

August 6, 2003

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This is a brief synopsis of my tour of duty in Korea aboard the USS WAXBILL (AMS 39) from June 1952 to June 1953. By way of background, an AMS or Attack Mine Sweeper, is a small wooden ship (the smallest ship in the navy) about 60 to 70 feet in length. The only metal aboard is a diesel engine and a large electrical generator to blow up magnetic mines. The crew consisted of approximately 30 enlisted men and 4 officers. My job was that of Executive Officer and Navigator.

With two exceptions all of our time was spent in the enemy harbor of Wonsan, North Korea which is about 110 miles north of the DMZ or 38th parallel. The first of the two exceptions took place when we were ordered to participate in an invasion of the mainland south of Wonsan. After our formation of AMS's swept up close to the beach for moored mines, we pulled out and the boats filled with troops started in toward the beach. When they were close, the boats did a U-turn and came out. The whole affair was a mock invasion to fool the North Koreans and force them to pull troops, tanks, and munitions off the front lines and relieve pressure on our army which was having a hard time. It worked!

The second exception occurred when we were ordered to proceed north from Wonsan and sweep a harbor with a second AMS in our company. We swept for moored mines for about an hour when the second ship hung a mine in its sweep gear. As if that were not enough, the shore batteries opened up

with tracer bullets at both ships. After about 30 minutes the mine was cleared out and we left as fast as possible with no one being hurt.

Wonsan harbor was a very large harbor shaped like a horseshoe and about 20 miles long. We swept for moored and magnetic mines seven days a week mostly during the day and occasionally at night. These operations were not without some risk. Two AMS type sweepers, the Mermaid and the Maggie, were blown up and went down side by side. They were extremely lucky that no one was killed. Both ships had cut dozens of moored mines on both sides of each ship and were completely surrounded by floating mines. The Captains of each ship stationed two men forward, one on each side, and two men aft, one on each side. Every ten seconds each of the four men called out the estimated distance of the nearest mine to the ship. When the closest mine was within about 10 to 15 feet of the ship and was headed toward the ship, the Captain ordered all hands to the extreme opposite side and then everyone jumped overboard. They swam away as fast as they could and the ship then blew up. The same thing happened with the second AMS. In the meantime, motorboats with shallow drafts had been sent from ships outside the harbor and from Yodo island at the entrance to the harbor to pick up the men in the water. All of the men were picked up with no loss of lives. Both of these crews were very lucky.

Not so lucky was the crew of one AMS donated to the South Korean navy by the United States.

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It was sweeping in the harbor when it hit a moored mine head on. Four men were blown overboard from the fantail of the ship and were the only ones out of the 34 man crew to survive.

A question usually arises as to whether we were concerned or worried about being blown up by mines. The truth was that we hardly ever thought about it, much less worried about it. There was good reason for this, that being there was something else that we really did worry about, i.e. enemy fire from their shore batteries. For example, one of our destroyers was in a section of the harbor where a notorious battery nicknamed "LITTLE EVA" was located. Little Eva fired three armor piercing rounds that went down through the steel deck into the fire room and hit the boiler.

The superheated steam that was released instantly killed all the men in the fire room. Another incident occurred when we were sweeping in a formation of six AMS type ships. Enemy fire was directed at the AMS just ahead of our ship. Three of their men were hit by shrapnel and were taken to the hospital ship. Everyone was really happy to learn that they completely recovered.

In late December of 1952 we had an incident of our own. We had been ordered to sweep for moored mines deep within the harbor near the end of the closed horseshoe. We had made one pass and had started our second pass when several shore batteries opened up on us. We turned the ship around so that we could head toward the open end of the harbor and hopefully escape the shore batteries. We noticed

that volleys of shells were hitting the water very close to the ship and on both sides at the same time, i.e., we were straddled, the worst possible situation we could have encountered. The shells were exploding as they hit the water and shrapnel and water was raining down all over the ship and on us. We took the few actions that we could to try to prevent being hit or sunk. First, the wire cable that towed the minesweeping gear through the water was cut by a very sharp ax we kept for that purpose. This increased our speed by about two knots from eight knots to about ten knots. A person who is being shot at could most likely run faster than this. The second action we took was to steer a zigzag course to make it more difficult for the enemy to hit us. The last thing we did was to station two men on the bow of the ship to throw smoke grenades ahead of the ship and try to create a partial smoke screen. Our ship continued to be straddled and under very heavy fire for the next 45 minutes (about 8 miles). At that time we were close to being out of range of the guns and they finally ceased firing. Although we had been fired at for only 45 minutes, it had seemed like hours. We took a quick check on the crew and although most everyone had been rained on by the shrapnel, no one had been hurt. For this, we were very thankful.

Unknown to us during this little epic was the fact that a Newsweek photographer on a destroyer had been using a telephoto lens to take pictures of us under fire during the entire period. That afternoon he came aboard our ship and interviewed the crew and

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officers. The result of all this was that the cover of the January 1953 issue of Newsweek magazine had a picture of the Waxbill with shells exploding all around it and a long story about our men and officers who continued to keep the harbor cleared of mines in spite of dangers.

I completed my tour of duty in early June 1953 and was transferred to another station. Late that same month peace was finally declared with a truce being signed between South and North Korea.

Glenn North