

SPRING 2005 ISSUE — FEATURED STORY
The Long Tao Sweepers - MSB's in Vietnam 1965– 1970
By Edward B Sinclair

The 57' MSB's were the backbone of US Navy Vietnam minesweeping forces and maintained Saigon's vital link with the South China Sea at Vung Tao. Although most sailors referred to this route as the Saigon River, technically a series of rivers, this route was officially named the Long Tao shipping channel.

Evolution Of The 57' MSB



MSB 1 Series - Panama City, FL 1949

The history of the development of the 57' MSB is a long and tortuous one, and for their first 13 years were a boat without a mission. Official Navy documents state that the design requirements for this boat were forged during the Korean War, during our 800+ day siege of Wonsan and other North Korean ports. Your author believes there is not a lot of truth to this claim, since the US Navy built the first prototypes in 1946.

Four 57' boats were built by US Navy shipyards in 1946 for the US Army Mine Planter Service, responsible for the planting of defensive controlled minefields in US harbors. Two were built at Norfolk NSY, and two at Mare Island NSY. Official records indicate these were turned over to the US Navy in 1949 with the massive military reorganizations occurring during that period. The US Navy later referred to these boats as the MSB 1-4 series, but perhaps not until later in the 1950's.

I have firsthand interviews stating that the US Navy used these four Army boats as early as 1947-48, in the minesweeping of Japan, carried out by **Mine Squadron Seven**, later redesignated **Mine Squadron Three** prior to Korea. Capt Jack Westervelt COMINRON7/COMINRON3 commanded the squadron in the little known "**second post war Japan sweep**". This sweep was made necessary by the fact that Lloyds of London and other international

shipping insurers, refused to insure inbound and outbound traffic to and from Japan, until a technologically competent organization certified that Japanese harbors and ports were free of American-laid magnetic mines, and their own Japanese-laid moored defensive minefields. Nothing short Japan's economic future depended on this certification. The Japanese had been clearing mines from their own waters continuously since the end of WWII, but were judged to lack the technology to ensure the US magnetic mines, laid during "Operation Starvation" had all been swept. The US Navy completed this sweep over two seasons in 1947-48. The **USS Scoter AM-381** was the flagship for the task force that included nine YMS's, and these four 57' US Army mine sweeping boats.

Capt Westervelt commanded these boats a second time, when they appeared at his next command: **The Naval Mine Countermeasures Station Panama City, FL** in 1949. Thanks to NMA Member George Hopple for the picture of his MSB at Panama City in 1949. George said they called these MSB's, but we cannot explain the hull designation "31" on this boat.

My second reason for doubting the claims that the MSB came as the result of our Korean War experience, was that the 57' MSB prototypes were never used in Korea. Thirdly, The fleet units that would have used them in Korea were specifying LCVP or Motor Launch conversions that resulted in the development of highly modified 50' Motor Launches delivered to **Mine Sweeping Boat Division One** 6-8 months before the end of the Korean War. Eventually, 20 or more of these were built and used in Sasebo, Japan by **MSB-1** and it's successor, **Mine Division 111** Sasebo.

Meanwhile, during the Korean War a specification was written based on the MSB Series 1-4, for the MSB-5 Series 57' Mine Sweeping Boat. It was the first purpose-built shallow water minesweeping boat in the Navy inventory. The first (MSB-5) was delivered to Annapolis in 1952. The decision was made that same year to build 50 more 57' MSB's.



MSB-5 Series Annapolis, MD 1952

Navy wisdom then forced **Mine Sweeping Boat Division ONE** to redesignate their war tested veteran MSB's, some having bagged as many as 84 Russian mines, as MS's. The LCVP's and 40' Motor Launches were made obsolete following the war, and the 50' Motor Launches were refined and designated as Mo-



50' Motor Launch MS - MLMS - Sasebo 1955

tor Launch Mine Sweepers - MLMS (MS-10 above)
These MLMS's were given to Vietnam, Taiwan, and Korea in the early sixties.

Following the 57' MSB's deliveries to Long Beach MinRon 11, and Charleston MinRon 10, evaluations determined that the 57' MSB's were too heavy to be hoisted aboard an LSD or AKA, and they had too much draft for inshore shallow water work. They were then redesignated as "Harbor and Channel Minesweepers".

In Mine Squadron Eleven, these boats were split between Mine Division One Hundred Twelve and Mine Division One Hundred Thirteen

The MSB's languished in Long Beach, and by the early sixties they were placed in upkeep status with eight crews caring for several boats each. COMIN-PAC gave permission to activate 6 MSB's, and to mothball 18 of the boats in December 1964.

But, later, in mid-1965, with the US Navy's increasing tempo of operations in Vietnam "a requirement for MSB's as Harbor and Patrol Craft was initiated"

Deployment To South Vietnam

In August 1965 MSB-51 and MSB-52 departed aboard the SS Fan Wood for Da Nang, SVN. They began patrol operations on 15 September 1965.

Your author had been a frequent visitor to Cam Ranh, Nha Trang, Da Nang since July 1964, with Mine Division 33 aboard the USS Epping Forest MCS-7. We employed our MSL's in check sweeping these areas for WWII mines. In addition, in 1965 we deployed ashore in Da Nang, our Sasebo-based sister unit, the Mobile Inshore Undersea Warfare Surveillance - MIUWS, to guard the harbor entrance to Da Nang on a permanent basis.

As I recall, we had not encountered any moored contact mines, or any other type of mine for that matter, that could not be directly identified as leftovers from WWII minefields. However, we were made aware of the sinking of the USS Card (ex-CVE) alongside a Saigon dock in May 1964. She was delivering Navy AD Skyraiders to the VNAF. It was announced she had been mined by a Viet Cong swimmer attaching a limpet mine to her hull. After first writing about this in the Spring 2004 TSD, I was contacted by a Navy officer, Lt Max Harksen, and he said he had the story firsthand from an EOD diver investigating, that this VC sapper had actually reached the ship to attach the mine, via the Saigon sewer system!

Regardless of how this happened, the Navy was put on the alert, and had implemented 24 hour anti-swimmer patrols whenever we were anchored or tied up ashore in Vietnam. Sailors armed with M-1's and a supply of concussion grenades walked the decks of USN vessels large and small, peering into the water for the telltale air bubbles from swimmers. Larger vessels would also launch an LCVP or LCM to circle the ship on anti-swimmer patrol. I am assuming the first MSB deployments to Da Nang and later Cam Ranh Bay, were performing these type patrol duties, with occasional check sweeping to maintain some

minesweeping proficiency.

In January 1966 the Navy ordered the activation of 16 inactive MSB's. Their hulls were fiberglassed, and .50 caliber gun mounts were installed. An SQS-19 mine hunting sonar was installed on MSB-53 for evaluation as a riverine mine hunting sonar for Vietnam rivers.

Soon to be designated as MinRon 11 Detachment Alpha, the Da Nang detachment was transported via the USS Epping Forest MCS-7 in March 1966 to Vung Tao, SVN for redeployment upriver to the junction of the Long Tao and Soi Rap Rivers, at the town of Nha Be. Nha Be was located nine miles downriver from Saigon. Stateside MSB's and personnel soon followed.

The detachment of two officers and 100 men were housed in temporary facilities while their base at Nha Be was being built. Eight more MSB's arrived, bringing their total to twelve boats. One of these, MSB-18,



MSB-18 Long Tao River December 1966

had been outfitted with lightweight ceramic armor for combat evaluation.

In a Saigon meeting during this period, the CO of Mine Division 33 told me recently that our division's 36' MSL's, homeported in Sasebo, Japan and transported aboard the USS Epping Forest MCS-7, were considered for this mission. They were deemed too vulnerable to shore based small arms fire, were too small for any armaments, provided no pilothouse for



MSL-15 Sasebo Harbor 1964

crew protection, and lacked a head, cooking facilities, and operating space for radar or sonar.

As the old saying goes, "We Dodged the Bullet" with this decision. Actually, a lot of bullets, RPG, recoilless rifle fire, and command-detonated mines.

Detachment Alpha Established

Mine Squadron Eleven Detachment Alpha was established by CNO letter on 20MAY1966, with Lt W.D. Jones USN commanding.



MSB's nested alongside the dock in Nha Be

Alpha's First Combat Minesweeping Casualties

A Viet Cong attack on MSB-15 on 22SEP1966 using 57mm Recoilless Rifles, struck the pilot house killing EN2 Ronald Arthur Heintz USN. He became the first combat casualty in this command since Korea. Ten Purple Hearts were awarded to other sailors as a result of this day's action.

MSB-54 was the next casualty on 1NOV1966, when it was destroyed by a Viet Cong command-detonated mine. George Robert Weaver Jr. EN2 was KIA/BNR as he was below deck at the time of the explosion. The entire forward section of the boat was destroyed. No identifiable remains were recovered. Thomas M Moore SN was also killed, and five other sailors wounded.

Soviet Made Contact Mine Found

At noon, on New Years Eve 1966, an Army helicopter crew reported a large cylindrical object floating downriver, drifting toward the Saigon Port Complex. A Russian MKB(v) chemical horn contact mine, a 984 lb monster, was adrift in the Long Tau River. EOD personnel captured and rendered safe this mine, one that had been very familiar to EOD personnel since Korea. (See Spring 2004).

MSB Rammed and Sunk By A Merchant Ship

At 0620 on 14JAN1967 heading downriver towards Vung Tau, MSB-14 was about to pass a Norwegian Merchant, the Mui Finn starboard to starboard, when suddenly the MSB turned sharply right, intent on a port to port passage. The Mui Finn rammed the MSB, and it sunk immediately taking several to their death.

Discrepancies between the various sources I consulted differ in the number of sailors killed, and who was in command of this MSB.

The MinRon 11 Command History cites that POIC Thomas (NMN) Colman BM1 was in command, but nowhere else is he mentioned. He is not listed as KIA, although he could have been injured. Four others not listed were found in the Vietnam Memorial database under identical Service-Place-Date-Cause and Casualty Type:

Franklin Harlee Canup Jr EM2 - KIA/BNR
Jerome Alfred Hagen SA - KIA
Robert Dell Moore SN - KIA
Francis John Zinda RM1 - KIA

The MSB was lifted on January 19th and no bodies were found inside. It is assumed that three others were later found, because the database lists their bodies as having been recovered. Franklin Canup's body has never been recovered.

The MinRon 11 Command History contains a later entry citing the investigative results of this incident, that the Captain of the Mui Finn and the POIC of MSB-14 were equally responsible for the incident, without naming either by name.

Officer In Charge Wounded

Lt William B. Jones USN Officer In Charge of MineRon 11 Detachment Alpha was WIA on the Rach Ba Dang River, SVN from Viet Cong weapons fire while assisting a USN Seal Team in an assault on a VC supply depot. LT JONES was medically evacuated to Saigon.

Lt Jones later received a Silver Star for assisting other wounded to safety and directing activities to extinguish the fire started by the VC Rocket, while critically wounded in both legs and in severe pain.

His second in command, LTJG Henry A. Levien, USNR, took interim command until relieved on 24 January by LCDR Clarence N. McRight, USN.

More Heavy VC Attacks During Sweep Ops

On 15FEB1967 at 0655 while conducting a chain drag bottom sweep, the VC attacked MSB-49 and MSB-51 with 75mm recoilless rifle and automatic weapons fire. Three 75mm hits taken by MSB-49 wounded everyone aboard. MSB-51 also had three wounded, including the POIC, but was able to push MSB-49 onto the bank to keep them from sinking. One of MSB-49's wounded died during medical evacuation. Unnamed in the Command History, it appears this was Rodney Howard Rickli SN from the Vietnam Memorial database.



MSB-49 Following 15FEB1967 Attack

On the same day at 1020 MSB-45 was destroyed by a command detonated mine. Five of her six man crew were wounded, one missing. Gary Clifton Paddock DC3 was likely the MIA, who later died, as his cause of death was listed as "Hostile, died while missing".

Detachment Alpha receives PUC

Detachment Alpha became the first US Navy unit to receive the **Presidential Unit Citation** in the Vietnam War for ***"exceptionally meritorious and heroic service from 1 July 1966 to 18 February 1967 while conducting minesweeping operations in the Rung Sat Special Zone of the Republic of Vietnam."***

On March 20, 1968 Lt Mace, Officer in Charge of Detachment Alpha, received the award and a free standing plaque from Adm Veth, Commander Pacific Mine Forces. Adm Veth spoke: ***"As your Commander, I am deeply gratified to have your professional competence, personal sacrifices and bravery under fire recognized by our Commander In Chief with the award of the Presidential Unit Citation. In keeping the Long Tao River free for all nation's ships, you have carried out a most difficult and dangerous mission in a manner that has brought great credit to the Mine Forces."***

“All the officers and men of the Pacific Mine Force join me in sincere congratulations. Well Done.”

Detachment Alpha receives new Craft

A River Patrol Craft (RPC) was developed by a BuShips panel on unconventional watercraft between 1961 and 1964.¹ Two of these craft were sent to Det Alpha, the date was not recorded in the MinRon 11 Command History, but on 14JAN1967 it states that Lt Dean Jones OIC Det A was wounded while aboard RPC-1.

Originally designed for allies under the Military Assistance Program (MAP), 34 RPC’s were built, 24 ordered from Birchfield Boiler in Tacoma, WA; and 10 from Peterson Shipbuilders in Sturgeon Bay, WI. Friedman states “The RPC was the only major failure of the US Vietnam small-craft program.”²



RPC-2 MinRon 11 Det Alpha Feb 1967

In July 1967 Detachment Alpha received and began using four LCMS “Landing Craft Motorized Minesweepers” converted from standard LCM’s. With additional armor, guns, and minesweeping equipment installed, the LCMS were intended to provide greater security for Detachment Alpha personnel mine-sweeping on the Long Tao River. They were used for moored Oropesa and Chain-Drag sweeping.



LCMM on Long Tao Shipping Channel 1967

Chain Drag Effective For Controlled Mines

A favorite tactic of the VC has been to moor command-detonated mines in waterways with a wire leading to a foxhole where the guerilla waits for a passing vessel, and detonates the mine using a dry-cell battery. Some mines may even be suspended along a guy wire and maneuvered for maximum effectiveness before detonation

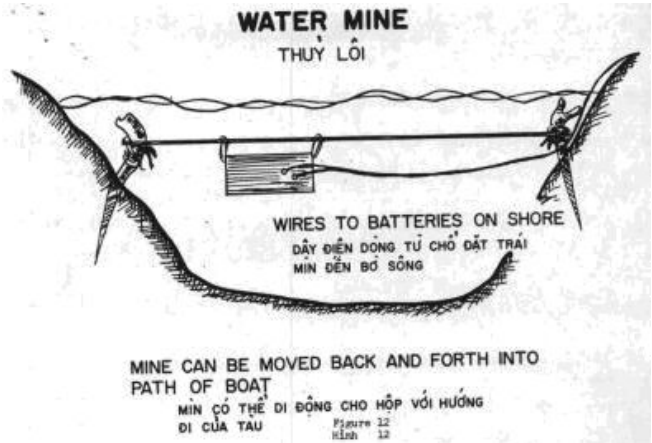


Diagram of a VC Command-Detonated Mine

Most often these attacks were part of larger scale ambushes where geurilla’s with RPG’s, recoilless rifles, and automatic weapons waited for the mine-sweepers.

Chain Drag sweeps were used close to riverbanks, in an effort to sever these command detonated wires and defeat these VC mines.

A command-detonated mine firing wire captured on the Long Tao River is shown in the photo below. I found this in the Navy Yard Photo Branch files undated and without any additional explanation. If anyone in Detachment Alpha can explain the "casing" around this wire, please contact the author. I first thought it was bamboo, but eliminated that thought when I remembered bamboo floats. It looks like some sort of fibrous root that grows in the river, perhaps to submerge and protect the wire from sweepers.



VC Command-detonated mine wire Nha Be



Deploying Chain-Drag Sweep



Chain-Drag sweep Gear On Deck

On 9MAY1967, ten additional MSB's and 60 personnel were transferred from MinRon 10 in Charleston to MinRon 11 in Long Beach for SEASIA contingencies.

MSB's 6, 7, 10, 11, 35, 36, 37, 39, 40, and 42) arrived at Long Beach aboard the USS HERMITAGE (LSD 34).

NMDL Panama City Team Arrives At Nha Be

A six week evaluation of the Mine Sweeping Drone (MSD) developed by the team at NMDL started on 14JUL1967. This was a remote-controlled drone intended to be operated from craft in mid-river, a safer distance from hostile shorelines, sweeping to sever command-detonated mine wires.



MSD Long Tao River



MSD Operation Console



MSD Operator

The deployment of the MSD meant that fewer personnel would be subjected to enemy fire at close range, which the MSB crews experienced sweeping the banks of the Long Tao River.

Requirements submitted for new MCM craft

Approval was received for additional MCM craft, a Minesweeper River (MSR), and additional LCMM's. The MSR was a converted Assault Support Patrol Boat (ASPB) a converted Riverine Force craft, with reduced armament and added minesweeping equipment.

Command Changes in Long Beach & Vietnam

On 1MAY1968 Mine Division 111 and Mine Division 112 were created subordinate to MinRon 11. MinDiv 112 replaced Detachment Alpha at Nha Be. Det 1 in Da Nang, and Det 2 in Cam Ranh Bay. And In June, Mine Division 113 was formed, composed of all new craft. Their HQ was aboard USS Benewah (APB-36) at Ben Luv, RVN. Mine Division 113 Det A was located at Ben Luc, RVN. Det C at Cua Viet and Da Nang, RVN. Det D in Rach Soi, RVN. These included MSM's, MSR's, and MSD's. the MSR's arrived in November 1968. The MSM's were to be used as an armored riverine minesweeper and droning platform. The MSR had increased speed and improved armor over the MSM. The MSD may be operated remotely from any craft capable of carrying the power package.

Minesweepers Leave Vietnam

On November 13th MineDiv 112 redeployed from Vietnam, and was disestablished on 31DEC1970. On November 15th MinDiv 113 ceased mine-sweeping operations in preparation for redeployment from Vietnam. By 30APR1971 all MinRon 11 divisions departed RVN.

MinRon 11 Decommissioned

CNO disestablishes MINE SQUADRON ELEVEN and Mine Division ONE HUNDRED ELEVEN on 30 June 1971.

In Memorium – Vietnam KIA's - MinRon 11

MINE SQUADRON 11 - DET ALFA

9/20/66 EN2 Eugene Underwood
East St Louis, IL.
9/22/66 EN2 Ronald A. Heintz
Eugene, OR. MSB-15
11/1/66 EN2 George R. Weaver Jr
Lancaster, PA. MSB-54 MIA
11/1/66 FN David L. Hall
Harrisburg, IL. MSB-54
11/1/66 SA Thomas M. Moore
Tacoma, WA. MSB-54
1/2/67 EN1 Larry D. Allen
Yuma, CO.
1/14/67 EM2 Franklin H. Canup Jr
Concord, NC. MSB-14 MIA
1/14/67 SN Robert D. Moore
Colorado Springs, CO MSB-14
1/14/67 SA Jerome A. Hagen
Fergus Falls, MN. MSB-14
1/23/67 EN1 Donald G. Peddicord
Des Moines, IA. MSB-16
1/23/67 SN Terry L. Braden
Liberty, MO. MSB-16
2/15/67 DC3 Gary C. Paddock
Marysville, WA. MSB-45
2/15/67 SN Rodney H. Rickli
Fond Du Lac, WI. MSB-49

MINE DIVISION 113

4/16/69 BM2 Ralph C. Munsey
Clio, MI. BC MSM-17
11/4/69 BMC Charles P. Geisert
Wichita Falls, TX. MSR-17
2/13/70 GMG3 Thomas E. Copp
Northridge, CA. MSR-3
2/26/70 EN2 David P. Hoffman
Florissant, MO.

Editors Note:

I am very disappointed to find that at least nine additional sailors lost their lives and there was no mention of their sacrifices in the MinRon 11 Command History which I used as a chronology road-map for this story. In addition, the Command History says very little about their operations in the last two years of the war. There is not even a single mention of the events that lead to their abrupt withdrawal from Vietnam, and I can only assume until doing more primary research that their withdrawal was part of the overall Vietnamization plan, and the US withdrawals associated with this program.

I apologize to the families of our deceased shipmates who are not mentioned as to the circumstances of their deaths in the text of my article. I promise that I will investigate each of their deaths, and update this article in a future issue of TSD. I believe the list in the opposite column is the most up to date that I could find. If there are additional omissions, please contact the author and I will correct this as well in an article update.

*Edward B. Sinclair
May 2005*

¹ US Small Combatants by Norman Freidman 1987
Naval Institute Press pp15

² US Small Combatants by Norman Freidman 1987
Naval Institute Press pp 289