

Compliments of the 2nd Infantry Division, Korean War Veteran's Alliance and the Navy

Chinnampo revisited

A Korean memory

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US Navy, Retired

(Ed. Note: The cease-fire ending the Korean War was signed in December 1953, 44 years ago last month. To the Korean War veteran it seems as recent as yesterday, while to those who came after, the war is just pages in a history book. In the United States it is often referred to as the "Forgotten War.")

The threat of mines proved to be a serious problem for the US Navy throughout the conflict. In mid-October 1950, the US Eighth Army had occupied the North Korean capital of Pyongyang and, with winter fast approaching, urgently needed supplies to winterize its men and equipment. The Army was already in short supply of fuel and desperately needed combat stores. In addition to the fuel shortage, roads were in disrepair from heavy bombing against the retreating North Korean Army, and rail links were virtually unusable. Supply by sea through the port city of Chinnampo was the only possibility. The port's approaches, however, were known to be heavily mined and opening the port became one of the top military priorities.

The following are the recollections of LCDR Harold Elston, US Navy, Retired. Elston, a former Mineman, recounts his experiences as a young Sailor in Korea from 28 October to 30 November 1950 participating in clearing the port of Chinnampo. His personal account is printed here with his kind permission.)

Imagine being a young Mineman Seaman Apprentice aboard a Destroyer Minesweeper (USS CARMICK [DMS 33]) in the Korean Theater of Operations and being asked to volunteer for a special task without knowing the task or the risk. I don't remember exactly how I came to volunteer, but the next thing I knew I was with eight or nine others and were loaded into a motorized whaleboat and delivered to a Japanese LST [Landing Ship, Tank], that had just arrived in the approaches to Chinnampo (now called Nam'po). We were led by a young Navy Reserve LTJG by the name of Privette, and once aboard the LST we were shown to the tank deck where we found two World War II 35-foot motor launches and a considerable pile of minesweeping gear which appeared to be miniatures of the type used aboard the YMSs [Motor Minesweepers] for sweeping moored mines. We were also shown a pile of portable radio gear and batteries to use for communications between the launches.

Also aboard, was a USN helicopter along with its crew and maintenance personnel. They had to stay aboard the LST, but we were lucky enough to return to our own ship each night. We had three or four qualified motor whaleboat coxswains in the group and two of them were to act as coxswains for each of the two boats. Since I was the only one with experience with the explosive minesweeping cutters we were provided, it fell to me to train another man to install the cutters on the other boat.

Since it was a job that didn't occupy much time we also became the unofficial radio operators. Of course when it was time to let the gear out and rig it for sweeping, it was an all-hands evolution. The 1/4 inch wire rope used to stream the miniature minesweeping gear was difficult to handle when paying out and many times more difficult when it came time to bring it and stow it aboard the launch. We made ready everything the first day and returned to our ship that night. The next day, after checking the time of high tide, we left our ship for the Japanese LST and our first day of Small Boat Minesweeping. Little did we know that this was the first time this had ever been attempted. We proceeded to launch the gear and started our first sweep into the shallow waters in the entrance to the river leading to Chinnampo.

There is a 27-foot tidal range in that area and we could only sweep while the tide was at, or near, flood stage. When the tide ebbed, many of the moored mines that had been planted there, often during the night, came to the surface and were easily avoided. We were able to sink them with M-1 rifle fire. Once in awhile, instead of just making a hole in the case so that it would fill with water and sink, when hit by a bullet from our M-1 the explosive charge would detonate. Mud, water and all kinds of other debris would be thrown all around us. We first decided to stay about 200 to 300 feet away so most of the heavier debris would go over our heads. That worked fine until the shrapnel started falling into the boat. We changed our tactics and decided to stay as far away as we could and still hit the mine with rifle fire.

We proceeded that first day to launch the gear from both boats and entered the approaches to the Chinnampo River. In less than an hour the engine in one of the launches suddenly died. The load was just too much for it. We retrieved the gear for that boat with much difficulty, since we were unable to control the boat's heading without engine power. Before the end of the tidal period we lost the engine in the second boat as well. We managed to attract the attention of the helicopter crew and they sent a boat from CARMICK to tow both boats back to the LST.

We returned to CARMICK where we awaited the arrival of replacement boats. A few days later, several US Navy ships appeared on the horizon, including a destroyer, a destroyer escort rigged to carry Explosive Ordnance Disposal and Underwater Demolition Team personnel, and another destroyer escort fitted with electrical generating equipment. Following them was a relatively large ship which we soon identified as USS CATAMOUNT (LSD 17). In its well deck were a large number of World War II LCVPs [Landing Craft, Vehicle and Personnel], at least 12 to 15, as well as several larger LCSMs [Landing Craft, Mechanized]. As soon as the group arrived we were told that we were going to be put aboard CATAMOUNT temporarily, to conduct small boat minesweeping. As soon as we were aboard we were allowed to select any two of the LCVPs to use as our minesweepers. After careful selection by LTJG Privette, we loaded and launched the boats from the well deck and returned to the Japanese LST to retrieve our minesweeping gear. Returning to CATAMOUNT, we prepared our gear for the next high tide. When the tide came in we launched our boats and, after streaming our minesweeping gear, commenced sweeping into the entrances to the Chinnampo River. The entrance was very wide at high tide with two islands almost side by side creating a narrow entrance.

Once past the two islands the river widened out to a width of a mile or so (at high tide) so we had an area inside the two islands about a mile wide and about 3 miles long before it became a narrow channel leading to the pier at Chinnampo, two miles up river. We swept in and around the two islands and up the river at each high tide, during daylight, for the next 15 days. During this time we had the helicopter from the Japanese LST firing on mines which surfaced because the tide went out or because they were improperly laid in water too shallow for them.

Occasionally a USN PBY would fly by and use the waist machine guns to either sink or explode mines that came to the surface. One day there was a line of eight mines floating on the surface when the PBY came by. As they fired on the mines the entire line exploded all at the same time. The plane was making a turn at that moment, crossing the line of mines. A wall of water was sent skyward as all of the mines fired simultaneously. The wall was higher than the PBY was flying and when they hit it they lost altitude. They were almost to the surface before they managed to get the aircraft under control. Watching from our boats, we were sure it was going to crash but somehow the pilot was able to get the plane back into the air before hitting the surface.

On another occasion, the EOD folks gathered up a large number of the mines which had surfaced and been towed to one of the islands in the entrance. Without letting us know, they suddenly detonated all of the mines at one time. We never did learn how many mines were involved, but large fish were killed in the area we were located, almost 3 miles away. As we neared the island where the detonation took place, we noticed fish up to 24-inches in length had been killed.

After we had streamed our gear from the LCVs and found they would be able to carry the load, we convinced the shipfitters aboard the CATAMOUNT to assist us in designing and constructing a winch system we could use to stream and recover our minesweeping gear. They were some of the best and most willing folks we could have met. Many times they worked during the entire time we slept, in order to have the equipment ready when we needed to go about our minesweeping tasks.

The nearest we came to being shot, was by our own YMSs, when they fired at a mortar battery set up on one of the small islands. They were on the South side of the island and we were on the North. The 40-mm shells came through the trees and almost hit us. One of the projectiles did penetrate the boat I was in but simply came in one side and went out the other, thankfully without exploding. We could also hear them passing overhead, but since we had no radio contact with the YMS we could not tell them of our situation. We just scooted out of there as fast as our boat would take us.

During the time that we worked we had swept some 12 to 20 mines, we weren't absolutely sure because often when we thought we had swept one or more, upon pulling in the gear, we found none of the cutters had fired. We had also fired on and either sunk or exploded at least another dozen or more.

The day before Thanksgiving, we were told to report to the APD [High Speed Transport], and we were all looking forward to a nice hot Thanksgiving Dinner aboard CATAMOUNT. They lifted our boats aboard and we were assigned temporary quarters for the night. The ship got underway sometime in the evening and we traveled north all night. At first light they woke us and gave us breakfast. Then we manned our boats, and were lowered into the water. We were provided with two escort boats with armed personnel and told to sweep up a river from its mouth. We swept up the river while Korean folks on the banks waved US or South Korean flags.

About noon we were signaled by radio and told to return to the ship. As we turned, a few rifle shots went over our heads and we noticed that the same peasants along the riverbanks were now waving North Korean flags and every once in awhile would direct rifle fire at us. It was difficult, but we found a way for four or five of us to get behind the diesel engine that was providing our power. We knew the sides of the boat would not stop a rifle bullet. To make matters worse it was so cold that the salty water of the river froze on the gunwales of the LCV. The water, which splashed into the boat, froze on everything it contacted, except the engine. We took turns, even when they were not firing at us, to huddle next to the diesel engine in an attempt to get warm. As soon as we were spotted by the APD they came alongside and picked us up and we left, heading south, as fast as we could go. We later learned that the North Koreans and Chinese had overrun the area, but we never were told for sure what river we were operating in. The only river of any size North of the Chinnampo is the Yalu. We thought that was where we were. During the time we swept, using the LCVs, we fortunately lost only two engines. They were much more capable of towing the sweep gear than the motor launches we first used. The diesel engines on the LCVs provided considerably more horsepower.

After our return to the CATAMOUNT from the APD we were given our Thanksgiving dinner and then returned to CARMICK. I've often wondered what became of the LCVs, because CATAMOUNT did not remain with us after that day and we had no further contact with her or the LCVs. CARMICK proceeded to Inchon Harbor where I was transferred to the Hospital Ship USS HAVEN [AH 12] when it was suspected that I had contracted tuberculosis. I was hoping for an appointment to the Naval Academy, but the possibility that I had TB brought that hope to an end. Later, given a clean bill of health (it was scar tissue on my lungs, not TB), I was transferred to the Navy Beach Masters unit in Inchon, awaiting transportation to rejoin my ship.

While there, I spent several days assisting refugees to board LST's at high tide so they could be taken out to the AKAs [Assault Cargo Ship] and APAs [Assault Transport] for transportation to some other area of South Korea. It was known at that time that the North Koreans were going to overrun Inchon within a matter of days. A few days after New Years Day, I was put aboard the Oil Tanker USS ASTABULA, bound for Sasebo, Japan, where I rejoined CARMICK.

We immediately left Japan heading for the East Coast of Korea, to an area near Wonsan. For several days we would stream our minesweeping gear before daylight and sweep at a speed of 15-20 knots North towards, and perhaps past, the port of Wonsan. When it became dark we would recover our sweep gear and anchor for the night. The next day would be a repeat except we would go south all day, spend the night, and then resume our sweep on a northerly heading.

After this operation, we returned to Sasebo, Japan where I was given orders to report to the Commanding Officer, Naval Ammunition Depot, Oahu, Hawaii for further duty. The crews of the two LCVs were awarded Bronze Star Medals with

combat "V"s. CARMICK was also awarded a Navy Unit Commendation for the period 28 October to 25 November 1950.

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