

Hanoi Agrees to Free Americans Within Time Specified in Accord;
U.S. Had Suspended Minesweeping

SHIPS PULL BACK

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Work Had Just Begun in Haiphong, Sources at Pentagon Say NYTimes

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 28—The United States started to sweep Haiphong harbor of mines yesterday and then, abruptly, stopped all operations and moved its mine-clearing task force to sea, according to well-placed Defense Department sources.

The sweeping operation will not resume until Washington is assured that Hanoi will proceed without further delay with the release of American war prisoners, the sources said.

Neither the start of the mine-clearing, nor the subsequent pullback of the ships and helicopters, has been officially announced.

Account of Mission Given

Pentagon officials said that Rear Adm. Brian Mc Cauley, commander of Task Force 78, which is charged with clearing thousands of American mines from North Vietnamese ports and inland waterways, was aboard the first CH-53 helicopter on the first sweep of Haiphong harbor.

The sources gave this account of the first mission:

The helicopter took off yesterday about 1:20 P.M., Hanoi time (1:20 A.M. Tuesday, New York time) from the deck of the helicopter carrier New Orleans. It flew to an amphibious landing ship, where it picked up three magnetic devices that it towed.

At 2 P.M. the helicopter reached the beginning of the main ship channel to Haiphong and began a 10-mile sweep over the mine field toward shore.

Withdrawal Then Ordered

The helicopter, accompanied by a smaller UH-1 escort helicopter, turned around just as

it came in sight of a large number of freighters that have been stranded in Haiphong since the first mines were laid last May.

The CH-53 then conducted a reverse sweep of 10 miles along the main channel and returned to the New Orleans at about 4 P.M.

Some small wooden hulled North Vietnamese fishing junks were passed during the sweep.

Pentagon sources said that at least one other helicopter made a similar sweep. Both sweeps were reportedly carried out without incident.

But then, according to the

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sources, the 19-ship task force was ordered to halt operations and withdraw some miles to sea as it became clear that North Vietnam was not going to release the next large group of prisoners early this week as expected.

The 11-man team that had been negotiating with the North Vietnamese in Haiphong on minesweeping arrangements was flown out by helicopter as the task force departed, Pentagon sources said.

In Washington yesterday morning the Pentagon had said only that the minesweeping was delayed because of North Vietnam's request for time to warn its fishing boats to leave the areas involved.

Today Pentagon spokesmen declined to discuss the minesweeping at all, pending a resolution of the dispute over the release of prisoners.

Military specialists estimate that the mine-clearing, when it

resumes, will take a few months to complete.

It will require thousands of flights by helicopters aided by special radar navigation beacons set up in North Vietnam and on one ship at sea, as well as hundreds of sweeps by minesweeping vessels.

North Vietnam has complained that the United States is moving too slowly. Privately, military sources say the operation has been brought along at what one official called "a

very deliberate pace" to insure that the bulk of the mines would not have been destroyed or neutralized before the release of all remaining American prisoners in North Vietnam, South Vietnam and Laos.

Since Hanoi is believed to be very anxious to open its ports to freighters, the clearing operation is considered one of the principal elements of leverage remaining in American hands to insure compliance with the prisoner-release agreement.