

'WE CAME TO REMEMBER THEM'

Survivors of last Vietnam War battle go back to honor missing comrades

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

KOH TANG, Cambodia — Forty years ago, scores of inexperienced U.S. servicemen waged a largely forgotten battle in a largely unknown place to rescue a mysterious ship from an unfamiliar enemy.

Forty-one American troops were killed in the operation, including three Marines who were left behind in the confusion, ending the dark chapter of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia — one that many were more than willing to forget.

In May, veterans of the battle of Koh Tang, also known as the "Mayaguez Incident" or the last battle of the Vietnam War, returned to the small, jungle-blanketed Cambodian island in the Gulf of Thailand for the anniversary of the ill-fated mission. They disregarded health problems, braved the demons that have plagued their thoughts since 1975, and carried a message to the U.S. government and the American public: We will never forget.

SEE REMEMBER ON PAGE 4

Retired Marine Scott Standfast stands near what veterans believe to be helicopter wreckage on Koh Tang, Cambodia's east beach, on May 12 following commemoration ceremonies for the 40th anniversary of the May 15, 1975, battle in which two helicopters crashed in the immediate area.

MATTHEW M. BURKE/Stars and Stripes

Families still searching for those left behind
Page 4

Tunisian police hunt for accomplices in deadly beach attack

The Associated Press

SOUSSE, Tunisia — Investigators are searching for one or more accomplices in an attack on a luxury hotel in a Tunisian beach resort that killed at least 38 people, some of them sunbath-

ers on the beach, an official said Sunday.

The father and three roommates of the attacker were detained and being questioned in the capital, Tunis, Interior Ministry spokesman Mohamed Ali Aroui

told The Associated Press. The attacker has been identified as Seifeddine Rezgui, a 24-year-old graduate of Tunisia's Kairouan University where he had been living with the other students.

"We are sure that others

helped, but did not participate," Aroui said. "They participated indirectly."

A security official close to the investigation confirmed news reports indicating that a swimmer had found the attacker's cellphone

in the Mediterranean. The phone showed the attacker spoke with his father just before his assault, the official said on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to speak publicly.

SEE HUNT ON PAGE 9

MILITARY

Military chefs square off in DC's Barbecue Battle

Page 2

NATION

SpaceX launch ends in failure; rocket breaks apart en route to space station

Page 6

WORLD

Nuke talks may miss target; Iranian goes home for consultation

Page 10



Djokovic is back, focused on Wimbledon >> Back page

PACIFIC



Marine veterans Gale Rogers, left, and Fred Morris share a solemn moment upon arriving back on Koh Tang on May 12, nearly 40 years to the day after they fought for their lives on its beaches.

PHOTOS BY MATTHEW M. BURKE/Stars and Stripes

Remember: 2 versions of battle exist — government's and veterans'

FROM FRONT PAGE

"The heroes are still over there on the island or have been returned in caskets," said Clark Hale, who was a 27-year-old Marine platoon sergeant in May 1975. "We came to remember them."

Hale said he would make it his life's mission to bring attention to the veterans of the battle and the fallen. He was joined by fellow Marine veterans Larry Barnett, Fred Morris, Gale Rogers and Scott Standfast; airmen John Lucas and Don Raatz; and Cary Turner, cousin of Lance Cpl. Joseph Hargrove, one of the men left behind after the battle.

The commander of Khmer Rouge forces on Koh Tang during the battle, Em Son, also accompanied the group to the island and spent several days with them. Son has claimed he executed Hargrove.

Hale organized the trip with John Muller, commander of Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 11575 Phnom Penh. Muller, a Vietnam veteran and security contractor, saw to it that the men and their families were treated like rock stars during their nine-day pilgrimage.

Not only did Muller see to it that marble plaques were finally erected on the island bearing the names of the fallen, he also organized catered boat trips up the Mekong on a Vietnam-era military surplus boat — blasting Vietnam-era songs out of an ammunition can stereo — and he negotiated a small flag-raising ceremony at the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh.

The program was designed to promote healing among the veterans and their families after years on the fringe — not quite Vietnam veterans in a majority of cases, but definitely combat veterans of the Vietnam era — and it accomplished that, Hale said.

The return to Koh Tang attracted renewed interest from Vietnam veterans living in Cambodia, western journalists from across Asia, a European documentary crew and Cambodia's two major English-language daily newspapers, as



American veterans of the battle of Koh Tang and their families hike through thick jungle to reach their fighting positions on the northern part of the island.

well as legendary Vietnam War-era photographer Al Rockoff, who was portrayed by John Malkovich in the Academy Award-winning film "The Killing Fields."

The audience gave the veterans hope that the search for their five unaccounted-for comrades — a three-man machine-gun team that was left behind and two others who died in the battle — and remembrance of their sacrifice would continue, even with plans from a Russian consortium to turn the Cambodian military base into a resort.

The Mayaguez incident

The Mayaguez Incident began May 12, 1975, about two weeks after the U.S. military evacuated the embassy in Saigon, signaling an end to U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and about a month after the evacuation of the embassy in Phnom Penh.

The official government narrative says the U.S. merchant vessel SS Mayaguez was on its way from Hong Kong to Thailand with food, clothing and medical supplies when the Khmer Rouge opened fire and hijacked it in international waters about 60 miles southwest of the Cambodian port of Kompung Som, near Poulo Wai island.

However, mystery swirls around the ship, its cargo and its inten-

tions. It flew no flag, was about 2 miles from Cambodian territory and left Saigon nine days before it fell. The captain destroyed a secret code upon capture, according to a 1981 article in the Boston College International and Comparative Law Review, written by University of Houston legal scholar Jordan Paust.

Paust analyzed court records from lawsuits later brought by the crew against the ship's owner and the U.S. government. He claims the true contents of the ship's cargo have never been released.

President Gerald Ford mobilized 2nd Battalion 9th Marines from Okinawa for a rescue mission.

Unbeknownst to the Marines, the crew had been separated from the ship and were spotted by air units heading toward the mainland. National Security Council meeting minutes from the Ford Library state that the president and his Cabinet were aware the hostages might not be on Koh Tang but pushed ahead with a rescue mission.

The Marines first traveled to Thailand in preparation. Most were fresh from boot camp and meeting each other for the first time, Hale said. They were told to expect a few dozen old men and farmers.

SEE REMEMBER ON PAGE 5

Cousin pursues promise to 'bring Joseph home'

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

KOH TANG, Cambodia — Cary Turner sank ankle deep into the fine white sand where he believes his cousin's body was buried, accompanied by the man who says he was behind the Marine's execution.

Lance Cpl. Joseph Hargrove was a member of a three-man machine-gun team that was left behind and believed to have been executed by Khmer Rouge forces after the last battle of the Vietnam War on May 15, 1975, an operation referred to as the "Mayaguez Incident."

When Turner arrived in Cambodia to commemorate the battle's 40th anniversary, he met with Em Son, the former Khmer Rouge commander of Koh Tang during the battle. Son accompanied Turner and the other veterans to the island.

Son claims he executed Hargrove after catching him after the battle.

"It's really good that for the first time, I'm here with Em Son," Turner said upon arriving at Koh Tang. "I have received some answers to some of my questions that I failed to get from the government, and it's a shame I have to go to the enemy's side to get answers, where I can't get any from my own government. That's disappointing and frustrating."

In a 2010 trip to the island, Son indicated that POW/MIA accounting officials had dug the site where he had ordered Hargrove buried, and a body had been removed. Defense

officials said that while remains have been recovered at the sites Son reported, none has produced remains of those missing.

Turner collected sand from the burial pit in clear plastic water bottles; he believed it was the closest he would get to his cousin's remains. Stakes at the bottom of the depression indicate the spot where a body had been unearthed by the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency's predecessor organization, the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command.

Cambodian military officials said the body unearthed at the site in 2008 was about 6 feet tall, and the bones were long, which is inconsistent with Southeast Asian remains. They also said they had a reddish-orange hue to them, which was consistent with the other American remains found on the island.

"These were big bones and long, long bones," the Cambodian official said through a translator.

Cambodian officials said the remains were found with two other sets, but was separate from them. The hands were bound behind the back.

Turner said U.S. government officials told him that no American remains were unearthed on the dig, yet he saw a picture of a flag-draped coffin during a repatriation ceremony at Phnom Penh's airport that appeared in a local newspaper. Similar photos taken by The Associated Press and Reuters can be found on the Internet.

SEE TURNER ON PAGE 5

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Survivors of the May 15, 1975, battle of Koh Tang gather at the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on May 15 for a ceremony to honor the fallen from the battle.

Remember: Ford administration blamed

FROM PAGE 4

In reality, the Cambodians had been beefing up island defenses after clashes with the recently triumphant Vietnamese.

The Marines were to land under cover of darkness at a bottleneck on the island's northern end, make contact with the Cambodians via translators and request the handover of the hostages. If the Cambodians refused, the Marines were to use force to rescue the hostages and retake the ship.

The mission began to fall apart before it started when 23 Air Force personnel died in a support force crash in Thailand.

Things went from bad to worse as the first of eight Air Force CH-53s, with radio call signs "Knife," and HH-53s, with "Jolly" radio call signs, approached the island as dawn broke May 15.

Breaking the code

Four U.S. helicopters were shot down and five more were damaged, with more than a dozen killed in the initial assault. In all, 230 Marines and airmen were caught in a life-and-death struggle on two beaches during the 14-hour battle.

Reports of the number of Khmer Rouge on the island vary. Son claims there were about 60. Some Marines and airmen who fought in the battle agree, while others have claimed there were hundreds.

At some point during the day, the Marines learned that the crew had been released. They only had to get off the island as darkness fell.

Air Force pilots braved enemy fire in barely functioning aircraft to evacuate them. On the last helicopter out, chaos ensued. Marines climbed over each other to get off the island, after-action reports state. Khmers in "black pajamas" could be seen running through the tree line.

American commanders counted 38 dead, 50 wounded and three missing — Hargrove, Pfc. Gary Hall and Pvt. Danny Marshall, members of a machine-gun team guarding a flank.

Hale and the other Marines said they wanted to return to recover

their three comrades. They said they were told to wait until morning. In the morning, they said they were told that there wasn't enough ammo or enough transportation for a rescue. They said they were told diplomatic means would be used to get the men back.

That never happened. "I leave the conversation when Marines say, 'Marines don't leave men behind,'" Hale said. "I blame the Ford administration for not letting us go back in. They made us break our code."

Ford called the mission a success. Years later, word emerged from Cambodia that the three Marines were caught shortly after the battle and executed.

Survivor's guilt

Upon reaching the island May 12, the veterans gathered near the Cambodian military headquarters for the dedication of plaques hung at the compound's entrance. As about 30 attendees crowded around, Hale and Lucas read the names of the fallen. Cambodian troops read the names of their fallen from plaques hung beside the others. Then together, they observed a moment of silence.

Son — who lost a leg to a land mine in later years — sat flanked by American veterans. He answered questions through a translator about his role in the battle.

Afterward, the veterans and their families hiked through the jungle, past livestock and old Cambodian military buildings, down the beaches and out to their old fighting positions. Some wanted to say goodbye to lost friends, others were looking for answers.

The emotions came flooding back. They were young again, excited, scared, sad, determined and filled with wonder at what had changed and what hadn't.

"It's [expletive] up," Barnett replied with a laugh when asked how it felt to be back. "[Expletive] up. But at the same time, it's euphoric. I'm unable to put it into words."

He looked out into the jungle, thinking about how his lost comrades had been just kids before getting sucked into the Koh Tang morass.

"The only thing they had to

worry about was how to get gas money and hamburger money to go to the drive-in picture show. Three months later, you're laid out in this. ..."

Rogers nailed a small plaque to a tree for a sick veteran of the battle who could not make the trip.

"We made it from like here to that tree through the jungle and we just couldn't make it any farther so we pulled back," he recalled. "I don't know if they fragged us or mortared us or what, but we got hit right around that corner. I don't remember a whole lot after that. Next thing I know, it was getting dark and they were crawling up on us."

The stoic Standfast — awarded a Bronze Star with a "V" device for valor for his efforts on Koh Tang — let his guard down as he observed his squad's sector. He smiled and looked around excitedly, pointing out landmarks.

"I told my wife, 'This is pretty important for me — and for her,'" Standfast said, describing a life-long battle with post-traumatic stress and seeing clearly how his ordeal has continued to affect both of them.

"I hope this does help with some of the healing and dealing with it better. It's not going to go away."

He embraced his wife, Phyllis. "It's moving," she said moments later, wiping away tears. "He's dealt with this ever since I've known him. ... It's destroyed him. It's that survivor's guilt."

Forgotten?

On the morning of May 15, the veterans, their families and others arrived at the U.S. Em-

Turner: Explanations about remains found not consistent

FROM PAGE 4

Former Ambassador to Cambodia and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for POW/Missing Personnel Affairs Charles Ray told Stars and Stripes that a set of remains was unearthened and identified on-site as Caucasian. In addition, declassified documents given to Stars and Stripes indicate that "multiple" sets of remains — not just one — were recovered during the dig.

But defense officials said Hargrove has not been accounted for and they continue to dig for signs of him and the others. They have declined to discuss their investigations, saying the process is complicated and that they don't want to get relatives' hopes up unnecessarily.

Turner said he promised Hargrove's dying mother, Charlotte, in 2009 that he would "bring Joseph home." He has enlisted the help of members of Congress to lobby for answers.

Students from Hargrove's hometown of North Duplin, N.C., recently started a letter-writing campaign to Secretary of Defense Ash Carter to demand results.

DPAA officials were back digging on the island in January-March, according to documents obtained by Stars and Stripes. One vast area was on west beach, where battle veteran Fred Morris said Marine Lance Cpl. Ashton Loney's body was left.

Cambodian military officials said they unearthened two sets of remains there, determined on-site to be Southeast Asian. They were buried on the beach under mounds of rocks. The officials said DPAA investigators also unearthened a Marine flak jacket but they could not recall whose name was written on the

inside. A Marine radio was also found.

"The sites we excavated in Koh Tang are closed, but additional information was obtained during these missions, keeping the case open," spokeswoman Lt. Col. Melinda Morgan said.

The search for Air Force Staff Sgt. Elwood Rumbaugh, who was lost at sea, is more complicated. He was lost near a downed helicopter. Although the helicopter has been located and a dive on the wreck was planned, according to JPAC documents, it was not explored due to weather. No other recovery operations have been announced.

Clark Hale, who was a 27-year-old Marine platoon sergeant in May 1975, said he spoke to DPAA officials during a ceremony at the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh. He said they told him they had identified one of the five missing men but couldn't announce it until the family had been notified.

"I'm encouraged that somebody's coming home soon," he said. "Wherever I am, I'll be there for them when they're laid to rest, to make up for, not being there when we left."

After returning to Cambodia, Turner and the battle veterans went to a site in modern-day Sihanoukville, where Son claims to have seen the body of Pvt. Danny Marshall. He claims his body was thrown into the sea but kept washing up on shore, so they tied it off between some rocks by the beach. Hale said seeing Marshall's final resting place was cathartic.

"If he could see where his remains were, he'd be happy," Hale said. "It is a beautiful, peaceful place."

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bassy in Phnom Penh for another ceremony.

Hale said he had been disappointed and angry all week, believing that the embassy and the U.S. government had given the visitors the cold shoulder.

The Marine Corps did not send a representative to the commemoration. Ambassador to Cambodia William Todd did not attend. A Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency team was to join the veterans on Koh Tang but canceled.

Hale said an embassy official worked with him on his ceremony speech and persuaded him to re-

tract critical remarks.

But when it came time, Hale tossed the approved speech and spoke as he originally intended.

"President Ford said the operation went perfectly after he found out the crew was safe," Hale said. "Marines were still fighting for the sand on the beach. Were we forgotten? Seems like it. ..."

"We have lived with this for 40 years. We wanted to go back to Koh Tang and get our men. We have remains out there that need to be home."

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