

AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 12:45 A.M. EDT

MAY 15, 1975

THURSDAY

MR. NESSEN: Let me give you what I have, and hopefully that will answer all your questions.

The crew of the ship consisted of 40 Americans and five Thais. As the President said, they have all been recovered.

Q Forty-five were recovered?

MR. NESSEN: Yes. What I said was that the crew consisted of 40 Americans and five Thais. Now, it appears that the Thais may have decided to -- after they were released -- go off on their own in a small boat. (Laughter) That is somewhat unclear at the moment.

Q They are missing?

MR. NESSEN: No, no, they were recovered.

Q Yes, but now they are missing?

MR. NESSEN: No, that is one report.

Q Did they get one of the Cambodian boats?

MR. NESSEN: As the President said, the fighting still is going on and the United States forces are preparing to disengage.

The ship, because it will take some time to fire up the boilers, it was decided to tow the MAYAGUEZ away, and it will either be towed by one of the destroyers, the WILSON or the HOLT, or two Army tugs, which have been moving in that direction and are very near by.

Where the tugs came from, I have not been able to establish.

Q Army tugs?

MR. NESSEN: Army tugs.

Q Corps of Engineers' tugs?

MR. NESSEN: Are they building a project over there? (Laughter)

Q Probably.

MR. NESSEN: I do have little bits and pieces here that maybe will help you.

Q Where is the fighting? Is that still on the island?

MR. NESSEN: On the island, right.

Q Have they started already to tug this away?

MR. NESSEN: No, no, they have not started to tow it away.

Q Ron, there is one question. What about American casualties. Do you have anything on that?

MR. NESSEN: There were apparently reports that indicate some American casualties. I have just talked to Joe Laitin, and I told him that -- or we agreed, I should say -- he is going to take over at this point and give you all the information on when it started, how it started, who did what to whom, and how it all resolves and so for that, you need to go to the Pentagon.

Q I think you need to clear this up.

Q You are crazy.

MR. NESSEN: I am sorry. That is where the information is.

Q Why didn't you pipe it here?

MR. NESSEN: I can have Laitin piped in here, if you like.

Q Certainly.

Q To clear up one point did the broadcast from Phnom Penh Radio come after the attacks began or did that broadcast come before the attacks began?

MR. NESSEN: Good question.

The broadcast, as most of you know, and as the wires reported, began at 7:07 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time in the Cambodian language on their domestic service, not their international service.

Now, it is very difficult for me to pinpoint the exact time when the activity started because they started at various times, and Marines were being flown at various times. As you know, the broadcasts, if you read the text, refers to the HOLT approaching, and so forth, so apparently -- not apparently -- there were military activities going on at the time of the broadcast.

More to the point, a partial translation of the broadcast was sent to the Government agencies at 8:06 p.m., approximately -- according to the figures supplied by the NSC. At 8:06 p.m., a partial translation into English was sent to the agencies. It was given to General Scowcroft, according to the NSC timetable, at approximately 8:15. He gave it to Dr. Kissinger almost immediately and Dr. Kissinger informed the President almost immediately.

So, the military operations were underway before the broadcast and certainly were well underway before a translation reached here.

Q Had the ship been seized by that time, 8:15 p.m.?

MR. NESSEN: No. Again, as reported to me the approximate time that the HOLT pulled alongside the MAYAGUEZ was 8:45 p.m. EDT.

Q Was it true that after the President received the message from Dr. Kissinger that he took no action to stop the military operation?

MR. NESSEN: At that point, we then, as you know, sent the message to the Cambodians and also gave it here in the hope that news accounts perhaps could probably reach them.

Q Wait a minute. That is not what I asked. Is it true that when the President received the message he made no action, issued no order with respect to the military operation?

MR. NESSEN: He issued the statement that you saw.

Q But the military operation was allowed to continue without any change?

MR. NESSEN: It was underway. Marines were on the beach and under fire at that point.

Let us do get that clear, now.

Q That is why you ought to give us the blow-by-blow.

MR. NESSEN: Helen, if I had the blow-by-blow, I would give it to you, but you need to get to the people who have kept these logs, which is the National Command and Communications Center, which is in the Pentagon. But the fact is that at the time the broadcast was received here, a translation of it, Marines were on the beach and under fire.

Q Had they seized the boat?

MR. NESSEN: As I say, 8:45 was the time that the HOLT pulled alongside the MAYAGUEZ -- approximate times as reported to me.

Q Can I go back to my question of casualties? I appreciate that Joe is going to hold a briefing soon, but can you give us, now, some numbers?

MR. NESSEN: I cannot.

Q Anything at all?

MR. NESSEN: I cannot.

Q Ron, are the casualties light or heavy?

MR. NESSEN: Why do we sit here and do this when all you have to do is either get up and go over there or call and you will get the numbers.

Q Will you please pipe it in here, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: I will pipe it in here.

Q Are you prepared to say how many casualties?

MR. NESSEN: I am not. The hostilities are still going on, Bill.

Q What time is Joe going to talk, do you know?

MR. NESSEN: Joe is ready to talk right now. The longer we stay here, the longer he is going to wait to start talking to you.

Q Then let's quit.

Q Can you pipe it in?

Q You say you sent the message to the Cambodians and you made the announcement here?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q How did you try to send it to them?

MR. NESSEN: Let me put it this way: We sent it to them on a wavelength that we knew they received.

Q Can you confirm --

Q In what language?

MR. NESSEN: Cambodian.

Q Ron, did we rescue the Cambodian crew members or were they released?

MR. NESSEN: This is what you need to talk to Laitin about because all of those details are not even clear here.

Q Our first report of military action was 8:30, I guess two days ago now.

MR. NESSEN: Yes. That reminds me. I have something else to give you.

Q At what point did the President make the decision, if you will, to escalate the action by calling in the Marines?

MR. NESSEN: I would prefer to put it this way. I do want to give you two other things before I forget.

As I say, Joe is waiting to give you -- not waiting -- he has gone home?

MR. GREENER: We are going to confirm if he is having a briefing and what time we will pipe it. We are trying to run Joe down to get that information.

MR. NESSEN: Good.

The three actions that were announced at 9:18 tonight were decided upon at the NSC meeting, which began at 3:30 and lasted until sometime after 5:00, I think it was.

The other items I want to give you are these: We always are asked for public opinion. Since the sinking of the first three boats was announced this afternoon -- I forget what time -- up until 11:45, which was the latest information I had, the phone calls to the White House show 1,034 phone calls supporting the President's action, and 112 phone calls opposing the President's action.

Q Comments?

MR. NESSEN: There were no comments on this one.

Just before the President came out here, he made a few phone calls to Congressional leaders, and the liaison office made the others, to tell them basically -- actually, what they did was they had the statement that the President read to you and they informed the Members of Congress from that statement.

Now, the War Powers Act does require that the President, as you know, notify Congress of military action within 48 hours. The report will be sent to Congress by 6:20 in the morning.

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Q Why is that?

MR. NESSEN: I am glad you asked that. That is 48 hours after the American forces first were -- I am sure you will recognize this as legal language taken from the act. That was the 48 hours from the time that American forces first were introduced into a situation where imminent involvement in hostilities was clearly indicated by the circumstances.

The action which triggered the 48-hour timetable for the War Powers Act consisted of some American jet planes, jet fighters, shooting in front of the MAYAGUEZ in order to dissuade the Cambodians from moving the ship.

I understand that from the time it was seized there had been two movements by the MAYAGUEZ, and it was decided to send these fighters to shoot in front of the ship in order to prevent it from going into Kompong Som.

So, as I say, the notification required by the War Powers Act will go up to Congress sometime before 6:20 in the morning. The custom has been for Congress to release the letter. This was the case in the Saigon and the Cambodian notifications.

The method of delivery at that unusual hour is being made tonight, and frankly, we don't have the method of delivery worked out yet, but the notices go to the Speaker of the House and to the President Pro Tem of the Senate.

Q Ron, you released the Cambodian report right here.

MR. NESSEN: I don't think so.

Q I am sure you did.

MR. NESSEN: Maybe after it had been released on the Hill, I think.

Q Ron, you gave your statement that you sent a message to them on a wave length that we knew they received.

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q It gives the implication that the United States was in direct radio contact with Phnom Penh.

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Whereas I believe it was through third parties. Is that what you mean to say?

MR. NESSEN: No, that is not correct.

Q Which is not correct?

MR. NESSEN: Either one of those.

Q Well, this is implying that you sent it by radio transmission to them on a frequency that they would be listening to. Is that what you mean to say?

MR. NESSEN: I meant to say that it was on a frequency that they would be listening to --

Q You are talking about a radio frequency now, or a diplomatic channel?

MR. NESSEN: A radio frequency.

What did I say -- channel?

Q You said a wavelength.

MR. NESSEN: Radio frequency.

Q In other words, you are saying that we sent a radio message on a radio frequency that they --

MR. NESSEN: A frequency we knew would be monitored by them.

Q In Cambodia?

MR. NESSEN: In Cambodia.

Q Has there ever been any response by the Cambodian government?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Ron, was all the ship's cargo intact or was any of the cargo removed from the ship?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have that, actually.

Q Let's clear up this report now. Should everybody be at Capitol Hill at 6:20 in the morning? I mean, what is the story here?

MR. NESSEN: If you want to read the --

MR. GREENER: Several.

MR. NESSEN: Several what?

MR. GREENER: Several hours.

MR. NESSEN: It goes to the Speaker of the House and the President Pro Tem of the Senate. How it will be delivered to them at that hour has not been worked out yet.

Q Is it a newsworthy report or is it a pro forma report?

MR. NESSEN: I think it is required that the President give them a somewhat detailed accounting.

Q Will it contain new information, presumably?

MR. NESSEN: I think probably not.

Q Ron, was the People's Republic of China or any other country helpful in the diplomatic efforts?

Q Don't make O'Neill a liar.

MR. NESSEN: What did he say?

Q He said that the Chinese carried a 24 hour ultimatum.

MR. NESSEN: No, that is not correct.

Q Senator Byrd said that there had been no response.

MR. NESSEN: I am sure you are all aware that the head of the Chinese liaison office in Washington was called to the State Department on the first day of this -- that has been reported, I think, about 4:30 in the afternoon -- and met the Acting Secretary, which has been reported, and there was a message handed to him for delivery to the Cambodians since only the Chinese have an Embassy in Phnom Penh. There is no way of knowing whether the message was actually delivered, and there was no response.

Q Ron, there was a point that you brought out that for the first time we found out the ship was moved twice. Now, we know it was moved 30 miles from the coast.

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q When was the second movement?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have any information on the second movement.

Q Was it when the AP said it was moved?

MR. NESSEN: No, not when the AP said it was moving.

Q When did the President learn that the crew was safe, and can you tell us how he learned of it?

MR. NESSEN: I have sort of lost track of the events of the evening. When did I come down here and tell you he would be out to talk to you?

Q 11:30.

Q After the dinner.

MR. NESSEN: After the dinner.

Q When he came and said "Who is that bunch of characters," he seemed to be in a much better mood than he sounded on the toasts. Did he know at that time?

MR. NESSEN: He was on his way back to the office, wasn't he?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: No, he didn't know at that time. He got back to his office and received a telephone call from Secretary Schlesinger, at which time it was confirmed that all the crew had been saved and then there was some talk in the office -- not too much, a few minutes -- and then I came down here and told you, so it was within ten minutes of the time I came down here.

Q Can those who have to file leave now?

MR. NESSEN: I think probably so.

Q Ron, I know we are handicapped --

MR. NESSEN: Let me do announce this now, and I know it is going to cause a minor riot.

Q Do not hold us up anymore. Let us have the Joe Laitin --

Q Let him finish then.

MR. NESSEN: The Pentagon tells Bill that they will not be ready to brief for several hours. It will be done later this morning. It will be announced on the wires. We are closing this Press Office.

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Q And you still will not say the casualties, is that right?

MR. NESSEN: Ted, the problem is that the operation is continuing and the Marines and others are still under hostile fire.

Q I still want to ask this question. Even though we are handicapped in asking it by not knowing how many casualties, does the President feel certain in his mind that he could not have avoided these casualties?

MR. NESSEN: Just to share with you some of the thinking here, the United States has waited with some patience since Monday when it sent its initial demand for the immediate release of the ship.

There was a diplomatic effort before there was any military effort. There was no response to that diplomatic effort. It seems clear here that the radio broadcast, which offered to free the ship, was influenced by the pressure of the American military force. Nevertheless, even at that point the broadcast did not mention anything about freeing the crew.

Also, the radio broadcast was broadcast, as I said, on their domestic service, not overseas, so it didn't seem like they were sending us a message -- it seemed like it might be something that they were broadcasting for consumption at home. But as the President indicated in his statement, the operation has ended by achieving totally its objective, which was the freeing of the ship and the freeing of the entire crew unharmed.

Q Does the President feel a sense of triumph at the conclusion of this?

MR. NESSEN: I think his own words spoke for themselves and the fact is that the mission successfully accomplished its goal.

Q You say we know of some casualties?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Did they include deaths?

MR. NESSEN: One of the reasons why I hesitate to be too specific about this is that partly the operation is still continuing and the information on casualties is not verified. I mean, the fact that there were casualties is verified now. What the casualties precisely were is not verified.

I think we have gone through this whole week with a minimum of slip-ups here at the White House in terms of information and I would not like to make one here at the very end.

Q You are putting out a very victorious story.

MR. NESSEN: I want you to be sure -- and I want you to know -- there are reports of casualties.

Q Are there deaths, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: There just is not enough firm information for me to say that.

Q Are there reports of deaths? Reports of deaths?

Q Ron, you have said that all the crew were recovered. We can account for 30 who were brought alongside by this Cambodian naval vessel. Would it be fair to assume that the remaining nine or 14, whatever they may be, were taken on the island, or how were they recovered and from where.

MR. NESSEN: I don't have that information, truly I don't.

I think it would be fair to say, since it is going to be several hours before Joe is ready to brief -- let's do it this way -- that at this point there is an unverified report of one death.

Q Can you say, Ron, if there were heavy casualties on the Cambodian side, and whether any Cambodians were captured?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have the foggiest notion.

Q Was it a pilot or a Marine?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have it, Walt. It is not that I cannot tell you, I don't have it.

Q One more question.

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Did the President's orders contemplate the airstrike on the Cambodian mainland, and what was the reason for his decision?

MR. NESSEN: The reason for that was that there were 2,400 Cambodian troops in Kompong Som. Let's see, there was a Naval base and an air base in Kompong Som and in Ream there was a Naval air base, and it was feared that unless those bases were struck that they could interfere with, or attack, the rescue operation.

Q Strategic bombing, is that right?

MR. NESSEN: What is the difference? I forget.

Q Well, there is a big difference.

Q Do you know how many troops were involved in the hostilities?

Q The type of plane, for one thing.

Q Were B-52s involved?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Do you know how many troops were involved in the hostilities?

MR. NESSEN: I don't.

Q Ron, one other question. What is the status of the Marines who were not used in this operation? Are they going to be removed to Thailand?

Q Reports are that they have already been relieved.

MR. NESSEN: You really need to get the military stuff from Laitin.

Q Was there heavy damage in the bombing on the mainland?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know.

Folks, let me say this now. We are indeed closing the Press Office tonight. I don't anticipate opening at 6:00, as we have, because everything from here on which will be the real scenario of the military operation will come from Joe and he says there are live cameras there and the morning shows can originate from there.

Q Do you know what time?

MR. NESSEN: I have not got a time from Joe yet, but somebody will stay -- wait a minute. Laitin will put a notice on the wire of the time of his briefing.

Q What time will you be here in the morning.

MR. NESSEN: 7:00 or 7:15.

Q Will you have a message available here at that time?

MR. NESSEN: Only after it is released on the Hill, Bill.

Q Ron, there is nobody there until 7 in the morning.

MR. NESSEN: This is not going to be a big newsmaker. It is a legal document.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.

END (AT 1:12 A.M. EDT)

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AT THE WHITE HOUSE

WITH RON NESSEN

AT 11:58 A.M. EDT

MAY 15, 1975

THURSDAY

MR. NESSEN: We ought to welcome our Iranian friends who are here for the Shah's visit and are joining us at our briefing today.

I bet they don't have anything like this in Persia, do they?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: They do?

Q Yes.

MR. NESSEN: The President went to bed last night at 1 o'clock and slept later than usual this morning. He got up at 7 o'clock. He indicated that he was not sure whether he had forgotten to turn his alarm on or turned it off and rolled over and went back to sleep, but anyway, he slept until 7:00.

I guess the only other event here to sort of tie up the last loose ends is that I was in with the President at 9:35. Brent Scowcroft came in and said, "Mr. President, we are reasonably sure that all the Marines are out," and he indicated that the destroyers would still cruise close in to the shore and broadcast by bullhorns to find any stragglers who might have been inadvertently left behind.

Q Was there no roster?

Q Is there any word that any were left behind?

MR. NESSEN: I talked to Laitin, and there is currently underway on the HOLT, the WILSON and the CORAL SEA a muster, and the muster is expected to be completed sometime around noon, at which point Joe will be able to give you a firmer figure on casualties and so forth.

After sleeping until 7:00, the President got into the office at 7:45. He met with the usual round of staff people.

At 10:30, a lot of you went out on the lawn and watched the arrival ceremony for their Imperial Majesties and heard the exchange of remarks, and also you saw the meeting begin at 11 o'clock.

After the meeting is over, we will have a posting of information about the meeting, and we will do that before we give a lunch lid.

We have posted the coverage arrangements for tonight's white tie dinner in honor of the Shah and the Empress.

Tomorrow night, at 8 o'clock -- I don't think we have announced this previously -- the President will be honored to attend a reciprocal dinner given by the Shah and the Empress at the Iranian Embassy.

Q This also is for coverage?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Is this the first reciprocal dinner --

MR. NESSEN: -- that he has ever attended.

Q Since becoming President?

MR. NESSEN: On the overseas trips?

Q Here.

MR. NESSEN: We better check the record on that, Fran.

We will post the coverage arrangements on that. What I anticipate would be a protective travel pool and probably a prepositioned pool inside the Iranian Embassy. We will work that out. That is 8 o'clock tomorrow night.

Q Is that black tie also?

Q Are you fixing it so the travel pool can get inside, too, because we don't have that many reporters?

MR. NESSEN: We will get the arrangements, Helen.

At 12:30, the President is meeting with Senators Mansfield and Scott and Case and Sparkman. This is a meeting to discuss Senate action on repealing the Turkish aid embargo. You probably know that the President asked for this legislation in his speech to Congress on April 10, and Senators Mansfield and Scott are cosponsors of a bill which would authorize the restoration of aid to Turkey.

At 2 o'clock the President will have one of his regular meetings with the Vice President.

At 3:45 the President will go over briefly to the Residence to meet Mrs. Giscard d'Estaing, who is here on a private visit and will be having tea with Mrs. Ford. The others attending that tea are the wife of the Deputy Chief of Protocol, Ambassador Rockwell, and the wife of the French Ambassador in Washington.

Q Is that open for coverage?

MR. NESSEN: No, it is not.

The papers I think which were distributed here just a moment ago show that the President is nominating Christopher U. Sylvester, of Hatton, Indiana, to be a member of the Renegotiation Board. I think you know what that is.

The President also is transmitting to Congress today the annual report of the National Heart and Lung Advisory Council. You have the letter of transmittal, and for those of you who wish full copies of the report, we have that in the Press Office for you.

I don't have anything further. We were going to announce the putting green today, but I thought Peter would take offense at that, so we didn't do it. (Laughter)

Q Peter who? (Laughter)

Q Ron, as he discusses the Turkish aid, is there any concession or any new thing on the part of Turkey that you wish to announce in regard to the narcotics trade?

MR. NESSEN: No, I don't have anything on that.

Q The agreement from them on this?

MR. NESSEN: I have not even heard of this.

Q Is the United States going in to recapture the three detained Americans in Laos?

MR. NESSEN: Just before I came out here, Helen, your wire service reported that the three had been released. That is not confirmed, but that is the report.

Q Has the President shared any further with you his views on the success of the mission?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Does he consider it over, basically?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, with the proviso that this muster is going on board the destroyers and the carrier and the destroyers are continuing close in to the shore, broadcasting through a bullhorn for anybody who might have gotten left.

Q Do we have the casualties?

MR. NESSEN: Joe says that that will be produced by the muster.

Q Will the American Naval presence remain in the Gulf of Thailand for a while, first? Secondly, what kind of advisories are we now giving American boats, both commercial and Naval vessels, in that area?

MR. NESSEN: On the ship movements, I just don't have any idea. The Pentagon can help you on that. As far as I know, the mariners warning remains. I don't know that it has been withdrawn. That would be something to ask Defense.

Q Do you have copies available from the President to the Congress on the War Powers Act?

MR. NESSEN: I am told that the President's letters of notification in compliance with the War Powers Act have been released on the Hill, and we are running off copies now and will give them to you after the briefing.

Peter was trying to ask a question.

Q Whatever diplomatic effort was made before the military force was introduced?

MR. NESSEN: I think I told those who stayed here last night that -- or I recalled to them the public statements of the State Department -- on Monday the head of the Chinese liaison office here did go to the State Department at the Department's request and was given a message, which was essentially the same as the public statement; that no reply ever came from the Cambodians, and that the Secretary General of the United Nations was also asked to use his good office and there was no indication that he was able to have any success.

Q When was that done?

Q The Secretary General was only approached yesterday in the morning. Isn't that right at about the time when we were already engaged in military action there, after we had already completed one military operation and hours before we did another one?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have the precise timing of the message to the UN. I did see where a UN official was quoted, after the request for the UN to use its good offices, as saying that the UN had a serious problem with this because they had no way of knowing even who to deal with on the other side, so that did not appear to be a fruitful avenue.

Q It raises the question of how do we know that any of these messages -- whether it was possible to get any of these messages through to Phnom Penh.

MR. NESSEN: We don't, Peter.

Q Did the Chinese say that they would cooperate in trying to send the message and did they say whether they had any reply?

MR. NESSEN: We never got a reply.

Q Will the Marines be going back to Thailand?

MR. NESSEN: I am sorry, I missed the thrust of the first part of it.

Q The first question is, did the Chinese agree to cooperate as a transmitter of this message?

MR. NESSEN: All that happened, Carrol, was that they took the message and then we never heard back from them.

Q Do we know whether the Chinese transmitted the message?

MR. NESSEN: We don't. I said that last night.

Q We did not hear back from the Chinese, as well as the Cambodians?

MR. NESSEN: That is correct.

Somebody asked a question about Marines going back to Thailand. The Marines involved in the operation have gone to the CORAL SEA.

Q Where are the crewmen being taken, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: The crewmen are back on their ship. The ship is under its own power and is going to Singapore.

Q Is the cargo intact, do you know?

Q I thought it was going to Sattahip.

MR. NESSEN: No, that was its destination before this episode, but it is now going towards Singapore.

Q Is the ship leaving Tang Island?

MR. NESSEN: It must be because the two destroyers are still around the island and the freighter is moving toward Singapore.

Q No air surveillance?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have that fact.

Q Any casualties among the crew?

Q Any escort for the MAYAGUEZ?

MR. NESSEN: For the freighter? I don't know of any, but you ought to check the Pentagon.

Q Ron, during this crisis with the Chinese, did the United States issue a 24-hour ultimatum, or did we, at any time, do that?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Were there any casualties among the MAYAGUEZ crew?

MR. NESSEN: No.

Q Is there any reason for the ship going to Singapore.

MR. NESSEN: It was the ship's choice, I suppose.

Q R&R?

MR. NESSEN: They have an office out there, I think, in Singapore.

Q Is all their cargo still aboard?

MR. NESSEN: It was, but I don't know what their reasons are.

Q Ron, you mentioned yesterday that there was a broadcast of that Presidential message to the Cambodians over a channel which we understood they received.

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Were there continuous messages going all the way through; in other words, when the President said he wanted the ship returned immediately. The previous statement that you put out, were those similarly transmitted by radio directed to the Cambodians?

MR. NESSEN: They were not transmitted by that particular method and I really have gone almost too far in explaining how that message was broadcast. I am just not able to go any further.

Q Can you say that --

Q The message.

MR. NESSEN: The one that was broadcast directly to them? Well, whether they got it through the commercial wire services, which, as you know, was one of our intentions in announcing it here, or whether they got it through that radio frequency method, there is no way of knowing. They do seem to have responded to it.

Q Were there other radio frequency messages passed during the crisis?

MR. NESSEN: Directly by that method?

Q Well, I don't know what the method is, right, so I don't know whether directly by the method.

MR. NESSEN: No other messages were passed by that method.

Q Well, what messages were passed, and how?

MR. NESSEN: As I say, through the Chinese.

Let me consult with my advisers here for a minute.

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I just want to tidy up one bit on the message that, as the State Department has indicated earlier in the week, the Chinese liaison office chief did come over on Monday and received the message.

The State Department has said that and the Congressional leaders yesterday were told that the Chinese took the message and 24 hours later brought it back and there was no acknowledgement of whether it had been or not been transmitted to the Cambodians.

Q Brought it back, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Brought the message back? I don't understand.

MR. NESSEN: I don't understand why you don't understand.

Q He brought the subject back? Is that what you are saying?

MR. NESSEN: Brought the documents, or the piece of paper, back.

Q That indicates they did not send it, doesn't it?

MR. NESSEN: Not necessarily.

Q What does it indicate?

Q Did they say whether they sent it, Ron?

MR. NESSEN: I don't really think we can go any further on this. I have told you about all I can tell you.

Q It indicated that the Cambodians refused to accept the message because it contained a threat?

MR. NESSEN: Ted, I don't have the vaguest way of knowing what it signifies.

Q Ron, as long as the President has taken this very decisive action on behalf of one merchant ship, unarmed, can the American Tuna Boat Association count on similar protection as far as 200 miles off the Equadorian coast, or not?

MR. NESSEN: I think you know, Les, that the matter of the tuna boats is being handled through diplomatic means.

Q Ron, it does not seem unreasonable to ask you what the Chinese Ambassador said when he brought the message back.

MR. NESSEN: I think I have probably gone as far -- perhaps further than I should -- and I think this is a matter that was handled by the State Department.

Q Do you consider that we never gave an ultimatum in any way to the Cambodians?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know, you know, what the purpose of talking about ultimatums is. You have the language of the message. You have my saying, in response to a question, that there was no deadline or time limit set.

Q Have you released the text of the note?

MR. NESSEN: I said the note was virtually similar to the public statement that we made on Monday.

Q Ron, aren't you creating a little bit of a mystery here? You said originally, I thought, that we didn't know whether the Chinese had transmitted this and from what you are now saying, I kind of get the impression that we do know, but for whatever reasons you have, you are not able or willing to say.

MR. NESSEN: I don't see how you draw that conclusion, Lou. The facts are as I have laid them out. Whether it was transmitted or whether it was not transmitted, we have no way of knowing.

Q Can we state that it was rejected?

MR. NESSEN: I would not say that if I were you, Helen, because I have not heard anything here to indicate that it was rejected.

Q Doesn't the return of the original message indicate that it would not accept it?

MR. NESSEN: Why would you draw that conclusion?

Q Because they would not want to touch this with a 10-foot pole, and simply bring it back with no explanation. (Laughter)

Q Ron, the Chinese know we are not short of paper. (Laughter)

MR. NESSEN: Peter, you know, the facts are laid out there and I am not going to go any further.

Q Ron, what is the assessment in the White House of why the Cambodians turned the crew loose?

MR. NESSEN: You know, all through this, both the seizure of the ship and the release of the ship, obviously we have no way of knowing the motives of the Cambodians. I do think there is a feeling here that -- at least the appearance of it is that -- the minimum force used in this did have some influence on the Cambodian actions.

The sequence of events would certainly point to at least that appearance. The military forces were moving in. Then, there was the broadcast on Phnom Penh Radio which referred to the approach of the HOLT. At the time of the broadcast, the military operation was already underway.

At about 9:15 or so, 9:18 or so, we did send that message to the Cambodians saying that they had made no reference to the release of the crew and that we would stop the military operation when they released the crew, and at 10:23, a boat appeared waving a white flag, the crew was released, and at 11:16, the order was given to cease the operation.

So, the sequence of events would indicate that the --

Q The order was given at 11:16?

MR. NESSEN: 11:16 to cease all offensive operations and to withdraw. So, without possibly being able to read the motives of the Cambodians, the sequence of events would indicate that the military force did influence their decisions.

Q Ron, just to follow up on that, when you spoke about offering to cease military operations, is there any feeling here that the Cambodians released the crewmen because they feared continuing military operations, including bombing of the mainland, which had already begun?

MR. NESSEN: There is no way, truly, of knowing the motives of the Cambodians, Phil, and all we have is the kind of textual evidence of the sequence of events.

Q Ron, do you know how badly we smashed up the Cambodian air force in the attacks on the airfields?

MR. NESSEN: I don't, myself, and I think Joe will be doing some assessments later in the day.

Q What was the time of the bombing of those shore targets?

MR. NESSEN: Beginning at 8:45 p.m.

Q Will this be a modus operandi in the future or are we going to take it on a case-by-case basis?

MR. NESSEN: There would certainly be the hope that there would be no more cases like this.

Q Ron, have we any idea why those Thais went back in their boat? Did their government tell them to?

MR. NESSEN: It is not entirely clear, Sarah.

Q Ron, you were also talking about that boat. Was the boat that they came out in the Thai ship that had been captured earlier and did all the 40 crewmen come out together or did they come out separately, or one group at 10:15 --

MR. NESSEN: No, everybody was on the one boat and the one boat appears to have been -- again, Laitin will have to nail down these details as he gets them nailed down -- the boat appeared to be a Cambodian gunboat.

Q All 45 were aboard that boat?

MR. NESSEN: That is correct.

Q There were released and not recaptured?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q That is what we are trying to get cleared up.

Q He means recaptured by us.

Q Rescued by us.

MR. NESSEN: I see. No, the boat approached with a white flag.

Q Which boat did the Thais take back to Thailand, the gunboat or did they have one of their own?

MR. NESSEN: That is all very vague at the moment.

Q On a boat off the island?

MR. NESSEN: That is also unclear and there has been a garbled message from the MAYAGUEZ as it moves toward Singapore. It just has not been the opportunity to talk to everybody and find out what happened, and when.

Q Is there any indication of these Thais at all, where did they get them?

MR. NESSEN: They were crew members.

Q But they were not listed on the original roster.

MR. NESSEN: That is right.

Q What was the kind of boat that they came out on, whose boat was it?

MR. NESSEN: As I say, from what we know now, from what I got from Laitin, it was a Canadian gunboat.

Q Was there a Cambodian crew aboard?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know that, Mort.

Q Ron, you were saying you don't know where the crew was and what they were doing. Is that because you didn't know and if you did know, could you tell us where they were?

MR. NESSEN: No, it was because we didn't know.

Q Do you know now whether the crew was aboard any of those vessels sunk? Did we know at the time where they were?

MR. NESSEN: We didn't know precisely where they were and still don't, for that matter, but the planes took, I think we would have to say, special precautions to ascertain as much as possible that the Americans were not on the boats that were attacked and those precautions seemed to have worked because they were not on the boats attacked.

Now, there was one boat where there was some doubt and the doubt was caused by the fact that there appeared to be more people on the deck than the normal complement of one of those boats and that is the boat that was not attacked and has reached Kompong Som.

Q Did we pick up any of these Cambodians in the water or did they all die, or what?

MR. NESSEN: I have no way of knowing, Helen.

Q Ron, in fact, some of the ships that were sunk, did they not come out to port from the mainland?

MR. NESSEN: I talked to Laitin and it is still confused as to whether they were coming or going or just sailing around.

Q Ron, in view of all the confusion about messages, and what is happening and all, does anyone in the White House have the feeling now in retrospect that the Cambodians may not have gotten the message properly and they could not respond in time as a result?

MR. NESSEN: The original--both the public warning which was issued here on Monday and presumably worked its way through news channels to Phnom Penh, and the message that was given to the Chinese for transmittal--and then 2-1/2 days went by before any military action was taken.

MORE

Q Ron, to pursue the subject just one last time, aside from the messages that we have mentioned that the public statements, the letter through the Chinese and the radio broadcast through this special channel, were any other messages passed by the United States Government to the Cambodians or directed to the Cambodians?

MR. NESSEN: There were those three.

Q Were there any others?

Q Ron, I want to make one final try at this message that was given to the Chinese.

As you know, in diplomatic procedure, when a message is returned, that is because the country to which it is directed has rejected it.

MR. NESSEN: Jim, I don't know that.

Q Do you give this interpretation in the case of this message?

MR. NESSEN: I would not urge you to take that interpretation.

Q Ron, can you find out?

Q What other interpretation could there be?

MR. NESSEN: Jim, as I say, all I can do for you is lay out the facts as we know them.

Q Inscrutable?

MR. NESSEN: Dick says they are inscrutable.

Jim, all I can do is lay out to you the facts and tell you that there are areas that we simply don't know the answers.

Q When Mr. Chen brought the message back, whoever he gave it to at the State Department -- Mr. Ingersoll, or whoever it was -- didn't he say something or didn't the State Department official ask him, you know, here are you bringing this back and why are you bringing this back? What happened?

MR. NESSEN: For any details beyond what I have been able to tell you, you need to talk to the State Department.

Q Have you been told by the State Department what was said?

MR. NESSEN: Jim, I thought I said over and over again that there is no way of knowing whether the Chinese transmitted the message or not.

Q You mean when the State Department asked why they were bringing the message back, the Chinese would not answer and gave them no information? What happened over there?

MR. NESSEN: Jim, you need to deal with the State Department on that level of detail.

Q Ron, how closely can you fix the time now precisely that President Ford decided that force had to be used in this incident?

MR. NESSEN: There were, as you know, two orders given, one to prevent Cambodian gunboats from going to or from the island, and that was given on -- I have lost track of days a little bit here -- Tuesday. I think the NSC meeting then was at 10:30.

Q Your announcement said the action commenced at 8:30 p.m. that night.

MR. NESSEN: That night, yes.

Q What about the second one?

MR. NESSEN: The second one, the decision was taken at the NSC meeting yesterday afternoon, which began at 3:30, and ended somewhat after 5:00. The actual order was given at 4:45, to begin military operations for the recovery of the MAYAGUEZ and its crew.

Q Ron, on Tuesday I was under the impression that one of those boats got away.

MR. NESSEN: That is right.

Q And you seem to imply today we let it get away because there might be Americans on it.

MR. NESSEN: That is correct.

Q We let them get away?

MR. NESSEN: That is correct.

Q Ron, a couple other loose ends here.

MR. NESSEN: Let me just nail it down. In all of these cases, in all of the boats, there was, first of all, an effort to warn it not to move and that was by fire that was not directed at the boat, but basically fire across the bow and that was done in that case, too.

Then, the boats which did not take the warning but continued to move were attacked, but in the case of this boat, it was not attacked because of at least a doubt as to whether there were any Americans aboard.

Q Ron, you seem to have prepared now a chronology of this whole event. Could that be distributed?

MR. NESSEN: It is not quite in the form for distribution, but I think we are working on it.

Q Do you plan to put it out when it is complete?

MR. NESSEN: I certainly do.

Q Do you have any idea whether that might be today?

MR. NESSEN: Oh, yes. We have all the numbers. All we have to do is put it in the form.

Q Talking about the numbers, do you have the message center updated yet?

MR. NESSEN: Yes. Let's do this by various categories now.

From the time that we first announced the capture of the MAYAGUEZ -- which was what, Monday afternoon about 1:15, 1:45 or something like that -- from that time until 11:30, 11 o'clock, telegrams and letters --

Q When?

MR. NESSEN: We are checking.

From the time we announced the capture until 11:30 this morning, telegrams and letters in favor of taking strong action -- and I am going to generalize a little bit -- 1,514 telegrams and letters; against taking strong action, 17; and there were two assorted comments. (Laughter)

Q In favor that the President took strong action? Is that the category?

Q Was the Chinese response among those?
(Laughter)

Q They sent it here, Ron, instead of Cambodia.

MR. NESSEN: There was no response received.

Q One was Chinese and one was Cambodia.

MR. NESSEN: Seventeen. I don't understand this breakdown of categories. Now I have it straight.

What I have just given you, 1,514 to 17, was from the capture of the ship until we announced the sinking of the gunboats. Now, that is just that period of time and the favorable telegrams and letters there represented urging to take strong action.

From the time that the gunboats were sunk until 11:30 this morning, letters and telegrams approving the President's action numbered 2,657. Those opposing the President's action numbered 503, and assorted comments, 28.

Q These are in addition to the first ones?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, and I will do the arithmetic for you, if you want me to.

Q That 2,657 is support, right?

MR. NESSEN: Yes, support for the action and 503 against and 28 comments.

Now, if you add those two periods of time together, you get 4,171 letters and telegrams in favor of --

Q In favor of what?

MR. NESSEN: In the first case, taking strong action and then in the later period support of what he was doing; 520 opposed and 30 comments.

Now, the telephone tally for the entire two and a half day period --

Q That was all mail?

MR. NESSEN: That was mail and telegrams.

Telephone for the entire two and a half day period supporting either strong action or after the action was taken supporting it, 1,978 phone calls in favor; 157 against, apparently no phone calls were just idle comments. (Laughter)

Just to further refine this down to the most recent period, included in that earlier list of telegrams of support and so forth, those that have been received since midnight, which is roughly the period since the episode was concluded -- since midnight, 1,436 telegrams in favor, 170 opposed --

Q This is included --

MR. NESSEN: This is included in what I have already given you, but this is from midnight on.

Q Did you say only telegrams?

MR. NESSEN: Only telegrams. 170 against and 27 comments. Finally, there are about 4,000 telegrams and mailgrams which have not been opened and counted yet.

Q Based on this, Ron, do you think that this is a policy that has helped the President's standing with the American people, this action?

MR. NESSEN: Lou, just frankly, that was never a consideration during any point of this.

Q My question does not say it was.

MR. NESSEN: The sole consideration in considering what action to take at every step was the safe recovery of the ship and the crew.

Q Okay. Accepting that as the premise, could you answer my question?

MR. NESSEN: I would leave that to pundits.

Q Ron, some Members of Congress have complained that the President consulted with them after the fact and they felt he should have consulted with them prior to ordering the Marines into action. What is the White House response to this? Does the White House feel it lived up to the requirements of the War Powers Act, and was any formal protest received from any Members of Congress on this?

MR. NESSEN: No. As far as I can tell, certainly the consensus of Congress is supportive. The President believes that he complied with the statute. I saw a quote somewhere on the wire today from Senator Sparkman, the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, in which he said he was called three times, I believe, and was asked down here once.

I think the quote was, "That is enough consulting for me." (Laughter)

Q Was his opinion ever asked as to the final action?

MR. NESSEN: I am sure all of you know from reading the War Powers Act that there is no requirement to get approval and the President believes he did comply with the law.

I think it is interesting that at the bipartisan leadership meeting yesterday Senator Case, who is a coauthor of the Case-Cooper amendment -- Case-Church, Cooper-Case; in any case, he is the coauthor of one of those (Laughter) -- that he felt that when he was told by the President that he had ordered military action -- it has been a long nighttime -- that he felt that the amendment of which he was the coauthor in no way restricted the President from this kind of military action, it had nothing to do with hampering an action to save American lives and that he supported the President's action.

It is a long way of answering, Dick, that there has been no, as far as I am aware, major complaint about not living up to the War Powers Act. In fact, I saw -- Senator Jackson, I think, turned around today, didn't he, and didn't he say that -- what was it -- high marks for the President?

Q Ron, a couple of loose ends on the ship, here. For one thing, the little boat with the white flag that came bearing the crewmen, did that boat originate from the mainland indicating that all the crewmen had been taken to the mainland?

MR. NESSEN: I talked to Joe about that this morning and that detail is one of those that is not nailed down yet.

Q Okay. The other thing, has it been firmly determined yet whether the seizure of the MAYAGUEZ was on orders from on high or not just an isolated act of Cambodian boats without orders of their superiors?

MR. NESSEN: There is no way, as I say, to interpret the motives of the Cambodians.

Q Did the Marines take prisoners, or hostages, in the operation at all?

MR. NESSEN: As far as I know, they didn't.

Q Ron, a number of the Congressmen on the Hill are asking whether the President will come up to the Hill for an in-person report. Is that being considered?

MR. NESSEN: I had not heard of this request.

Q I spoke to several of them this morning.

MR. NESSEN: I had not heard it discussed here. I have not heard of any plans to report.

Q Ron, the personal stories of these crewmen won't be known until they get to Singapore?

MR. NESSEN: Unless a better radio contact can be arranged than this one they had this morning.

Q The military didn't put anybody on board to interview them?

Q Before they were put back on the MAYAGUEZ.

MR. NESSEN: I just don't know that, Jim. It is a Pentagon --

Q The military didn't put anybody on board. They didn't talk to them or get a report or a written report, or anything?

MR. NESSEN: I just don't know, Sarah. Joe Laitin can tell you.

Q Do you know the time it will take them to get to Singapore?

MR. NESSEN: I don't.

Q Ron, was there any diplomatic reaction? Did our allies send any messages of support?

MR. NESSEN: I checked the State Department, and as far as they can determine, there have been no official messages received on this matter from other countries.

Q Ron, in deciding whether to attack onshore targets, was there any consideration in the White House given to doing that as a punitive action as opposed to merely as a preemptive action against the possibility of those bases being used to launch supportive military action?

MR. NESSEN: Not in the least, Mort. Those were real threats. As I think I told some of you early this morning, there were 2,400 Cambodian troops at Kompong Som. There were 17 Cambodian airplanes at one of the air bases. There were amphibious craft capable of taking those troops out to the island which would have been an overwhelmingly larger force than the Marines.

As the President told the Congressional leaders yesterday, he never would have forgiven himself if he had not taken the precaution of making sure that those Cambodian planes, ships and troops on the mainland didn't come and attack the Marines, and it was a decision supported by the Joint Chiefs of Staff as a wise military precaution.

Q Is that a quote?

MR. NESSEN: "I would never forgive myself." That is a quote.

Q Was there ever dissension between the President and Kissinger in connection with what move to be made?

MR. NESSEN: No, not that I am aware of.

Q Ron, where did the planes come from that made the first attack on the island? Did they come from Thailand or across the bay?

MR. NESSEN: The planes that attacked Kompong Som and Ream came from the CORAL SEA. The others I am not sure about.

Q The original attack on Koh Tang.

MR. NESSEN: There was never an aerial attack on Koh Tang.

Q Can you repeat that quote? "I would never forgive myself."

MR. NESSEN: Let me dig it out.

Q Will you also repeat the statistics, the number of planes and troops?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

Q Have you got a number of amphibious ships? Could you give us that?

MR. NESSEN: Yes.

2,400 Cambodian troops at Kompong Som; 17 Cambodian airplanes -- and I am not sure whether that is at --

Q Those were destroyers.

Q All of which were ours in the first place; is that right?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know that, Jim.

And amphibious craft that were capable of taking the troops to the island.

Q How many?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have a count on that.

The President said at one point that it would be too great a risk not to have this supportive action on the mainland and then he said, "I would never forgive myself," and that is the end of the actual direct quote.

To paraphrase the rest of the sentence, it was if the first wave of Marines had been attacked by 2,400 Cambodians. That is a paraphrase.

Q Ron, we took out the planes, but, of course, what would have gotten those troops out there were the amphibious craft. Did we take those out, also?

MR. NESSEN: Jim, I just don't have a battle assessment. That is something the Pentagon will have to do for you.

Q How many Marines were there on the island?

MR. NESSEN: I only have a very rough number. Really, these precise battle statistics are going to be gone into at great length by Laitin today.

Q Ron, do we know how many, if any, of those gunboats were former U.S. gunboats that they gave them or sold them?

MR. NESSEN: I don't have any knowledge, any way of knowing that, Peter.

Q Do you know about how many Khmer Rouge were on the island?

MR. NESSEN: I don't know. The Pentagon is going to give you a battle report that will go on and on.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Ron.

END

(AT 12:40 P.M. EDT)