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MINE WARFARE: Status of the Navy's Mine Countermeasure Capabilities and Plans

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Before the
Subcommittee on Seapower and Strategic and
Critical Materials
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss the results of our review of the Navy's mine countermeasures capabilities and plans. You asked us to report on the Navy's progress in improving its capability to clear U.S. ports if they were mined. Accordingly, we reviewed

-- the mining threat to U.S. ports, harbors, and coastal waterways;
-- the Navy's plans to counter the perceived threat; and
-- the status of programs and systems established to counter this threat.

My statement is a brief unclassified summary of our findings in these three areas. I am prepared to discuss them in more detail in a closed session.

U.S. maritime strategy assumes that wars will be fought overseas, not on U.S. territory. A successful mining attack could significantly delay the reinforcement and resupply of allied forces by preventing ships from breaking out of port or others from returning for reprovisioning. The Navy is responsible for clearing safe passage for combatant ships out of U.S. military ports and for reinforcement/resupply ships from other major U.S. ports within specific time frames.

The Navy's mine countermeasures forces should be prepared to hunt, sweep, and/or neutralize mines. Mine hunting consists of

detecting, locating, and classifying mines. Mines are swept by equipment that is towed through the water and cuts the cables on moored mines, or simulates ship characteristics and causes the mines to detonate harmlessly. Mine neutralization includes actions taken to avoid, remove, or destroy mines.

Most of the Navy ships and related equipment, which are currently available to clear mined ports, are nearing the end of their service lives. The Navy is in the process of replacing these assets, and as of January 1989, the Navy planned to spend about $1.7 billion in fiscal years 1987 through 1991, for the development and acquisition of mine countermeasures ships, helicopters, and equipment. However, these acquisitions are experiencing a variety of problems.

For example, the Navy is conducting its surface mine countermeasures operations with 21 oceangoing minesweepers (MSOs) that are over 30 years old, 18 of which are in the Reserves. The Navy has begun replacing the 21 MSOs with 14 MCM-1 class ships. For minesweeping, both classes of ships use similar acoustic and mechanical sweeps. However, the mine-hunting and mine neutralization capabilities of the MCM-1 are improved.

Originally, the acquisition strategy (dated August 31,1983) called for the first MCM-1 ship to be delivered in September of 1985 and the last one in October of 1989. Five ships were to have been

delivered by now. However, because of design and production problems, the first ship was delivered in August 1987, 23 months behind schedule. The lead shipbuilder--Peterson Builders--has resolved its production problems, but the second shipbuilder--Marinette Marine--still has technical problems. The Congress delayed funding the Navy's request to procure the last three ships because of the program delay and cost overruns.

The Navy's port breakout plans involve having mine countermeasures forces break out of one port, transit to another port, and break into it. The plans are varied based on different environmental conditions such as water depth and bottom conditions, the type of mine threat expected, the type of mine countermeasures assets available to clear the mines, and the particular Q-route that needs to be cleared. Q-routes are the established channels that ships use to transit between a port and the open ocean. Untimely or extended mine countermeasures efforts in the first port would delay arrival at the second port. Thus, ships in the second port might face a choice of either staying in port longer or exiting through a potential mine field.

The strategy for sequential port clearance depends on detailed Q-route surveys being completed before hostilities commence. During these surveys, the Navy charts all mine-like objects in the Q-routes. Data from a detailed route survey would reduce the time and the effort required for exploratory and reconnaissance

minesweeping operations, expedite port breakout, and increase the effectiveness and safety of the mine countermeasures forces during a conflict. With complete, updated surveys, port breakout can proceed quickly since a mine-hunting effort only has to investigate mine-like objects not previously identified during Q-route survey operations. Because of limitations on the availability of assets and deployment schedules the Navy has only made a few detailed Q-route surveys. However, if detailed surveys are not complete and updated, the Navy could still successfully break out of port but, it would take longer.

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In summary, we found that the Navy recognizes that its mine countermeasures equipment is nearing the end of its service life, and has initiated several programs to acquire new and improved equipment. However, technical and funding problems have delayed the development and acquisition of these new assets. Also, Q-route surveys are behind schedule because most of the ships scheduled to do these surveys have been employed in Persian Gulf-related operations. Thus, if war were to occur at this time and U.S. ports were mined, the Navy would have to break out of U.S. ports without the aid of updated Q-route surveys.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my prepared statement. We would be pleased to respond to any questions.