



EPHING FOREST HISTORY SUPPORTING MINE SWEEPING BOATS

(Ed Sinclair's Notes: I embarked on the task of researching the USS Epping Forest's history with Mine Division 33 in Calendar Year 2000, with the stated intent of including the unit's history in an upcoming Epping Forest (EF) Reunion Book. By the time I finished, it was decided that no Epping Forest Reunion Book would be published that year. Since I had written a short history, and collected >300 photographs, and interviewed >30 veterans, I decided that the "History of Small Boat Minesweeping in the US Navy" was something I wanted to continue researching. I had hoped to document their history for posterity, so that these shipmates would not be relegated to the "dustbin of history". Smaller USN units, particularly those involved with boats, do not meet the priority assigned to Naval Vessels in the historical community – no matter how many thousands of sailors served in these organizations over the years. In my resulting 5+ years of research, I have now interviewed >400 veterans, assembled >2,700 photos, nine movies, thousands of documents, books, magazine articles, and memorabilia associated with small boat minesweeping. I have discovered that the Mine Countermeasures Support (MCS) concept of the "minesweeping mother ship" was invented by Germany in WWI. This is a concept that the US Navy did not formalize until 1950, and did not make permanent until 1962 with the re-designation of the Epping Forest to MCS-7.

*My book is titled "**Iron Men In Wooden Boats**" by Ed Sinclair. Since two brutal recessions have interfered with my ability to finish researching and writing more of the book (I needed to find employment as a result) the book research and writing have been limited, but I am still gaining more information as people read this article. I am planning on starting with a website which gives me the ability to share thousands of items that cannot be included in a book.*

I may be contacted for information, or unique contributions of photos, memorabilia, documents, or any anecdotes you would feel worthy - in telling the history of small boat minesweeping: Ed Sinclair - 2011
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MINE SWEEPING BOAT DIVISION ONE FORMED IN KOREA

At the outbreak of the Korean War the US Navy minesweeping forces had dwindled from a worldwide force of >500 ships following WWII. Only a handful were available in the Western Pacific (WesPac) due to demobilization, budgetary cuts, and a lack of USN interest or emphasis on mine warfare. These WWII steel minesweepers (AM's) and wooden versions designated YMS types of WWII, re-named AMS's, were re-activated in the months following the June 15, 1950 North Korean invasion of South Korea, but the bare facts were that the US Navy was ill-prepared for any minesweeping preceding the Inchon and Wonsan amphibious landings in North Korea in the Fall of 1950.

All available USN sweepers previously committed in the Fall of 1950 at Wonsan, North Korea, and keeping gunfire support (GFS) lanes open around Inchon, South Korea following that invasion, left the Navy with zero available assets for opening new fronts. A new front was needed at Chinnampo, North Korea with the US Eighth Army moving northward, the port facilities at Chinnampo (the seaport for the North Korean Capital - P'yöngyang) were needed to overcome the bottlenecks at Inchon and other South Korean ports.



MSA sweepers of the Second Japanese M/S Div – Wonsan, N. Korea Oct '50

One little known fact was that elements of the Imperial Japanese Navy, never disbanded following the Japanese surrender in WWII, (renamed the Maritime Safety Agency - MSA) had been hard at work in the

previous five years, clearing mines from Japanese ports and waterways. Japan had 84 minesweepers and 4 guinea pig type ships that the US Navy called “a superb force skilled in minesweeping operations”, and for this reason Admiral Arleigh Burke asked Maritime Safety Agency Director General Takao Okubo to “assemble every one of your mine sweepers in the Tsushima Straits area (Japan) and assist in the Wonsan, North Korea mine clearance, and help the check sweep of the Inchon, South Korea main approach channel and harbor”.

Cdr Stephen Archer, in theatre TDY (temporary duty) from MinLant (Mine Force Atlantic) was instructed by Admiral Smith to “Commence Sweeping Chinnampo, North Korea at the earliest practicable date”. He had no ships, no staff, and no spare trousers except those he arrived in. He asked about the availability of forces, and the Admiral replied “None at the moment, but you and LtCdr De Forest can go to Sasebo, Japan and take anything you can find”. They began by watching channel traffic in Sasebo Harbor from the bridge of the USS Dixie. The first two self-propelled units to pass were two 40’ Motor Launches left behind by the USS Boxer – their first recruits. Two DMS’s (Destroyer Mine Sweepers) arrived, the USS Thompson and USS Carmick, and three AMS’s arrived from Pearl Harbor, the USS Pelican, USS Swallow, and USS Gull. A Japanese LST Q-0007 (Landing Ship, Tank) was also drafted. They nabbed the USS Forrest Royal to serve as their flagship, and then four ROK (Republic of Korea) YMS’s arrived: YMS-502, YMS-503, YMS-506, and YMS-513. The last ship to join was the USS Catamount LSD-17 (Landing Ship, Dock) with 12 LCVP’s aboard. (Landing Craft, Vehicle-Personnel - 36’)

Fifteen experienced minesweeping sailors from USS Carmick and USS Thompson, seventeen enlisted ranks from USS Catamount, and eight Chief’s from Sasebo Naval Base were “shanghaied” to man these 36’ – 40’ shallow water sweepers. Excellent intelligence, following hard days of sweeping against 12 knot currents, produced a North Korean harbor pilot who helped the Russians lay the mines at Chinnampo. He led the first ships into Chinnampo aboard the USN-rented North Korean tug. A USN navigator plotted their route aboard the tug, for the UN fleet to follow on the invasion.

The two 40’ Motor Launches, and several LCVP’s carried by the USS Catamount, deploying their “miniature minesweeping gear” and started the Korean deployment of small boat minesweepers. The equipment and tactics had been developed earlier in WWII with British help, and refined in 1944 through evaluation of captured German minesweeping gear. The gear was deployed and recovered by hand, a difficult task, until reels and other assemblies were fabricated. Unfortunately, the Navy had forgotten all “lessons learned” after the first Boat Minesweeping Unit (BMS) was formed with 107 men, seven officers, and 24 LCVP’s in Bizerte, Tunisia preparing for the Invasion Of Southern France – Operation Dragoon in August 1944.

These shallow water sweepers in Korea were the beginning of COMINRON 3’s “Boat Division” in 1950, later in early 1951 commissioned as **Mine Sweeping Boat Division ONE**. The USS Epping Forest is shown by MSB ONE Muster Rolls to have transported the division DEC 51 to JAN 52, FEB 53 to MAR 53, and again MAY 53 to JUN 53. The MSB ONE rolls sometimes transferred personnel to the USS Kermit Roosevelt (Sasebo Depot Ship) to await the arrival of the LSD’s, so their final embarkations of personnel need to be checked using the LSD’s Muster Rolls.



Streaming moored minesweeping gear from an LCVP – Chinnampo, North Korea Oct 1950

During the war Commander Mine Squadron 3 (COMINRON 3) /MSB ONE were embarked on seventeen amphibious ships, mostly LSD's, following the initial 1951 experiment of converting LST-799 to carry the MSB's. The LCVP's would enter and depart the LST through the open bow doors and ramp, where a cable was attached, and the LCVP's were "winched" up to the LST tank deck on tracks. They were then shackled down for transport. In less than perfect seas this was dangerous, and became impossible as seas rose.

The LSD's primary method of bringing MSB's aboard were hoisting them using her cranes, and placing the flat bottomed LCVP's directly onto the well deck. The Motor Launch style 40' MSB's would set on their keels in the well deck, using large timbers to keep them level with the well deck. The LCVP's modified as magnetic boats carried large submarine batteries and DC-AC converters to create the electrical pulses for their magnetic sweep tails, and were too heavy to lift by crane, or too weak to support the weight of their batteries while on the crane. (LCVP's were made primarily of plywood construction, and all original metal armor for landing on hostile beaches had been removed – as not to trigger magnetic mines) These magnetic-sweep LCVP's had to be recovered through the stern gate of the LSD. The LSD would ballast partially, only letting enough water into the well deck to float four magnetic boats (LCVP's) in and out via the lowered stern gate.

Ballasting an LSD, a time consuming operation, exposed these LSD's in Wonsan Harbor to North Korean artillery fire. The ballasting down recovery of a well deck full of boats via the stern gate requires the entire well deck to be flooded 300' forward, and all MSB's had to be manned until the water is pumped out of the entire well deck, therefore this was not practical for recovery.

Mine sweeping Boat Division ONE and the rest of COMINRON 3 maintained the “siege” of Wonsan Harbor, North Korea for the next 900 days. Daily sweeping, when the weather permitted, was done to clear the hundreds of Russian MKB mines laid before the US arrival at Wonsan. In the early days of the war, when the North Koreans could navigate their own harbors, they planted these 1200 lb Russian behemoth mines at will, sinking three US Minesweepers, a Japanese minesweeper, and several South Korean ships.



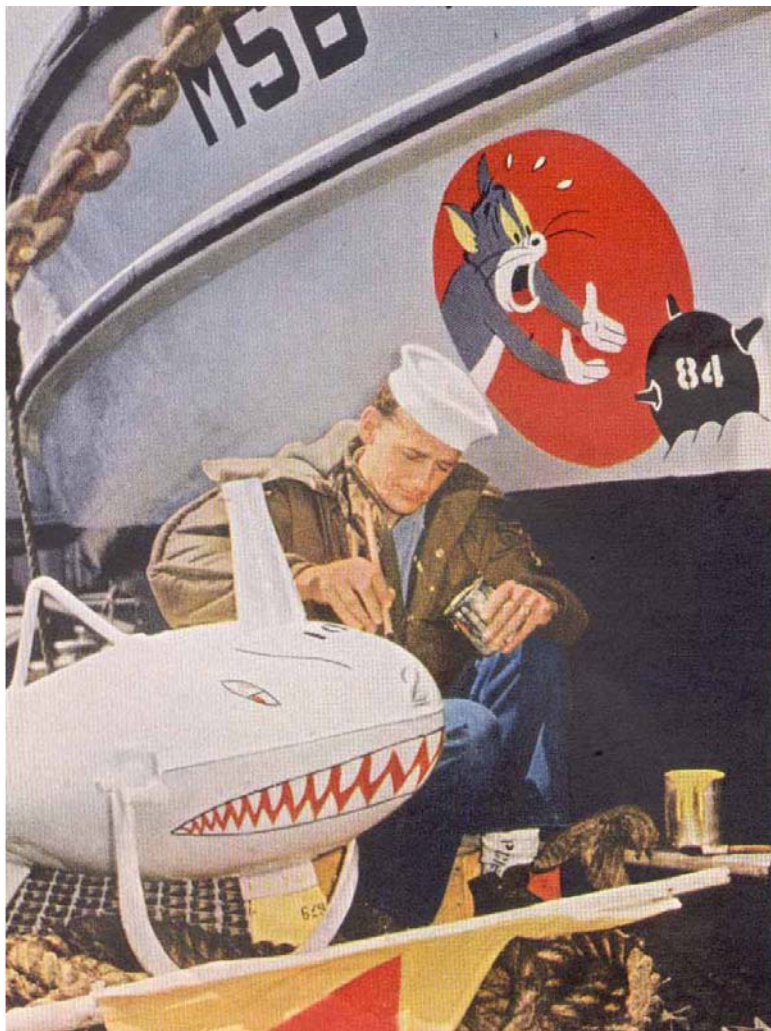
MSB 5 “Destruction Boat” with captured 1,200 lb Russian MKB Mine in April 1952

As the UN siege tightened around Wonsan, North Korea and USN radars became more sophisticated, the North Koreans had to use smaller and smaller sampans to lay smaller mines in shallower waters. The UN siege got so effective at capturing or sinking enemy vessels at night, the North Koreans had to resort to suspending smaller Russian MYaM type mines under logs and launching them from rivers emptying into Wonsan Harbor. These mines were suspended with pelican hooks below logs using water soluble washers that dissolved in hours, and initiated the mine planting process automatically when the pelican hook opened. With 44lbs of cast TNT inside the MYaM, these 3-horned boat mines were planted to sink Mine Sweeping Boats (MSB's) working close to shore, but the larger AMS's frequently caught them in their sweep gear, and mine disposal divers had to physically remove these mines from their sweep gear.

North Korean shore batteries got so intense during the daytime, that night sweeping had to be initiated in 1952. While in echelon formation one dark night close to shore, following what he thought to be the lighted flagstaff of the gear in front of his boat, Boat Captain Lewis Yore BM2 on MSB 19 saw a North Korean sentry walking along the shore with his weapon. Yore had inadvertently had his eye fixed on a flashlight carried by the sentry, instead of the lighted flagstaff! MSB ONE sailors improvised flagstaff lights on their floats for station keeping in echelon formation that were standard USN lifejacket lights powered by "D" cells, taped to the flagstaff. The lights, and flags in the daytime, denoting the end of the leading boat's sweep gear. They further waterproofed these lifejacket lights using condoms, and this made them too easy to miss at night!

In late 1952 new 50' motor launches were received in Sasebo to add to the two 40' motor launches and the dozen LCVP's of the division. These motor launches were standard Navy types, modified by the Ship Repair Depot in Sasebo. These boats eventually numbered about twenty in Sasebo, and carried bow numbers prefixed with "MS".

MSB ONE/COMINRON 3 Destruction Boats destroyed hundreds of mines cut by MSB's and other COMINRON 3 ships (AMS & AM's), and regularly captured and disarmed new Russian mine types throughout the war. These were sent back to Indian Head Maryland EOD HQ for evaluation and training purposes. Generations of EOD personnel encountering these mines in Vietnam and the Persian Gulf, practiced on the very mines captured by MinRon 3 Mine Disposal personnel at Wonsan. This EOD Facility has since moved to Eglin AFB, Florida.



← A Mine-sweeping "Pig" Gets Fresh Make-up

Some sweepers are large seagoing vessels. Others are so small they take haven aboard an LSD (landing ship dock).

Here a small mine-sweeping boat is chained on the grated deck of the *Gunston Hall*. When this mother ship prepares to recover her brood of landing craft, she sinks her stern, lets the boats float in under their own power, and then pumps out flooded tanks, leaving her catch high and dry. The mine sweeper, however, is lifted on deck by crane.

This boatswain's mate paints a paravane, commonly called a pig, which is towed behind a mine sweeper to hook and cut the cables of mines. Once afloat, mines are destroyed by gunfire. The red-and-yellow flag flies above the paravane as it moves under water.

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568

MSB ONE BM paints float for National Geographic in 1953

Adm Radford, Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), accompanied by National Geographic reporters visited the Pacific in 1953, and they posed the photo above of the MSB ONE Boatswain Mate (BM) painting his float with shark's teeth, but missed the most significant point in the picture – MSB 16, a modified 40' Motor Launch had swept 84 Russian mines in Korea! I believe MSB-16 and MSB-15 are the same two Motor Launches CDR Archer nabbed in Sasebo in 1950 – left behind by the USS Boxer. These two boats were present for the entire time MSB ONE was commissioned, for the entire Korean War. I have often thought it was a shame MSB-16 wasn't saved as some sort of memorial.

MSB ONE ended the war with only one combat casualty from a North Korean artillery shell that exploded on the catwalk above the well deck of the USS Cabildo LSD-16, severely injuring Alan Selig EM who was evacuated to Pusan by seaplane with a shrapnel wound in his hip on 26 APR 1952. MSB ONE boats were shot at regularly by artillery rolled from caves, fired, and then returned to caves before the Gun Fire Support (GFS) ships could zero in on them and eliminate them.

The MSB ONE sailors had names for these North Koreans that were not very complimentary. When they started firing, the MSB's often had to cut their minesweeping gear at the stern of their boat, drop smoke pots for creating smoke screens to hide behind, and take evasive action until the GFS destroyers, cruisers, or

battleships sent these artillerymen back into their caves. Songs that I have acquired from the sailors often mention “Kalma Gak Charlie”, or “Hodo Pando Pete” named for their locations on the Kalma Pando (S) or Hodo Pando (N) peninsulas jutting into Wonsan Harbor. Having cut their minesweeping gear earlier, retrieving 1500 feet sweep wire and gear from the float end, was difficult work particularly when you had to contend with right-hand and left-hand lay sweep wire, and retrieve it entirely by hand.



Wonsan Harbor showing UN Occupied Islands and NK Artillery Peninsulas

One month earlier than the Selig casualty in April 1952, on 25 MAR 1952, MSB 3 sunk while mine sweeping at Mokp’O, South Korea. Their minesweeping gear had fouled on the bottom in a rapid cross current while crossing the face of the Mokp’O River. Other MSB’s nearby observed MSB 3 “going down by her starboard quarter”, and soon her stern was under. Their next observation was “her bow was high in the water”. MSB 19 arrived and recovered one survivor, and then reported two sailors missing. Boat Captain Lewis Yore BM2 recovered the two missing dead men. First was William C. “Duffy” Hushion BM3 USN, and later Creighton F. Donaldson SN USN. Both had drowned, or died of hypothermia in the cold water.

MINE DIVISION 111 REPLACES MSB ONE AT THE END OF THE KOREAN WAR

Mine Sweeping Boat Division ONE was re-designated Mine Division 111 on 1 SEP 1953 following the Korean Armistice, and stayed in Sasebo, Japan although they no longer reported to COMINRON THREE in Sasebo, but to COMINRON ELEVEN in Long Beach, CA. Their LCVP MSB’s were retired in favor of continued modification of the more spacious 50’ motor launches. In the photo below approximately 15 ML’s

are shown. Ten have masts, and radar reflector screens to track them from the mother ship, and at least one in the division had a radar antenna and radar set installed in a cabin forward. These modifications of standard 50' Motor Launches were made at the Ship Repair Depot Sasebo by the Japanese workers at SRD.



Mine Division 111 MLMS's at Sasebo Seawall circa 1956. Note differing configurations..

While no Sasebo Mine Division ever owned or used 57' MSB's as shown below, the Navy's eventual purchase of these 50 boats impacted MSB ONE directly, since BuShips took the MSB designation, and directed that the "real" MSB's be re-designated as Mine Sweeping Motor Launch (MLMS) with MS as their bow prefixes.

My research has also been made difficult by the Navy's re-use of MSB designations. The first four boats designated as MSB's (1-4 Series) were built at Mare Island Naval Shipyard (NSY) and Norfolk NSY for the US Army in 1946. This is when the Army had the responsibility for the planting and maintenance of controlled minefields protecting Americas rivers and harbors. Army responsibilities, and these early boats were turned over to the USN during the post-war military reorganizations of the late 1940's, and the Navy designated these boats Mine Sweeping Boats, MSB 1-4.

By some arrangement, these first four Army boats were deployed to COMINRON 7/3 (Commander Mine Squadron 7 was renamed Commander Mine Squadron 3 in mid-late 1940's) in Sasebo, Japan in 1948, and

participated in the 1948 Japan sweep with several AMS's. The USS Incredible AM-249 was acting as MINRON 7/3's flagship. They were returned to CONUS in 1948, and were photographed operating at the Mine Warfare Lab in Panama City in 1949 below. We believe the "31" on her hull was a locally assigned (Panama City, FL) hull number, not to be confused with MSB 31 delivered later in the Fifties. (An MSB 5-series craft)



MSB 1-4 Series boat serving at the Mine Warfare Lab in Panama City, FL.

It was surprising that these Army MSB's were never sent to Korea, because the specifications laid down by MSB ONE Commanders during Korea (13OCT51) for a new series minesweeping boat, was used by BuShips to develop the MSB 5 series design. These boats had obvious crew comforts to offer versus the open LCVP landing craft and ML motor launch type MSB's used in Korea. The Navy had four of them all during the Korean War! Since the Navy had already known about their inability to support these type MSB's at sea during minesweeping operations (discovered in 1948) – why BUSHIPS ever ordered another 50 boats of nearly the same design in 1952 is one of the major sins of naval bureaucracy! These boats ended up being put out of commission after their failure to solve overseas deployment and support problems in the late Fifties, and placed in caretaker status until another mission was concocted for them a decade later in Vietnam.

In 1952 the Navy had begun receiving 57' MSB-5 Series craft in Annapolis, Charleston, and Long Beach intended initially for the task of inshore assault minesweeping. These craft however, were again determined

to be too heavy to lift with LSD cranes, and their round-bottom hulls prevented them from coming aboard LSD's via the stern gate, as they had to "sail" into submerged boat skids chained to the LSD well deck astern. Not only was this difficult (for fear of punching holes in their wooden hulls) it was impossible to accommodate more than two abreast in the well deck of an LSD after they settled into their skids. These boats were then reclassified as Harbor and Channel Minesweepers and placed in upkeep mode. In 1956 or 1957, a new boat design was authorized to replace them, designated as the 36' Mine Sweeping Launch, MSL.

MINE DIVISION 33 REPLACES MINE DIVISION 111 SASEBO

By the end of 1958 ten 36' Mine Sweeping Launches (MSL's) were delivered to Mine Division 111 in Sasebo, Japan, MSL's 11-20, at which time the MLMS's were placed in inactive status. MSL's 21-30 were still in Long Beach undergoing evaluation and acceptance. MSL's 21-30 were shipped to Sasebo early in 1959. The first WesPac Mine Exercise using MSL's was held in June-July 1959 with the Taiwan Navy. MSL's were embarked on AKA's, carried topside in their davits.

Command Histories did not record any difficulties with MSL deployment on AKA's as minesweeping motherships, nor did they indicate any favoritism towards the LSD's they had been using for over a decade. MSL's, due to their curved bottoms and lack of a skeg protecting their exposed screws, could not sail into a ballasted LSD. Special wheeled skids were fabricated so that the LSD cranes could recover MSL's alongside two at a time, and place them into these skids in the well deck below. Forklifts (or sailor power) were used to position the 10 ton MSL's three abreast in the well deck for transport. Large chains with turnbuckles lashed the skids fore and aft to the cloverleaf tie down deck sockets in the well deck.

In November 1960 Mine Division 111 was transferred to MinRon Three and the Sasebo Division redesignated as Mine Division 33 (MinDiv 33), and ten of the twenty MSL's (21-30) were returned to Mine Squadron 11 in Long Beach, CA. The assignment to COMINRON 3 returned a Mine Division 33 to Sasebo, Japan, alongside Mine Division 31 and Mine Division 32, made up of Mine Sweeper Coastal's (MSC's) during this period.

(Another Mine Division 33 existed for a short period of time in Sasebo, Japan during the Korean War, but consisted of WWII steel-hulled AM-type minesweepers. After the loss of the steel-hulled USS Pirate (AM-275) and USS Pledge (AM-277), to Russian magnetic mines at Wonsan, these steel minesweepers were deemed obsolete. Shortly thereafter the first Mine Division 33 was decommissioned)

Mine Flotilla (MinFlot) ONE was formed and COMINRON THREE reported to this Commander, who wore both MinFlot1/MinRon 3 "hats" for it's duration - until the early seventies. Mine Division 33 consisted of ten MSL's, a Mike Boat (LCM), an LCPR, and one LCVP. All three Mine Divisions reported to MinFlot 1/MinRon 3, as did a mine disposal/EOD function, and the Mobile Inshore Undersea Warfare Surveillance Unit 12 (MIUWS 12), until a 1965 trip to DaNang, SVN when we dropped them off permanently for Vietnam duty. All embarked units were transported aboard the USS Epping Forest MCS-7, and the MSC's often sailed independently, but convoyed with EF frequently to many WesPac destinations as a mine flotilla.

At some point in time, the date is currently unknown to your author, MinDiv 33 moved into Barracks "G" at the Fleet Activities Main Base, and began eating three meals a day at the base chow hall. This shore duty like existence continued until July 1966, interrupted only by 4-6 deployments each year aboard the Epping

Forest, to attend Asian mine exercises. In the Spring of 1964 however, MinDiv 33 rode the USS Catamount LSD-17 to a "Minex" in Okinawa, because if I recall correctly, the Epping Forest was scheduled for drydock work in Yokosuka, Japan.

EOD CPO Killed During 1964 Okinawa Minex

It was during this Spring 1964 Minex, that MSL 13's Boeing gas turbine engine malfunctioned, and killed an EOD Chief, Manny "Goose" Gallegos. He was a passenger, standing on the gunwhale, holding onto the mast guy wire to keep his balance. The turbine speed increased until the flywheel reached its destruction point, and the departing turbine blades "sawed" the man open from hip to armpit, along with sawing the MSL hull open, the engine covers, and penetrating the stainless steel pig stored on the port side. I was unable to contact Jose Veliz Jr., SN but I remember his story of holding the Chief's organs in his body as their boat was towed by the LCM to the pier at Buckner Bay for medical evacuation by helicopter.

Minex destinations were primarily organized with Korean, Taiwanese, and Thai navies in their local waters, with the British and Australian Royal Navies participating regularly. These were primarily SEATO members (SEATO = South East Asia Treaty Organization) which was an alliance formed in 1954 to counter the growing Communist threat in Asia. SEATO was dissolved in 1977, but the collective defense treaty remains in effect today.

Other mine exercises were held with the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF) with visits to Kobe, Beppu, Yokohama, and Hiroshima in Japan. Many port visits were made to Subic Bay, PI; Manila, PI; Bangkok, Thailand; Hong Kong, BCC; Keelung, Taiwan; Kaoshung, Taiwan; and Chinhae, Korea over the years. Other one time trips to smaller cities were made to deliver Military Assistance Program (MAP) equipment, disaster relief, or various "goodwill" tours. Obsolete MLMS minesweeping boats used by MinDiv 111, were delivered on different trips to both the Taiwanese and South Vietnamese navies, and the original four 57' MSB's (MSB1-4) were delivered to the South Korean Navy.

The 1964 Cruise to Vietnam – The Cold War Heats Up Following Tonkin Gulf Incident

This idyllic lifestyle (for a sailor) came to an abrupt end in July 1964 during and following our 13 day visit to Cam Ranh Bay and Nha Trang, South Vietnam. Our objective was to check sweep various SVN harbors for WWII mines (the Japanese occupied Vietnam in WWII and Cam Ranh Bay was once heavily mined), and update the hydrographic charts for port facilities development. We were accompanied by First Force Recon Marines, that were provided to our task force to keep our small wooden boats safe from shore based ambush as we did our minesweeping in the bays. Also, to protect us in the more exposed chore of standing on the bows of our boats, throwing lead lines from dawn to dusk.

Our Mine Sweeper Coastal's (MSC's) were anchored in the bays, tracking us on radar and recording our lead line soundings, transmitted to them via radio, as we crisscrossed the inner and outer harbors. Two Marine helicopters aboard the Epping Forest, from USMC HMM-364, inserted these Marine Recon forces ashore daily, and picked them up at night. In addition, a Navy UDT Team swam the three-fathom curve around the perimeter of the bay, charting obstacles on the sea bottom. They recorded obstacles with grease pencils on plexiglas panels strapped to their forearms. Cam Ranh Bay at that time was very beautiful, and clean. Two years later (1966) we returned to find the outer harbor filled with USN and civilian oilers unloading at Petroleum, Oil, and Lubricant (POL) piers, and the inner harbor was filled with merchant and naval vessels of all types. The water was brown, with flotsam everywhere. The hill in the picture below had been bulldozed

and a giant Marine Corps air base had been built to the left of this photo.



Cam Ranh Bay July 1964 – 3 MSL's near left shore vectored by MSC's

Upon our return to Subic Bay in July 1964, we moored in between the USS Turner Joy, USS Gridley, and USS Maddox. I did not realize, until my color slides were returned some weeks later, that these ships were destined for fame following the Tonkin Gulf Incident, occurring following their Subic departure. They departed a couple of days after our arrival in Subic.

Typhoon IDA Evasion -- August 2- 9, 1964 South China Sea

Unfortunately, our “rest & relaxation” after the arduous Vietnam trip was cut short in Subic Bay. Typhoon IDA was bearing down on the Phillipine Islands, and we were ordered to get underway immediately from Subic Bay and ride this storm out - at sea. Our boredom was soon forgotten in mountainous seas, with the green water cascading over the 03 level as we headed into the wind, and green water breaking over the stern gate with a following sea. In researching this typhoon, I now know Typhoon Ida (1964) was a Super Typhoon, packing 165 mph winds. While underway during this typhoon evasion, we received a Flash message from the Chief of Naval Operations regarding the Tonkin Gulf Incident, and watched intently in the days following for news regarding US retaliations on the North Vietnamese.

Over the next several years, mine exercises and R&R trips either began or ended with trips to Vietnam. OPNAVNOTE 1650 Unit Awards and Campaign Medals lists eighteen Vietnam trips for the USS Epping Forest, beginning with the Nov 1961 trip as LSD-4, through her last trip in August 1968 as MCS-7, Vietnam area service had earned the USS Epping Forest six Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal awards, and eleven

Vietnam Service Medal awards.

The Epping Forest and Typhoon Dinah -- October 26- 30, 1967 West Pacific Ocean

On Thursday 26 October 1967 the USS Epping Forest departed Sasebo for Yokosuka, Japan. The Plan of The Day (POD) mentioned typhoon Dinah stuck over Okinawa, but since EF was headed north there was not much to worry about, or so they thought. Friday came, and the weather worsened, soon the winds were climbing to 80-90mph with 30-40ft waves. At 1257 Friday the largest wave encountered so far hit the ship. The wing wall phone talker on watch reported two Landing Craft Mechanized (LCM's, one belonging to the ship and one to Mine Division 33) at the stern were floating, breaking loose from their chains and striking MSL's. Ten MD-33 MSL's were aboard, three abreast in the well deck, forward of the two LCM's at the stern gate. Working parties entered the well deck to secure the boats and equipment in the well deck.



1965 Photo of MinDiv 33 MSL's in EF Well Deck on their wheeled skids

By 1745 the well deck was abandoned due to "water surfing the full length of the well deck". General Quarters (GQ) was sounded and the crew donned their life jackets. The Deck Log reports: **"Complete Destruction of All MSL's" and "Ship is considered to be in Grave Danger"** At 1750 a flare from an exercise mine ignited in the Well deck. This was critical, due to the fact that the MSL fuel tanks had burst, spilling >13,000 gallons of diesel fuel into the well deck, sloshing from end to end floating on top of the sea water. Ron Boise BM3, EF Boat Division reported that during their 50 hours at GQ, flooding in the wing walls astern came perilously close to inundating the electric "telemotors" in after steering. Without steering the Epping Forest would certainly been in much greater peril of foundering and sinking. The ship turned around and headed for a "cove", later reported to be the Bungo Suido channel in Japan. Divers from the USS Grasp inspected the underside of the Epping Forest's hull, and helped EF pump the well deck dry. The Epping Forest then returned to Sasebo under her own power arriving at 0900 on Monday 30 October 1967. Fifty

Million Dollars was the (rumoured) repair bill for the Epping Maru.



EF Well Deck 30OCT1967 – Note 3x8 foot section of MSL hull, the largest surviving boat piece.

The EF Boat Division had lost all of its minesweeping boats and equipment, along with the LCM that streamed its Magnetic Tails and Acoustic Hammer boxes. An urgent call went out to MinRon 11 Long Beach for their MSL's as replacements, and the specially modified LCM that were returned to Long Beach in 1959. On 10 November 1967, ten MSL's and one LCM were loaded aboard the USS VALLEY FORGE (LPH-8) for shipment to the USS EPPING FOREST via Subic Bay, Phillipine Islands.

This Is Not A Drill!

In 1967, the Epping Forest Boat Division had some "chain drag" sweep gear fabricated in Subic Bay, PI and went to Vietnam to sweep for VC command-detonated mines. June 5, 1967 they swept Chu Lai, and five more days around the perimeter of Da Nang Harbor.

In 1968 the USS Epping Forest sailed to the Cua Viet River north of Da Nang, where Ed Marolda (USN Historian) states in his book: Operation End Sweep (pp9) that "In mid-1968, the MSL's used a modernized version of the World War II M MK1 iron rail sweep in the Cua Viet River when Russian HAT II acoustic-magnetic mines were discovered. Information from a participant I interviewed said "a Tango Boat was blown up by an underwater mine, killing Six sailors, and wounding one, that were clearing the river for a convoy from the Cua Viet Port Facility, upriver to the Marine Base at Dong Ha". The MSL's detonated no mines after sweeping the Cua Viet channel extensively. I have been unable to confirm any details of this operation from

official sources. It was assumed the NVA had hauled the cylindrical Russian Bottom Influence Mines in pieces from North Vietnam, reassembled them and planted into the Cua Viet after crossing the DMZ.

On May 5, 1968 Six more mines were captured in a lull during the Battle of Dai Do Village north of the Cua Viet River. The VC had done the same with a 1200 lb Russian MKB Moored Mine in the Long Tau Shipping Channel (Saigon River Complex) earlier in the war. This MKB was spotted floating by river patrol personnel, and was captured and rendered safe by Navy EOD personnel. It was the only Russian MKB encountered in the Vietnam War, a 1,200 lb monster of a mine that claimed several US Navy ships during the Korean War.



MSL sweeping on the Cua Viet River, SVN near the DMZ in 1968 (Courtesy of Ron Boise BM3)

The Epping Forest Decommissioning – Sasebo, Japan 31 October 1968

The USS Epping Forest's last cruise to Vietnam ended on August 20, 1968. Following this period in Sasebo, it was announced that the Epping Forest was to be decommissioned on 31 October 1968.

Following the decommissioning, the MSL's were put up on the seawall and the Epping Forest Boat Division was kept busy with out of water upkeep of the MSL's through the winter of 1968. This involved scraping and cleaning their hulls, and repainting them with the copper-based paint to prevent barnacle and particularly toredo worm growth. (A salt water worm, destructive to wooden hulls)

The USS Catskill MCS-1 arrived in Sasebo, Japan early in 1969 after an extensive three year, two month overhaul in New Orleans, LA; her recommissioning 6 October 1967, and a shakedown cruise to Long Beach, CA. There she offloaded crew members not slated for overseas duty, and proceeded to Sasebo as MineFlot 1 Flagship and Mine Countermeasures Support vessel for COMinRon 3 vessels homeported in Sasebo, Japan.

It was difficult to understand why the Catskill and her sister ship Ozark MCS-2 received their designations as MCS-1 and MCS-2., with a number preceding that of the Epping Forest MCS-7. Research determined that in 1955 the Navy reclassified these two ships as Mine Countermeasures Support Ships MCS, and in the next budget cycle failed to come up with the money to overhaul them as MCS's, so on 18 October 1956 Catskill was decommissioned and struck from the Naval Register, and they both went to mothballed storage. The USS Epping Forest LSD-4 was transferred to MineFlot 1 in 1960 from the Amphibious Command, and re-designated as MCS in November 1962. This is the reason Catskill and Ozark had MCS designations ahead of the USS Epping Forest.

The USS Epping Forest was sold to the Japanese at Sasebo, for scrapping in 1969.

Boat Division From the USS Epping Forest Continues In Sasebo aboard the USS Catskill MCS-1

The USS Catskill was capable of carrying 18 MSL's, two minesweeping equipment-carrying LCM's, and two minesweeping helicopters. Although two years older than the EF, her 3+ year overhaul added crew air conditioning, flag quarters, and more sophisticated communications, radar, and tracking capabilities for minesweeping exercises. Looking at the ships photos, she looked beautiful with her 18 MSL's aboard – but what immediately came to my mind is how could this ship not be top-heavy with 200 tons of boats carried above the main deck! Several crewmembers I interviewed did not recall her being top-heavy, but after my experience on the USS Epping Forest in 38+ degree rolls, I wouldn't want to be on a ship with that much weight topside.



USS Catskill MCS-1 with MSL's and one HC-7 R-3D Helicopter aboard

In Long Beach, sailors nicknamed the Catskill "The Mail Ship". She evidently had so many steadying lines for the MSL's housed in their davits, which were rolled up and stored in white canvas bags while underway, sailors thought she looked like she was carrying the US Mail.

Another officer I queried about that nickname "The Mail Ship" had never heard it, but told me about their "go to hell flag" called "The Cat's Ass", depicting the south end of a northbound cat! They flew it at special times underway as a joke – obviously not during pass and review inspections.

By 1970 and the realities brought about by excessive spending on the Vietnam War, Navy budget cutters began slashing budgets, and by 1970 Catskill was sent to Long Beach, CA and decommissioned on December 2, 1970. She was sold in December 1973 to the Taiwanese for scrap. The MSL's were sold from the boat lot – mole pier in Long Beach, CA in April 1975.

This ends the 1950 – 1970 era of the "minesweeping mother ship" concept in the US Navy.

*(Authors Note) My book is titled "**Iron Men In Wooden Boats**" by Ed Sinclair. Since two brutal recessions have interfered with my ability to finish researching and writing more of the book (I needed to find employment as a result) the book research and writing have been limited, but I am still gaining more information as people read this article. I am planning on starting with a website which gives me the ability to share thousands of items that cannot be included in a book.*

I may be contacted for information, or unique contributions of photos, memorabilia, documents, or any anecdotes you would feel worthy - in telling the history of small boat minesweeping:

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