

NYTimes, AUG 31 1972

Haiphong Vessels

Reported in Shift

3 Ships Said to Tie
Up Near Chinese
Minesweeper

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Special to [NYT]

Washington,
Aug 30 -

WASHINGTON, Aug. 30 — Pentagon sources said today that three small craft, recently modified in such a way that they could conceivably be used to drag mine-clearing gear, had tied up near a 136-foot Chinese minesweeper in Haiphong harbor.

The sources said that this could indicate an effort soon by North Vietnam to clear some of the mines blocking Haiphong to outside shipping, but they expressed confidence that if such an effort is made it would be ineffectual.

The three 50-to-60-foot vessels, the sources said, are general-purpose intercoastal ships of unknown ownership that were photographed in Haiphong harbor before May 8, when United States planes began dropping mines in the approaches to Haiphong and six other North Vietnamese harbors.

'Hundreds' of Mines

"We have hundreds of very sophisticated mines blocking the approaches to the inner harbor of Haiphong," one Pentagon official said.

"We know where they are and what they are configured to do, and we'd have great difficulty sweeping them successfully. One old-fashioned minesweeper, even if accompanied by three cockle shells, could hardly do more than a token minesweeping job."

In a news conference today, Jerry W. Friedheim, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, declined to comment on a report that two minesweepers had joined the previously reported Chinese minesweeper at Haiphong.

He did say, however, that "so far as we know," no mines "have been exploded or swept or anything else." He said that American specialists believed that they would be aware of any minesweeping attempts.

Air-Dropping Is Fast

Pentagon officials contend that new mines could be dropped by air faster than those already in place could be swept.

Sources said that the latest reconnaissance photos of the harbor showed that the 136-foot Chinese minesweeper and one of the smaller vessels, recently modified possibly for minesweeping, were both tied up alongside a Chinese freighter that has been bottled up in the harbor since the mines were first dropped.

Another of the smaller vessels is reportedly tied up alongside a second Chinese freighter. The third is said to be nearby. All three of the smaller craft were recently moved near the minesweeper from other parts of the harbor.

So far as is known, none of the four vessels have attempted any minesweeping.

Built in 1937

Officials said the Chinese minesweeper, of the Wochung class, was built in a Chinese shipyard in 1937. She has a displacement of 270 tons and is iron-hulled. An earlier report saying that the vessel was one of four minesweepers built in the United States and turned over to China was said to be erroneous.

It could not be ascertained whether the smaller ships had wooden or iron hulls.

"We still think that if they attempt to sweep up some mines, it will be a token effort, a symbolic effort, of no genuine military significance," one senior officer declared.

Sources said that there was no evidence of other Chinese or Soviet minesweepers heading toward North Vietnamese ports. North Vietnamese ports that have been mined besides Haiphong are Quangkhe and Donghoi.

'Ahead of the Defense'

"If the Chinese, or the Russians, moved in a large force of more modern minesweepers, they might be able to sweep up a substantial number of mines," one source said. "But they'd lose a number of ships in the process. And in this area, we're pretty sure, the offense would stay ahead of the defense."

At the news conference, Mr. Friedheim repeated an earlier Pentagon assertion that the Chinese minesweeper did not pass through the minefield to enter the inner harbor at Haiphong. Most likely, he said, it used high tides to ride into the harbor along one of several intercoastal waterways from the sea.

The ship draws only about six or seven feet of water, Mr. Friedheim said, and could float "on a good-size swimming pool."