

# Briefing Memo

## **The Impact on Japan from Mine Warfare during the Korean War**

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### **Introduction**

For Japan, which was in a chaotic state after the war and under the occupation of the military of the Allied Powers, the Korean War which broke out on June 25, 1950 seemed to be “somebody else’s problem” on the other side of the Sea of Japan. Meanwhile, efforts were made at economic recovery through the war and the war brought about the opportunity for industrial revitalization called “Korean War special procurement,” and at the same time, the Japanese archipelago became an important logistics base for the United Nations forces. The impact of the Korean War on Japan has been researched from many perspectives.

In particular, the mine warfare by the North Korean forces implemented as a part of its maritime operations is often brought up in connection with the example of the Japan special minesweeping unit that was secretly dispatched from Japan. One of the minesweepers that was participating in the activities of the Japan special minesweeping unit hit a mine and sank, one crew member died on duty, and therefore a discussion began about the lead-up to the dispatch of the minesweepers, etc. However, mine warfare in the Korean War caused a large amount of damage and had a large impact on Japan in addition to this special minesweeping unit. That impact extended in a variety of directions directly and indirectly and continued for a long period. This article discusses mine warfare during the Korean War and presents historical facts that are now starting to be forgotten.

### **1. The appearance of mines in the Korean War**

The majority of the operations in the Korean War were on land, and furthermore the naval power of the North Korean forces opposing the United Nations forces was weak. Due to these facts and other factors, the operations at sea are not often mentioned. However, the mine warfare implemented by the North Korean navy, which was said to be a weak navy, caused enormous damage to the United Nations forces in spite of the fact

that it was implemented using rudimentary equipment and few personnel, so mine warfare is often brought up as a major maritime operation in the Korean War.

This does not mean that the US navy at that time did not anticipate the anti-mine warfare as part of landing operations, but actually, looking back on the unit formations in the Incheon landing operations, we cannot conclude that the preparations against mine warfare had been made carefully. On September 4, 1950 when the Incheon landing operations were about to start, the US navy destroyer *McKean* discovered drifting mines (this refers to mines deliberately set adrift and is distinguished from mines which are suspended because the mooring cable naturally breaks, which are called “floating mines”) for the first time, in the waters off the coast of Chinnampo (approximately 90 miles northwest of Incheon).

According to the report prepared by the US Navy Pacific Fleet Command at that time, it was recorded that the mines used in the Korean War were made by the Soviet Union. It is estimated that from around July 10 to July 20, 1950 approximately 4,000 mines passed through Wonsan transported by rail, and were transported via Pyongyang to the west coast of the Korean Peninsula and to Incheon and Gunsan in the south. The mines transported in this way were laid with the support of the Soviet navy. The US navy estimated that approximately 3,000 mines had been laid over the short period of approximately three weeks with a simple and easy method utilizing wooden barges. Moreover, this report recorded the mine-laying implemented by the weak North Korean navy with a certain kind of surprise, asking “is there any other country that can prepare and lay so many mines using an extremely easy method in such a short period?”

Fortunately for the United Nations forces, the mine warfare of the North Korean navy did not have an impact on the Incheon landing operations on the west coast of the Korean Peninsula, which started on September 15. Due to the success of the Incheon landing operations, the complexion of the war changed greatly and it became possible to mount a counteroffensive against the North Korean forces bearing down on Busan. However, in the Wonsan landing operations planned for early in October on the east coast of the Korean Peninsula, it became necessary to sweep for mines, so the commencement of the landing operations was delayed by five days. The minesweepers of the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea participated in the minesweeping off the coast of Wonsan but two US navy minesweepers, the *Pirate* and the *Pledge*, hit mines and sank on October 12. Further casualties were incurred, including the minesweeper MS-14 of the Japan special minesweeping unit and minesweeper YMS-516 of the Republic of Korea navy hitting a mine and sinking on October 17 and October 18, respectively.

## 2. The impact of mines on Japan

When the Korean War started, the attitude of Japan, which was under occupation, could be seen in the statement “Our Position in the Korean Conflict” issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on August 19, 1950. It states “the battle for democracy in Korea is nothing other than the battle to protect the democracy of Japan. If we do not provide cooperation to the extent permitted by the United Nations forces fighting to protect the autonomy and independence of Korea, how can the security of Japan be protected?”

This cooperation with the United Nations forces soon became a reality. At that time, approximately ten minesweepers of the US navy had been deployed to the Far East region, and the cooperation of Japan was necessary for implementing the minesweeping because Japan possessed approximately 80 minesweepers and had people with experience of participating in minesweeping operations during the cleanup after the war. On October 2, there was a request from US navy Chief of Staff Rear Admiral Arleigh Burke to then Commandant of the Japan Coast Guard Takeo Okubo to dispatch the minesweepers of Japan to the Korean Peninsula. Commandant Okubo immediately contacted Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida and Minister for Transport Takeshi Yamazaki and commenced preparations for the dispatch. With no time to lose, on October 4 there was an official request from US navy commander Vice Admiral C. Turner Joy to Minister for Transport Yamazaki for the dispatch of the minesweepers, and the first group of minesweepers amassed at Karato Quay in Moji departed from the port in Japan on October 7 and entered the seas around the Korean Peninsula.

The minesweepers of Japan were dispatched to the seas near Wonsan, Chinnampo, Haeju, Incheon, and Gunsan, and they implemented minesweeping work in each of these sea areas. The period they were dispatched was from October 10 to December 2, and a total of 43 minesweepers, ten patrol boats, and one trial ship as well as a total of approximately 1,200 personnel participated. The special minesweeping unit disposed of 27 mines through this minesweeping work, and casualties were incurred when the minesweeper MS-14 hit a mine and sank on October 17, resulting in one fatality and 18 injured people. On October 27 the minesweeper MS-30 ran aground and sank, which resulted in no fatalities but the minesweeper was lost.

There were other examples of many fatalities within the casualties caused by mines in the Korean War. One of those was the case of Large Tugboat 636 (LT-636) of the US Army, which was navigating the waters off the coast of Wonsan when it hit a mine and sank on November 15. Twenty-seven Japanese LR (Labor Required) crew members that

had been dispatched by the Special Procurement Board using the then services procurement demand were on board this boat and 22 of them died when the ship hit a mine and sank. This accident was reported at the time as a fatal accident due to a shipwreck.

The final confirmation of the minesweeping work is carried out by a trial ship. The trial ship actually navigates repeatedly across seas where the minesweeping has been actually carried out. The actual ship navigating across seas where the minesweeping had been carried out was called the “guinea pig ship” at the time because it was analogous to the guinea pigs often used in experiments. Due to the nature of its duties it was difficult to recruit crew members, so advertisements were placed in newspapers promoting the high salaries on offer that said “Recruiting crew members for trial ships! We will buy the life of a person for 10,000 yen.”

Regarding these trial ships, four trial ships (Toa Maru, Eisho Maru, Soei Maru, and Wakakusa Maru) were designated for confirmation minesweeping of the sea areas around Japan as part of the cleanup after the Pacific War, and the trial work was commenced from April 1946. Three of those ships were decommissioned one after another by July 1950 and only the Soei Maru remained as a trial ship. As a consequence of the outbreak of the Korean War, confirmation minesweeping missions in the seas surrounding the Korean Peninsula were given to the trial ship Soei Maru. Soei Maru commenced its trial work from late April 1951, carried out the work divided into four missions, and continued to implement the work until late June 1952. The seas where it implemented the work were in the vicinity of the ports of Busan, Masan, Jinhae, Mokpo, Yeosu, and Incheon. Former crew members recalled that there were a lot of hardships as this trial work of navigating back and forth across the same seas many times around a peninsula at war involved continuously stressful conditions, and furthermore the seas around the peninsula became extremely cold in mid-winter.

### **3. Mines that washed ashore in the seas surrounding Japan**

The impact of mines on Japan began with the outbreak of the Korean War, and subsequently continued even after the armistice. Those are the floating mines for which the mooring cables (the cables connecting the mines to the anchor assembly installed on the sea bed for laying the mines) for the mines laid in the seas surrounding the Korean Peninsula broke, resulting in the mines floating across the Sea of Japan driven by seasonal winds and tidal currents. From the end of 1950 when the Korean War began to the beginning of 1951, the appearance of floating mines made by the Soviet Union rapidly

increased, and the seas in which they appeared went beyond the Sea of Japan with some even going far away north through the Sea of Japan, through the Soya Strait and into the Sea of Okhotsk. Furthermore, in May 1951 mines made by the Soviet Union were discovered for the first time in the Tsugaru Strait and subsequently mines that had drifted through the Tsugaru Strait and into the Pacific were also confirmed.

Moreover, there were a total of 23 accidents between 1950 and 1955 in which mines that had washed ashore on the coast exploded spontaneously, resulting in a total of three fatalities, two in 1951 and one in 1953. Many mine accidents occurred even before the outbreak of the Korean War. In March 1949 an accident occurred in which a mine of unknown origin washed ashore on the coast of Kodomari, Nadachi-cho, Joetsu City, Niigata Prefecture and exploded, claiming the lives of 63 people, so the residents on the Sea of Japan side of the country had a strong fear of washed-ashore mines. That fear grew even stronger each time newspaper articles were published with headlines such as “The Tsugaru Strait: the mines were made by the Soviet Union” (Asahi Shimbun, May 23, 1951) and “Mines are threatening the Sea of Japan: they are large mines made by the Soviet Union” (Mainichi Shimbun, May 31, 1954).

In addition to these kinds of direct harm, we cannot overlook the indirect harm, namely that ships navigating through the Sea of Japan and toward the Tsugaru Strait were forced to take detours in order to avoid the threat of the mines. At that time, the Seikan connecting ferry was an important means of maritime transportation connecting Honshu and Hokkaido. However, operations were often suspended, particularly for the nighttime freight trains, and 120 return freight train journeys (14,302 train cars) were cancelled in May to December 1951. In February 1952, a situation arose in which ships that wanted to enter Niigata Port were completely cut off. Due to this kind of indirect impact, not only the maritime shipping industry but also the entire economy and transportation of Japan received a serious shock.

This problem was discussed in the Diet and in February 1956 the Minister for Transport reported to the Prime Minister regarding *Mines Made by the Soviet Union in the Sea of Japan and Cautionary Measures*. According to that report, during the period from July 1950 to 1955 a total of 306 mines were discovered in the vicinity of Japan (132 floating mines and 174 washed-ashore mines). Moreover, the symbols and numbers of the Soviet Union were on these mines, and it was determined that they were mines made by the Soviet Union based on the perspective of maritime weather. Floating mines were also confirmed from 1955 onwards and 90 floating mines were discovered over the period from 1956 to 1963. In other words, a total of 396 floating mines were discovered between 1950 and 1963, and the areas in which they were discovered consisted of 355 mines (90%) in

the Sea of Japan, 12 mines (3%) in the Tsugaru Strait, 13 mines (3%) in the seas surrounding Kyushu, and 16 mines (4%) in other seas.

## Conclusion

Near the end of 2017, a floating and washed-ashore wooden ship that seemed to be from the Korean Peninsula became big news. Over the three years from 2014 to 2016 the Japan Coast Guard confirmed 176 cases of floating and washed-ashore wooden ships, etc. that seemed to be from the Korean Peninsula. The characteristics of the seasonal winds and tidal currents in the Sea of Japan have not changed since time immemorial. Wooden ships floating on the surface of the sea are easily affected by the wind. Even though floating mines, which are only partially visible on the surface of the sea, are not easily affected by the wind, the historical fact that the floating mines have mainly washed ashore on the coasts of the Sea of Japan demonstrates that the route on which they float tends to be the same.

The mines used in the Korean War have mainly washed ashore on the coasts of the Sea of Japan and have threatened the lives of the Japanese people. I hope the readers of this article have gained a good understanding that the impact of the mines had been long-term and wide-ranging. According to a statement by the US Chief of Naval Operations in 2009, excluding the weapons of the United States, probably 1,000,000 mines of at least 300 types are possessed by at least 60 navies around the world.

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