little of their weapons, of their

training background, or of how the Vietnam experience affected their approach to the battle on Koh Tang.[2] There is a table listing USAF tactical assets in Thailand (p. 49), but nothing similar for the other services. In a footnote, Guilmartin states that U.S. Navy aircraft did not provide air support to the battle on Koh Tang because "carrier-based A-7Es and A-6s were not equipped with radios capable of communicating with the Marines on the beach" (pp. 211-12, text on p. 99). In contrast to the detail on the H-53s, Guilmartin does not explain why U.S. Navy aircraft did not have the capability to support Marine Corps operations in 1975 when, after all, this had been a principal role for U.S. Navy aircraft during the Vietnam War and remained, at least on paper, one of the principal tasks for all naval aviators. In another example, while we learn the names of many of the H-53 pilots, almost none of the involved fighter or reconnaissance pilots receive the same attention. Somewhat in line with the focus on the rescue pilots, *A Very Short War* has only the briefest references to the strike missions into the Cambodian mainland that occurred in conjunction with the rescue operation.

Less applicable to the substance are some shortcomings in the notes and bibliography, some suggestive of editorial lapses. For example, several works cited in the footnotes never have full citations. Guilmartin refers to a General Accounting Office study on the *Mayaguez* published in 1976, yet cites it only through another source and never directly.[3] In some cases, the citations are not strong. In addition to the detailed discussion of the *Mayaguez* incident, Guilmartin discusses other, frequently rather poorly known, U.S. military operations, such as Operation Babylift—an evacuation of orphans from Vietnam. The key study for "Babylift" (a Military Airlift Command monograph) does not make the footnotes.[4] For Operation Urgent Fury (the invasion of Grenada), the citation is to a 1990 *Wall Street Journal* article,

rather than to any of the numerous books and monographs on the operation.[5]

Thus, *A Very Short War* is not a perfect work, but it is a very good one. In combination with Christopher Jon Lamb's *Belief Systems and Decision Making in the Mayaguez Crisis* (Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 1989), *A Very Short War* provides a history of the *Mayaguez* incident that should satisfy all but those with the most profound interest, and the footnotes and bibliography will provide the basis for further reading. In addition, Guilmartin provides enough detail and context for non-participants to gain an understanding into some of the complexities of modern warfare and how Clausewitz's nineteenth-century concept of friction can emerge in a twentieth-century battle.

A Very Short War should be on the reading list of those interested in the command and control of military operations, in the interaction of policy and tactical military activity, and in the modern U.S. military in general. Any library with a collection interest in the modern (U.S.) military should have this on their purchase list. John Guilmartin is an excellent writer with a keen insight into a crucial part of this operation—anyone with the slightest interest will find his book fascinating and worthwhile reading.

Notes

[1] John Francis Guilmartin, *Gunpowder and Galleons: Changing Technology and Mediterranean Warfare at Sea in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1974). This study of naval developments in the sixteenth century remains one of the most impressive historical studies I have ever read.

[2] For a USMC-focused discussion of the operation, see Maj. George R. Dunham and Col. David A. Quinlan, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Bitter End, 1973-1975* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1990), pp. 237-265.

[3] Comptroller General, "The Seizure of the *Mayaguez*: A Case Study of Crisis Management," a report to the Subcommittee on International Political and Military Affairs, House Committee on International Relations, 94th Cong., 2d Sess. (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1976).

[4] Coy F. Cross II, *MAC and Operation Babylift: Air Transport in Support of Noncombatant Evacuation Operations* (Scott Air Force Base, Ill.: Military Airlift Command, Office of History, Nov. 1989).

[5] There is a wide range of literature on Grenada (Operation Urgent Fury), which I will not attempt to recreate here. In addition to the footnoting problem, Guilmartin comments on "Urgent Fury" that "Published accounts suggest that inadequate intelligence and the lack of adequate maps were--as with the MAYAGUEZ affair--a major cause of embarrassment" (p. 158). I think that this understates the importance of these problems, as one can point to the lack of adequate maps (for example, no joint maps with gridded squares) as one of the potential causes for some of the friendly fire incidents that occurred during "Urgent Fury."

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