

Briefing Memo

**The significance and lessons of the Dispatch of Minesweepers units
to the Persian Gulf:**

**Considerations from the History of the Minesweeper Force
and the Transition of Maritime Defense Capability Building up**

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Foreword

The dispatch of minesweepers units to the Persian Gulf (April to November, 1991) was the first oversea actual mission for the Self-Defense Forces, a pioneering activity of subsequent SDF's international contribution as well as greatly contributing to the recovery of Japan's diplomatic damages originating in the fact that Japan had not taken action beyond financial cooperation when the Gulf Crisis and the Gulf War occurred. The outline was generally known, owing to Taosa Ochiai, who was the commander of the dispatch unit (Oversea Minesweeper Force "OMF"), left many testimonies through the Oral History of the National Institute for Defense Studies, etc. In this paper, I would like to try to consider accordingly why this dispatch, which might have been one of the turning points of post WWII history of Japan, was able to achieve an initial objective despite its being the first time experience and what problems emerged through the activities while considering the historical situation relating to the development, in particular, of the Maritime Self-Defense Force ("MSDF") Minesweeper Force, which was the main force dispatched.

The background and circumstances of the dispatch

There was no international contribution from a manpower point of view in the Japanese Government's response to the Gulf Crisis and the Gulf War. The fact that no Japanese flag was found in the advertisement of the Washington Post in which the Kuwait Government expressed its appreciation to relevant countries after Kuwait was liberated, despite the Japanese Government's financial contribution of 13 billion dollars in total is a famous incident. In the midst of this, some people in the Government and the ruling parties began claiming the necessity of manpower contribution. In particular, after reaching a ceasefire agreement, the idea of dispatching mine sweepers, which can be realized based on the Self-Defense Forces Law (Article 99 at that time, current Article 84 Paragraph 2) surfaced as a convincing proposal. This kind of judgment first came from the reasoning, as a domestic political issue, that minesweeping was easily accepted by public opinion at the time which felt reluctant about the overseas dispatch of the SDF, because the objective of minesweeping was to secure the safety of ship navigation, which was inherently suitable to a humanitarian purpose. Second, as an external factor, the U.S Navy had also unofficially sounded Japan out about the dispatch of minesweepers at the early stage of the Gulf Crisis because it had high expectations of the MSDF's minesweeping capability as the MSDF Minesweeper Force had an established reputation through consistently clearing a shipping route after WWII. Speaking of the situation of the Persian Gulf at that time, as many as 1,200 mines had been laid in the northern waters, which greatly threatened, not only general ships, but multinational forces' warships deployed, where U.S. warships had also struck by mine. On the other hand, mine disposal based on international cooperation was in progress as Germany, which did not directly participate in the war, also dispatched minesweepers. Therefore the Government was concerned that the necessity of the dispatch itself would be lost if it lost this opportunity.

Under these circumstances, the Director General of the Defense Agency issued a preparations order on April 16, 1991 and the minesweeper dispatch was determined in the Security Council of Japan and a Cabinet meeting on April 24 and "The MSDF general order related to minesweeping in the Persian Gulf" was issued. Two days later on April 26, the dispatch unit, made up of 6 vessels: the minesweeper tender "Hayase", the minesweepers "Yurishima", "Hikoshima", "Awashima" and "Sakushima", and the fast combat support ship "Tokiwa" respectively, left their home ports in haste. Then, the dispatch unit arrived

at Dubai on May 27. Minesweeping operation was conducted mainly in the northern waters of the Persian Gulf for 99 days from June 5 to September 11. During this period, the unit disposed 34 mines in total and secured the safety of many port fairways including waters which multinational forces avoided dealing with because of the high degree of difficulty, greatly contributing to securing safe navigation in the Persian Gulf. The unit left Dubai on September 23 and arrived at Hiroshima Bay on the night of October 28. Then two days later, October 30, they entered the port of Kure, where a very warm welcome ceremony was held. At this time, a welcoming and appreciating banner was reportedly posted on a ferryboat navigating around the entering vessels. This is one of the episodes, which showed a great change of national attitudes towards the dispatch compared with situation when they left Japan in the midst of arguments for and against the dispatch.

The history and “actual operation” experience of the MSDF Minesweeper Force

The Minesweeper Force, since its previous existence in the Imperial Navy and going through changes in affiliation such as the 2nd Ministry of Demobilization, and the Japan Coast Guard etc., has consistently engaged in keeping shipping routes open in the seas surrounding Japan. When the war ended, approximately 55,000 moored mines laid by the former Imperial Navy and about 6,500 un-disposed mines of about 10,000 influence mines laid by the U.S. forces remained in the seas surrounding Japan. For Japan’s restoration after the war, it was urgent business to remove these mines and reopen shipping services with major port fairways cleared. In order to do this, whereas the former military personnel were purged from public service, personnel relevant to minesweeping avoided being purged by a GHQ order and were able to engage in the service of clearing shipping routes. In this background, the Minesweeper Force, even in the MSDF, which recognizes itself and is recognized by others as the successor of the former Imperial Navy, is often regarded as the very root of the former Navy. In addition, the activities of the Japan Special Minesweeper Unit, which was secretly dispatched to the waters around the Korean Peninsula to conduct minesweeping operation under orders of GHQ in the Korean War, have been revealed today through various historical documents and leading research. That these activities were highly evaluated by U.S. and became accordingly one of the motives towards the conclusion of the 1951 peace treaty afterward is also widely known anecdote.

After that, in April 1952, when the Coastal Safety Force, the predecessor of the MSDF, was established, each minesweeper divisions were transferred from the Japan Coast Guard. In August, the same year, when the Safety Security Force was established, the minesweeper divisions were assigned into District Force when they were newly organized. Then the Defense Agency and respective SDFs were established in July, 1954 and the Minesweeper Flotilla 1 was newly organized into the Self-Defense Fleet in October, the same year. Moreover, in September, 1961, the Minesweeper Flotilla 2 was newly organized as a mobile operation unit to react to minesweeping requests from the East-West two fronts. And, after their dispatch to the Persian Gulf, minesweeper force in mobile operations were integrated into one “Mine warfare Force” in March 2000 according to the decision that the Minesweeper Flotilla be changed to “One Minesweeper Flotilla” in the “National Defense Program Guidelines in and after FY1996” (07 NDPG). In addition, as for the scale, the peak posture in the end of the Cold War was 14 Divisions/ 32 ships in total with the aim of defending 10 crucial ports. However, after 07 NDPG, the scale has been gradually reduced in accordance to the changing situation. As a result, as of the end of March, 2014, “Mine warfare Force” and District Force subordinates are composed of 9 Divisions/24 ships in total (there is one more division consisting of two minesweeper control ships operating as the mother ship of a remote controlled mine neutralization system (SAM)).

Now, many references point out that strength accumulated in the “actual operation” of clearing a shipping route through the above mentioned history was also shown in the dispatch of minesweepers to the Persian Gulf. However, strictly speaking, the planned minesweeping service for specified waters had been gradually reduced and were already finished in 1985 (though the disposal of discovered explosive substances has been conducted continuously even today). Therefore, as a matter of fact, not many members necessarily experienced the “actual operation” in OMF. And the MSDF which emphasized the “actual operation” by the Minesweeper Force conducts real mine-disposal training in Iwo Jima instead of minesweeping service, making an effort to expand experienced personnel. Actually, in the case of the dispatch, many members said that “the experience in Iwo Jima was very helpful for the task”. That is, one of the factors for OMF to have been able to achieve the expected objectives of the dispatch was the existence of know-how based on the tradition after the clearing of shipping routes and the accumulated “actual operation” type-trainings in order to properly pass on the know-how – an important factor.

The historical circumstances of maritime defense capability building up and the foundation of an overseas dispatch activity

I have described the history and “actual operation” experience such as clearing a shipping route of the MSDF Minesweeper Force. In addition to that, another factor for the dispatch to have achieved the expected purpose, it is necessary to focus on the details of the maritime defense capability building up since its establishment and the gaining of overseas deployment capability, which has various connotations. That is to say, from a viewpoint of the overall organization of the MSDF, what should be the foundation of an overseas dispatch activity might have already been established though the Minesweeper Force was not necessarily a subject of the foundation at that time.

In this regard, it is often pointed out in the leading research related to the circumstances of the MSDF establishment that there was a conflict between two groups composed of a former Imperial Navy military group who wanted the MSDF to be directed towards “a comprehensive navy” in the future and forces who tried to keep the MSDF at a level of the Coast Guard. And it is also viewed that this has become a point of contention over whether the building up of defense capabilities should be directed towards open sea deployment or if greater importance should be attached to the defense of the waters surrounding Japan. That is, in the midst of political and diplomatic concern from inside and outside the country, how the range of maritime defense should be considered became one of the points in the defense capability building up of Japan. This conflict continued from the 1970s to the beginning of the 1980s until the idea of “several hundred miles in the waters surrounding Japan and sea lane 1,000 miles” was established as the internal and external declaration of the Japanese position. At the time of its establishment, the MSDF, placed in a systemic framework based on political and financial limitations, was, of course, from a standpoint of scale, not in a position to hope to become an entity like the former Imperial Navy or the U.S. navy. This point is basically the same in the subsequent building up of defense capability. However, at least, as for deployment capabilities to the open sea, the MSDF has consistently pursued it, even under various kinds of restrictions, based on the belief that the capabilities were requisites to be provided inherently as naval defense capabilities. Actually, the following results are given: improved ocean going capabilities through the enlargement of military ships and the building up of fast combat support ship, accumulated know-how through overseas dispatch training such as overseas training cruises and RIMPAC and the building up of spirits (spiritual foundation). It would be possible accordingly to think that the foundation of an overseas dispatch activity was already established as the overall organization of the MSDF if an action mode was focused on overseas dispatch, though the deployment to the Persian Gulf brought about an enormous impact as the first active mission. Makoto Sakuma, who was the Chief of Staff, MSDF when the dispatch took place, testified to the above situation saying, in the oral history, that “the MSDF might have accustomed itself to the task. They already had the know-how”.

The lessons of the dispatch to the Persian Gulf – The equipment enhancement of the Minesweeper Force

As for the factors enabling this dispatch to have achieved the expected purpose, I have described the history and “actual operation” experience of the MSDF Minesweeper Force and the foundation of the overseas dispatch, which had been established in the course of building up of naval defense capabilities. However, many challenges existed at that time. What seemed to be particularly important was the MSDF Minesweeper Force’s insufficient equipment, and the experience of the international collaborative mine disposal in the Gulf which became the opportunity for the equipment to be enhanced. This would be one of the lessons vividly showing the importance of “actual operation” experience.

For instance, EOD (Explosive Ordnance Disposal Divers) had to visually confirm mines and dispose of them because no TV camera was equipped on a mine neutralization vehicle (remote underwater robot). This was a typical example of insufficient equipment. In another case, the information processing of a detected target had not been automated at all, so that the processing task had no option but to all rely on the personnel’s skill. These situation seems to contradict the previously described “expectation of the MSDF’s minesweeping capability” but, in short, the insufficient equipment was covered by personnel’s proficiency. In this point, the fact is, even Ochiai testified that “It is not self-praise but a shameful thing”. Of course, this does not mean that the MSDF did not pay attention at all to the trend of overseas minesweeper’s equipment. For example, with regard to the mine neutralization vehicle mentioned above,

the truth of the matter is that a minesweeper equipped with a new model with TV cameras was commissioned one year before the dispatch. Nevertheless, reality is that the preparation for the dispatch was not completed because performance tests, etc. were still underway at that time. Consequently, however, it is true that the modernization of the minesweeper's equipment would not have been prioritized in the defense building up programs of the whole MSDF until the impact by the dispatch was recognized. In this sense, though the Minesweepers Force had the advantage of "actual operation" experience based on clearing a shipping route, it would be undeniable that they became a little bit complacent with it in some aspects. After that, a new system of minesweeper's equipment was introduced from Europe and thoroughly improved. The above experience shows the importance of a new "actual operation" experience in the opportunities of international collaborative tasks, etc. including training and it should be a valuable lesson not to be "a frog in the well not knowing the ocean". In this connection, the Minesweeper Force willingly participates in various kinds of oversea dispatch training at present, and the Units which has participated in the 3rd International Minesweeping Training hosted by the U.S. and carried out in the vicinity of the Arabian Peninsula waters is on their way home at this moment (as of the end of November, 2014).

Conclusions

I have outlined the background and circumstances of the dispatch of minesweepers units to the Persian Gulf and also have stated the equipment improvement of the MSDF Minesweeper Force resulted from one of the lessons in the dispatch as well as indicating two points of the Division's history and "actual operation" experience and the foundation of an oversea dispatch which had been established in the course of building up of naval defense capabilities as the factors for the dispatch to have achieved the expected purpose. "Mine removal and disposal in waters (straits, etc.), which exert important influence on a Japanese ship's navigation" was one of the focus points in the discussion, which took place the other day, towards the cabinet decision related to the Development of New Security Legislation. Therefore there are some lessons to be learned from the dispatch, though the event was more than 20 years ago.

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