

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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(San Francisco, California)

PRESS CONFERENCE
OF
CHARLES T. MILLER
CAPTAIN OF THE SS MAYAGUEZ

THE HOLIDAY INN

1:00 P.M. PDT

MR. NESSEN: As we announced earlier, we have Captain Charles Miller of the MAYAGUEZ with us today. Just to give you some background, the White House heard Captain Miller did not agree with the findings of the GAO report. Captain Miller was contacted, and he said that he would like to talk to the President. He phoned the President at 8:55 this morning and they talked and Captain Miller gave the President his view of this report. The President gave Captain Miller his view, which you probably heard out at the theatre.

The President said, "How far are you from San Francisco?" Captain Miller is between cruises. He is vacationing down near Newport and the President said, "I think it would be a good idea if you came up here and came to the debate tonight." So, Captain Miller did come up here. He had intended to hold a news conference in Los Angeles, but he decided to hold it here instead.

Q Before we go into this, your announcement says that Captain Miller telephoned the President.

MR. NESSEN: That is correct.

Q I would like to make sure I am correct in saying that -- did you say that the White House had heard that Captain Miller did not agree with the report so he was contacted?

MR. NESSEN: That is correct. When he was contacted, he indicated he would like to talk to the President, and he phoned the President.

Q Who contacted him and when?

MR. NESSEN: John Carlson did.

Captain Miller?

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Q Captain, could you begin by telling us where you live and what you do now? Are you still the Captain?

CAPTAIN MILLER: I am not the Captain of the MAYAGUEZ. I have been transferred to another ship. I came home from the Far East July 23. I am on vacation until the end of February. Do you want to know where I live? My home is in Pahrump Valley, Nevada. I also have an apartment down in Fountain Valley, California.

Q Is that where you were when you called the President?

CAPTAIN MILLER: Yes.

Q How about telling us what you think of the GAO report?

CAPTAIN MILLER: Yesterday afternoon I went out to buy a paper and the headlines were "MAYAGUEZ Dead Wasted". Then I read the report out of Washington by the GAO. The facts are not true, and I would like to set the American public straight.

This was not a Mickey Mouse operation. The crew was held under close security at all times. Our movement was closely guarded, and it would have been extremely difficult for our military forces that were in the area from May 13 to know where we were -- on the ship, on an island or on the mainland. We were guarded that closely and also escorted at all times by two or three gunboats.

Under the circumstances -- the Cambodians could not speak English, I don't speak Cambodian -- and with no indication from the Cambodians that they were going to release us, I think the President showed great courage to American lives that were in jeopardy. There was myself and 40 crew members and we all thank God that he did.

Q Did you tell this to the Congressional committee that investigated?

CAPTAIN MILLER: Yes.

Q The same facts?

CAPTAIN MILLER: I am telling you the same facts that I gave to the GAO. This was the subcommittee hearing on international public (foreign) relations and military affairs subcommittee. The Chairman was Congressman Fascell. Also present were Congressman Winn and Congressman Riegle of Michigan.

Q Captain, did you agree with the bombing at the airport at Cambodia after the crew was rescued?

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CAPTAIN MILLER: The bombing of Cambodia, of Komponsom, did not happen after the crew was rescued. I did not get aboard the destroyer WILSON until around 10:15 in the morning of the 15th, and the bombing had already started. I talked to Commander Rogers, in charge of the WILSON, and I asked him, or I told him that our negotiations with the Cambodians for a release was that I would ask Americans, our Government, to withdraw the airplanes out of the sky if we were released and the ship was permitted to sail, and Commander Rogers told me at the time that I was too late, that Komponsom had already been bombed by the air force of the carrier CORAL SEA.

Q Who told you that the bombing had started? What Commander?

CAPTAIN MILLER: Commander Rogers.

Q You contacted the Americans?

CAPTAIN MILLER: Yes. After we were released we sailed back to the MAYAGUEZ, but the MAYAGUEZ had already been boarded by Marines and the destroyer escort by the name of HOLT was along side and had taken her in tow to tow her out without any crew on her. There were about 30 on board this ship. The Marines had already landed on the island of Kohtang and they were pinned down on the beachhead.

When they saw that fishing boat coming in the area where the MAYAGUEZ was anchored and the HOLT along side of her, the WILSON steamed toward us and I hailed WILSON and asked permission to go aboard, and Commander Rogers let the fishing boat come along side.

That is when I was interrogated by Navy intelligence on the WILSON and told them the situation that we had negotiated our release, and that we would haul the aircraft out and stop the bombing, and Commander Rogers told me, "Captain, you are too late. We already bombed Komponsom and the base on the Mainland."

Q Captain, as you know, 41 Americans lost their lives in the overall operation to rescue you, and we don't know how many Cambodians died. There is some feeling on the part of those who wrote that report that in fact diplomatic methods might have freed you without anybody's loss of life.

CAPTAIN MILLER: No, when we were removed off the MAYAGUEZ we were removed by two fishing boats and taken to the island of Kohtang. This is the afternoon of the 13th. We laid in a small cove that was covered with palm trees and slept on two fishing boats overnight. Our P-3 that was overhead saw the crew leave on two fishing boats.

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The following morning, at around 8 o'clock, they put us all on one fishing boat and took us into the port of Komponsom. Our military saw two boats take the crew in and only one boat leave. So they figured that half the crew was being held on the island of Kohtang and the other half was being shipped into a prison camp in Komponsom.

Q I am not quite sure -- perhaps I did not make my question clear. What I am trying to ask you is, are you convinced in your own mind that there was no way that you and your crew members could have been released other than the operation which resulted in the deaths of so many Americans and Cambodians?

CAPTAIN MILLER: Yes, not only am I convinced but I think 39 other men that were with me were convinced. The only time we were taken anyplace that we could talk to an English speaking Cambodian was after our Air Force arrived on the scene. This was on the afternoon of May 14 at around 3:30 in the afternoon.

When I arrived there I was met by a young English speaking Cambodian and he said, "We want to interrogate you, Captain," and they did. They asked me if I was CIA or FBI, and we went through the interrogations. Then he told me we had already damaged two or three of their gunboats and injured 100 friendly Cambodian people.

Q How many Cambodian people?

CAPTAIN MILLER: About 100 friendly Cambodian people. At all times I had a gun on my back or on my head during the four days of capture. We started negotiating because I could see that the Cambodians, the second military command on the island of Kohrong Sam Lem was very belligerent to us. They wanted to know what I had on the ship, and I told them I would go back to the ship and open the containers and show them I had only food, clothing and general cargo for Bangkok, Singapore and Port Sataheap. This they did not do.

I negotiated until about 8 o'clock that night on the 14th. But all word had to come out through Phnom Penh so we negotiated by radio from Kohrong Sam Lem to the first military command post in Komponsom and was relayed by radio or telephone -- I don't know which -- to the supreme military command in Phnom Penh.

We were never promised our release. They offered to release seven men to go back on the ship, get steam up and radio my company in Bangkok and have us call off the aircraft, but nothing was said that they were going to release us, until around 9 o'clock at night on the 14th when they told us that 6 o'clock in the morning we probably would have word from Phnom Penh that we would be released the following morning at 6 o'clock.

Q Were you in any position to know about any high level diplomatic negotiations that might have been taking place?

CAPTAIN MILLER: No. From the time that I had the radio officer send the SOS out, our radio was secured. My single side band radio was secured. About four armed young Cambodian boys were in the radio shack at all times. There were about 100 or 150 Cambodians aboard the ship by this time and everybody that wanted to walk around had a guard on them. Most of the crew was held on the outside decks under guard.

Q The GAO report mentions those high level negotiations but you know nothing about them?

CAPTAIN MILLER: I know nothing about any high level negotiations. I was strictly negotiating with the Khmer Rouge that was in charge of the Government of Cambodia.

Q Captain, were you asked to testify by the people who prepared the GAO report?

CAPTAIN MILLER: Yes. I was in the subcommittee hearing a year ago July 24th, and I reported the same as I am telling you today.

Q Captain, is it your feeling -- if I can try to understand what you are saying -- that there was no way that you all would have been released unless this incident was escalated to the military extent it was and that those people who were killed in the operation were sacrificed as the only method in which you could be free? Is that what you are saying?

CAPTAIN MILLER: That is what I am saying.

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Q Why are you saying that? That is what I don't understand.

CAPTAIN MILLER: Because when they took us into the Port of Komponsom, they tried to take us ashore and some high-ranking military official came down and told the gunboat to escort us down the beach another half a mile or three-quarters of a mile down where there was a military prison or a military camp. It was a house built around the square with big steel gates on it.

They tried to get us ashore there and several aircraft flew over the fishing boat and they got scared and put us back in the fishing boat and sent us to the island of Kohrong Sam Lem. We would have been put in a military camp in Komponsom and then probably shipped into a military camp in the capital of Phnom Penh and then we would have been held for ransom.

Q Captain, the fact remains you were told the day before that you would be released the following morning. That was almost 12 hours before the raid on Komponsom.

CAPTAIN MILLER: No, sir. At this time we had not even arrived at the island of Kohrong Sam Lem. We were taken from Kohtang into Komponsom. I had nobody to talk to at that time.

Q You said earlier you were told at 9:00 p.m. that you would depart at 6:00 a.m. the next day, that you would probably be released. That was the day -- after you were released -- that the raid on Kohtang was placed.

CAPTAIN MILLER: Yes, this young English-speaking Cambodian, when I was negotiating with him and told him I could call off the aircraft from bombing their gunboats and securing anymore Cambodian people -- that I could call the aircraft off and stop the shooting until the ship sailed and all aircraft would leave the Cambodian skies.

That was 9:00 at night on the night of the 14th. We slept on the island that night. We had no communication with anybody after 9:00.

Q The point is, Captain, the raid on Kohtang took place a day later, after you had been told that you would be released.

CAPTAIN MILLER: I was not told we would be released. He told me we would probably be sent back to the MAYAGUEZ at 6:00 the following morning. I had no means of communication.

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Q You were on your way back to the MAYAGUEZ when the Marines were landing at Phnom Penh?

CAPTAIN MILLER: I had not been released from the island of Kohrong Sam Lem until 7:20 the morning of the 15th, and the invasion of Kohtang had already started and I was at least 25 miles away from the MAYAGUEZ.

Q Captain Miller, did the raid on Kohtang island have anything to do with your release at all?

CAPTAIN MILLER: Yes. I think that the raid started before our release and at 7:20 in the morning we had word from Komponsom to send the crew back to the ship.

Q Do you think it affected your release or inspired it?

CAPTAIN MILLER: Yes. The aircraft in the air -- I did not know anything about our Navy ships being there -- the HOLT or the WILSON or the CORAL SEA -- but that was one of the factors, that the American military was building their might in around the island of Poulo Wei. That made the Phnom Penh supreme command release us.

Q Captain, do you mean it was your question, it was your negotiations that led to your release or was it negotiations in which you were not involved that led to your release?

CAPTAIN MILLER: It was negotiations that I held with the English-speaking Cambodian on the island of Kohrong Sam Lem, which was raided to Komponsom and then to Phnom Penh. Our final release word was received at 7:20 in the morning.

Q Captain, is it possible your release was scheduled and was going ahead and just happened to take place a little bit after the raid and would have taken place regardless?

CAPTAIN MILLER: No, I don't think so. If our military had not been on the island, we would have been taken and put in a military prison on Komponsom and then shipped to Phnom Penh.

Q Why do you say that?

CAPTAIN MILLER: Because they were very belligerent to American people at the time.

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Q Captain, you say that you have no knowledge about any high-level negotiations so you are not able to say that high-level negotiations weren't taking place that might have led to your release. Whether you had been put into a prison camp or not, you are not able to say whether high-level negotiations might have taken place that would have led to your release, is that correct?

CAPTAIN MILLER: No, I didn't know about any negotiations aside from the negotiations I was holding with the Cambodians myself.

Q So that could have led to your release. You have no knowledge that it did not happen.

CAPTAIN MILLER: No. When we arrived on the island of Kohrong Sam Lem, I could see the fear in the eyes of the second military commander and this English-speaking man of our aircraft that was in the skies over Komponsom and Kohrong Sam Lem and the MAYAGUEZ, that they were deadly afraid of the aircraft that was in the sky at the time and they wanted them withdrawn. That was the negotiations we worked on.

Q Captain, do you feel the President has been made a political victim in this instance?

CAPTAIN MILLER: Well, looking back on the situation as a Monday morning quarterback, I can say I would have done a lot of other things. I would not have been six and a half miles off the island of Paulo Wei, to begin with. I would have been outside 12 miles, although I still have the right of what we call innocent passage, and it is out of the United Nations and the Geneva Convention. It is negotiated for all ships to come as long as we don't violate the three-mile territorial limit, and I used their landmarks as a navigation purpose.

Q What is the answer to the question?

CAPTAIN MILLER: What question was that?

Q Do you think this report has been issued at this time to hurt the President politically?

CAPTAIN MILLER: Well, I don't know too much about politics. The only thing that I became overheated about was the headlines in the paper where 18 young American boys were lost in the nation of Kohtang and they put headlines in the paper that the MAYAGUEZ dead were wasted.

This is 17 months after the situation, and I think the next of kin of these young American Marines, Air Force and Navy men that were killed and injured -- I don't see any sense in bringing it up, and I think this report coming out at the time it did is to embarrass the President in this foreign debate tonight.

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Q Are you a registered Republican or Democrat?

CAPTAIN MILLER: I have been a registered Democrat for around 32 years. I changed to Republican in 1975.

Q Captain, what did you tell the President this morning?

CAPTAIN MILLER: I told the President this morning that I would like to have a press conference -- it was okayed through my company that I could talk to the press -- and put the situation in perspective as the way it has happened. The article that I read is just a situation that is not true at all.

Q Captain, you say the military build-up in the area did not contribute to your release, but the fact is 18 Marines died on Kohtang and you were not on Kohtang to be released at that time, so how can you say those lives were not wasted?

CAPTAIN MILLER: As I told you, we were held under close security. Our aircraft, when they flew over the MAYAGUEZ or over the island of Kohtang were fired on. They looked like 20-millemeter cannon shells to me, plus machine-gun fire. Our aircraft couldn't come too low. The first aircraft that did fly over the MAYAGUEZ to make sure it was the ship, a P-3 Orion, and she was hit on the stabilizers and had to limp back to Utapao air base. She was out of the Navy base in Subic Bay.

They could not keep track of this when they were flying up 8,000 or 10,000 feet and then dive-bombing and going 700 or 800 miles an hour. The pilot that saw us on the fishing boat reported he saw around 10 or 12 Caucasians and there were 40 in the crew, so they figured half the crew was on the island of Kohtang and half was being taken into Komponsom.

Q Captain, how often have you spoken about this publicly before?

CAPTAIN MILLER: I was back in Washington July 23, 24 and 25, and then I made a tour around the United States for about three weeks -- Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Minneapolis.

Q Did you say to them the same thing you are saying now?

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CAPTAIN MILLER: Essentially the same thing. There was a book written about the four days of the MAYAGUEZ by author Roy Rowan, and I publicized his book. The book gives the exact details in it of what all the crew members that were on the MAYAGUEZ thought at the time.

Q Would you give us your age, Captain?

CAPTAIN MILLER: I am 63 years old.

Q Captain, did you suggest the presence of U.S. aircraft in the area--the continuing presence of the aircraft in the area--was responsible for your release and that your release was being affected while the attack was being carried out? Is that a fair characterization?

CAPTAIN MILLER: That is a fair question.

Q Is that a fair description of your interpretation?

CAPTAIN MILLER: That is my interpretation, that our negotiations -- with the aircraft and bombing their gunboats and as they claim we injured 100 friendly Cambodians at the time -- that they wanted to sit down and negotiate as long as I promised them I would withdraw the aircraft out of the sky.

Q So, it was the military presence in the area rather than the specific attack?

CAPTAIN MILLER: Yes, sir. I did not know about the attack so I can't say whether it was the specific attack that forced Phnom Penh to release us.

Q Captain, in consideration of what you said to the committee, how do you explain that the committee came out with completely different conclusions from yours?

CAPTAIN MILLER: I don't know why. I told the committee -- I sat there for about five or six hours in front of this congressional subcommittee and talked to Congressman Fascell, Congressman Winn and Congressman Riegle. Riegle was the man who more or less claimed I was a CIA agent and, if not, was an FBI agent. I am a civilian. I have been a civilian all my life. I never belonged to any military organization in the United States.

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Q Are you going to be in the theater tonight?

CAPTAIN MILLER: Yes.

MR. NESSEN: Either in the theater or at the President's house. He will be a guest at one place or the other. We have not worked it out yet.

CAPTAIN MILLER: It seems all American captains sailing--not only American flagships--when they are threatened on the high seas, have a lot more confidence in their Governments today after the situation than I was in when President Ford sent people in to rescue us. I think the President showed great courage in the action he did take to rescue the 40 men, and I thank God that the President did that. Otherwise, I don't think I would be here talking to you today.

THE PRESS: Thank you, Captain Miller.

END (AT 1:30 P.M. PDT)