

U.S. Sweeping Will Leave Deactivated Mines in Haiphong Harbor

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HONOLULU, June 18—Under current plans, the Navy's renewed minesweeping in North Vietnamese waters will leave numerous deactivated mines at the bottom of Haiphong Harbor, according to a high-ranking military commander here.

A task force of United States minesweepers, now on its way to North Vietnam from Subic Bay, the Philippines intends to make certain that the mines are harmless, the officer said. But it plans to stop short of actually removing those mines that have disarmed themselves, he said.

He noted that the idea of leaving mines was likely to encounter strong objections from North Vietnam, and might therefore be modified through "nuts-and-bolts negotiations" on the scene once the task force arrived. He held out the possibility that the negotiations might result in the removal of all the mines.

But he stressed the great difficulty and possible danger of attempting to dig up and settle in the mud of the harbor bottom.

"We see no useful purpose in removing them," said one of the officers, who agreed to discuss the matter only on the condition

that he not be identified. The naval operations in Southeast Asian waters are under the overall control of the Pacific Command headquarters, which is situated here.

Danger Discounted

"Practically all the mines involved have long since sterilized themselves anyway," the commander explained. "A lot of commerce has been going in and out of Haiphong Harbor."

The mines that were sown by United States aircraft beginning about a year ago were designed to rest on the bottom and to explode in response to any change in the magnetic field

caused by the passage of a metal-hulled ship. They were also set to deactivate themselves after a number of weeks, according to military spokesmen.

The minesweeping, therefore, is essentially an attempt to detonate mines that are still armed. This is accomplished by wooden-hulled minesweepers that drag long cables that serve as strong electromagnets, generating about 10 times the magnetic force of a large freighter. The theory is that the cables will detonate any mines that have failed to become inactive.

Mines were also planted in some of North Vietnam's canals to disrupt the flow of supplies from China, and the Navy does not intend to sweep those, the officer said. Instead, the North Vietnamese are to be given equipment and training to do the job themselves.

He contended that the language of the protocols accompanying the Paris cease-fire agreement of January permitted wide latitude in the methods to be used for rendering the mines harmless.

After the agreement was signed, the United States began minesweeping as required, but then suspended the operations, saying Hanoi was unwilling to allow American military teams to inspect airplane crash sites in North Vietnam. The teams want access to the sites to check the remains of fliers who are still listed as missing in action. Through the use of dental records and other means of identification, officials hope to account for as many of the 1,300 missing Americans as possible.

These two operations — the accounting for servicemen missing in action and the minesweeping — will continue to be linked in the lower-level bargaining that is yet to come in North Vietnam, the military commander said.

Under the new agreement reached last week in Paris, the United States is to resume minesweeping and North Vietnam is to give the American military teams access to the crash sites, but many technical details of both operations remain to be resolved.

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