Lost Marines Never Surrendered in "Last Battle of the Vietnam War."

⭐

~ By Kenneth Quinn • Ambassador to Cambodia (ret.)

Reprinted with permission by the author from

Des Moines Register

Nov. 10th marks the 240th anniversary of the establishment of the U.S. Marine Corps by the Second Continental Congress in 1775. The fact that this occurred more than seven months before the Declaration of Independence gives Marines great pride that their organization is older than our country itself.

To celebrate this birthday, Marine Corps celebrations are held every year wherever Marines are stationed, including at all US embassies at which Marines serve as security guards.

I know about this tradition because I spent my career as a diplomat in the U.S. Foreign Service. I have another relationship with the Marine Corps which is linked to Nov. 11, Veterans Day. For it was on that day while I was serving as US ambassador in Cambodia, that I unveiled a monument I created inspired by and dedicated to those 18 brave American servicemen who died in "the last battle of the Vietnam War." Among those men were three Marines whose incredible bravery and sacrifice personifies the meaning of the Marine Corps motto Semper Fi — always faithful.

The Mayaguez Marine Corps Memorial • Dedicated Novembver 11, 1996 by Ambassador to Cambodia, Kenneth Quinn

That last battle was the rescue mission launched by President Gerald Ford to free the civilian crew of an American cargo ship — the **S.S. Mayaguez** — which had been seized in May 1975 (two weeks after the fall of Saigon). Khmer Rouge communist troops had seized the ship as it was sailing past Cambodia. At the time, I was serving on the staff of the National Security Council at the White House. The intelligence indicated the crew was being held on a small island, Koh Tang.

The Marines Assault Koh Tang Island to rescue the crew of the U.S. cargo ship S.S. Mayaguez

A force of Marines was assembled and launched via Air Force helicopters to assault the island. They were met with fierce resistance by a large, well-armed force that resulted in several of the helicopters being shot down in the sea as they approached the beach. Those Marines and Navy medics who made it to the beach were caught in a withering automatic weapons fire in a battle that lasted throughout the day.

It turned out that the Mayaguez crew was not being held on Koh Tang, but at another location. Bombing by U.S. aircraft and the assault on the island, however, convinced the Khmer Rouge to free the hostages. With the crew free, the order was given for the Marines to withdraw from Koh Tang. The helicopter pilots performed heroically in landing on the beach in darkness to carry out those Marines still alive, but many of the bodies of the dead were unfortunately not able to be evacuated.

Fast forward 21 years to April 1996, as the new US ambassador to Cambodia, I flew to Koh Tang on a military helicopter with U.S. Army personnel whose job was to search for and recover the remains of those who had perished during the battle. Former Khmer Rouge soldiers were there, not to shoot at us, but rather in this post-conflict period, to assist in locating and repatriating the remains of our fallen Marines.

The Khmer Rouge veterans, however, told us a stunning story, one no one had ever heard. They recounted that in the fog of battle as the Marines withdrew from the island under heavy fire, somehow three Marines were left behind alive on the island, apparently presumed dead by the operational command.

Confronted by the reality that no rescue mission was coming for them, hopelessly outnumbered and with no way of being able to get off this isolated island, this "lost fire team" never surrendered. The Khmer Rouge told us that those three Marines evaded and hid and resisted for weeks until one by one they were hunted down and killed.

Standing on that same beach where that battle had taken place, I was so moved by the courage of those three Marines, that I vowed to ensure that their heroism and their names would be known.

Without asking permission from Washington, when I returned to my embassy in Phnom Penh, I purchased a large block of black marble and had inscribed on it the names of all 18 American servicemen killed in that operation along with the date of their deaths, except that next to those last three names it states "Unknown."

The commandant of the Marine Corps was so moved by my actions that he sent a general and a color guard to be present at the Veterans Day ceremony on Nov. 11, 1996, at which I unveiled the Mayaguez Marine Monument.

Today it stands on the grounds of the new U.S. embassy in Phnom Penh, so that the heroism and loyalty of those three Marines — Lance Cpl. Joseph Hargrove, Pfc. Gary Hall and Pvt. Danny Marshall — will never be forgotten. Their actions gave special meaning to the words *Semper Fi.*

✶ ✶ ✶ ✶ ✶

Author **Kenneth Quinn** is former Ambassador to Cambodia, having spent more than 50 years
in foreign service; and is also President Emeritus of the World Food Prize.

While with the State Department, Quinn served on a MACV Team in the Vietnam Delta, and for his combat participation,
mostly on Hueys, he earned the U.S. Army Air Medal ~ and is still the only civilian ever to have earned this honor.