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# 1      *Loss of Pirate and Pledge*

*We have lost control of the seas to a nation without a Navy, using pre-World War I weapons, laid by vessels that were utilized at the time of the birth of Christ.*

Rear Adm. Allan Smith  
In charge of the advance force at Wonsan

In the late morning of 12 October 1950, six minesweepers, *Pirate* (AM-275), *Pledge* (AM-277), *Incredible* (AM-249), *Redhead* (AMS-34), *Kite* (AMS-22), and *Endicott* (DMS-35) commenced mine clearance operations in the outer reaches of the harbor at Wonsan, on North Korea's east coast. They spearheaded the efforts of a small group of nineteen such vessels (10 American, 8 Japanese, and 1 Republic of Korea) assembled there to open the port to an armada of Allied troop ships waiting offshore. *Pirate*, the guide in a "protective" port echelon formation, was steering 258 degrees true with sweep gear streamed astern, diverted to port and starboard to increase the swath of water she could clear with each pass. As the lead ship, she was at greatest risk from the contact mines that lay hidden in the waters ahead, since her gear afforded her only a limited measure of safety from sea-emplaced munitions that she could only hope had already passed safely under her hull or far enough away down her port or starboard side not to blow her up. *Pledge*, the second ship, was stationed off *Pirate's* port quarter, proceeding in the swept path cleared by the lead ship's port sweep gear. *Incredible* was similarly positioned off *Pledge's* port quarter. Following these three "working" minesweepers were *Redhead* and *Kite*, the former stationed on *Pirate's* starboard float and the latter on *Incredible's* port float (devices that supported the sweep gear and at the same time provided a visual reference of its location beneath the water behind the vessel). *Redhead's*

job was to lay bright orange-colored Dan Buoys to mark the boundaries of the cleared channel, through which 50,000 marines and soldiers of the U.S. Tenth Corps would have to traverse to conduct a planned Allied landing eight days later. *Kite*, her 3-inch gun muzzle bared, was responsible for disposing of any surfaced mines. (Contact mines whose moors are severed by cutters attached to the sweep wires rise to the surface to be dealt with by naval gunfire from any of a number of ships: destroyers, minesweepers, auxiliary vessels, or pretty much anything with a gun on it.) *Endicott* was positioned astern of the formation to provide protection with 4 single 5"/38 caliber gun mounts and four 40mm and five 20mm batteries. (Congressional Medal of Honor winner John Bulkeley had commanded her in 1944 before she was converted to a minesweeper on 30 May 1945.) An armada of 250 warships and transports waited tensely offshore as the sweepers worked to clear an approach route through waters containing 3,000 Soviet mines that North Korean vessels, assisted by Soviet military personnel, had sown

to prevent the troops from landing.<sup>1</sup>

The minesweepers were operating in a battle-ready state known as Condition Able (watertight doors and hatches closed and dogged to minimize flooding in the event of a mine strike) and had set the special minesweeping condition. All crewmembers wore life jackets and helmets, and personnel not required to operate the ship had been

Photo 1-2



A portion of the amphibious shipping, which had been waiting offshore, after it entered Wonsan's outer harbor on 26 October 1950. Sin-Do island (also known as Rei-To) is in the foreground. Umi-Do is the small island in the left distance.

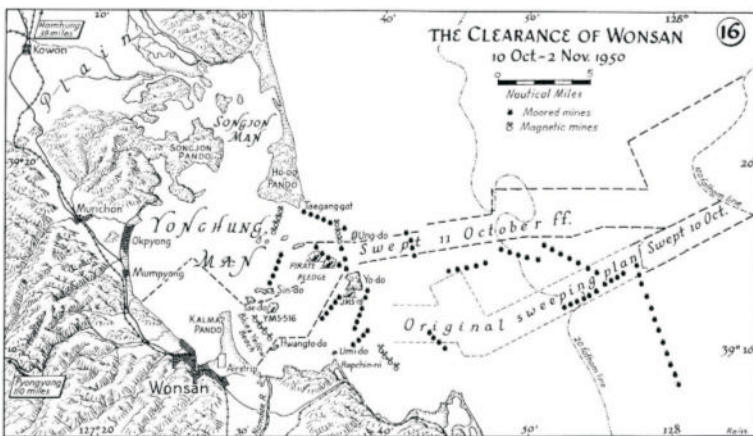
(Official U.S. Navy Photograph from the National Archives)

brought topside and dispersed to minimize casualties. To provide added protection, a lookout had been posted in the eyes of the ship and the degaussing system energized. Mindful of the loss of the minesweeper *Magpie* (AMS-25) and damage to destroyers *Brush* (DD-745) and *Mansfield* (DD-728) in recent weeks by mines off the east coast of Korea, the men were particularly attentive and on their guard. It was

the third day of such operations at Wonsan, a job that on paper called for dozens of minesweepers but was being carried out by the few available. Earlier that morning, an attempt at countermining the area that the ships would clear took place when 39 carrier planes, armed with 1,000-pound bombs fused to explode at a depth of 25 feet, attempted to bomb a five-mile lane past the island of Yo-do. However, this effort had been largely unsuccessful. Proper spacing of the bombs proved difficult for the pilots owing to lack of control procedures and malfunction of smoke floats, and the results, although spectacular amounts of water had been thrown up, were not fruitful. Other measures to reduce the danger the sweepers would face were absent or impaired, and the helicopter assigned to search visually for mines could communicate with the ships only by relay through the *Endicott*.<sup>2</sup>

After transiting the navigation channel used previously by Soviet naval forces that had occupied the harbor facilities, the sweepers altered course to port in order to pass between the two islands of Yo-do (also called Rei-to) and Ung-do and, at 11:12, on a beautifully clear, sunny and brisk morning, the formation entered the unswept waters of Wonsan Harbor (see map 1-1). Shortly thereafter, *Pirate*'s ready ammunition boxes were undogged and her 3-inch gun manned as a precaution against possible enemy shore-battery fire. About thirty minutes later, as the ships were coming left around Yo-do, they cut the first

Map 1-1



U.S. Navy minesweepers *Pirate* and *Pledge*, Japanese minesweeper No. 14, and Republic of Korea minesweeper *YMS-516* were all lost to mines while clearing Wonsan Harbor (Source: James A. Field, Jr.: *History of United States Naval Operations: Korea*)

mine. As the sweeps proceeded further into the harbor, they cut many more, which bobbed in rapid succession to the surface. *Pirate* swept five moored-contact mines with her starboard gear and one with her port gear; spaced about 50 yards apart, they lay on a north-south line between Yo-do and Ung-do islands. *Pledge* swept three with her port gear, and *Incredible* cut still four more. From the height to which they surged after reaching the surface, it was estimated the mine casings had lain about fifteen feet beneath the tranquil waters. About this time, Lt. Cdr. Bruce Hyatt, the officer in tactical command embarked aboard *Pirate*, received information from the helicopter pilot that a large patch of mines lay ahead, and that at least three more lines of mines could be seen in the vicinity of his sweepers, bounded by the islands of Ung-do, Yo-do, Mo-do, and Sin-do. Based on this information, and because he did not know the exact position of the mine lines nor the angles at which they lay, he made a quick decision to abandon the original plan to turn south and to continue in the reported Russian-swept channel instead.<sup>3</sup>

Around noon, *Pirate* received from *Endicott* a report that shallow mines visible beneath the ocean surface had been sighted by a helicopter in an area bounded by small islands, comprising three separate mine lines. Thereafter, underwater contacts began appearing in quick succession on *Pirate's* sonar screen, the first one reported at 250 degrees true, range 100 yards. Within seconds, the Commanding Officer received a report of a shallow mine lying beneath the surface close aboard the starboard bow, and he attempted unsuccessfully by a series of rudder orders to maneuver his ship clear of the unseen threat.<sup>4</sup> A former crewmember recalls the ensuing mine detonation (which occurred at 12:09 p.m.) and subsequent events:

Everyone on the bridge was blown in different directions. Some were blown over the side, and I was blown to the main deck. I can only remember being showered by what smelled like diesel oil and tons of dust and debris. When I finally realized what had happened, I was picking myself up from the main deck. I heard a shipmate yelling and saw he was trapped under several hundred feet of 2-inch diameter mooring line that had been coiled on top of a ventilating unit. When the ship listed, the line slid off and trapped his legs. One other shipmate and myself were able to get him out from under as the ship was going down. It had listed first to starboard, then back to port, and then to starboard again as we slid off into the water. The other man and myself were able to drag the injured man away from the ship before it

went completely under water, which was in about four minutes. I remember the water was very cold and at first most of the crew began swimming towards the shore until the beach guns opened fire and began blowing people out of the water. They also hit the *Pledge*, and it went down right after us.<sup>5</sup>

The explosion rendered the Commanding Officer unconscious for a period of about 30 seconds, and he regained the use of his faculties as a resulting huge column of water ceased falling and *Pirate* was righting herself from a port list of about 20 degrees. He asked for an estimate of damage, but received none as communications equipment was out and the phone talkers were temporarily dazed. The vessel began to heel to starboard at a steady rate with no indication of slowing, her stern settling into the sea. When the list reached approximately 15 degrees, the Commanding Officer ordered the crew to abandon ship. The word was passed by mouth after the cord for the ship's whistle had been pulled without effect to signal this action. The abandonment was quiet and orderly and the men slipped over the side and swam clear of the ship. Those who were able hung onto rafts and floater nets. The ship's boat could not be launched because the forward fall had been fouled with loose gear by the explosion. The Commanding Officer left the ship with its fantail completely submerged and with a list of some 45 degrees to starboard. The mast narrowly missed several survivors when it struck the water and the vessel turned over, exposing about forty feet of its keel forward, and sank. Barely four minutes had passed from *Pirate's* mine strike to her passage to the bottom beneath the disturbed waters of the bay.<sup>6</sup>

The former *Pirate* crewmember recounts the events after his ship went down:

After seeing the beach was not a safe place to go, everyone started swimming out to sea in hopes of being picked up by one of our other ships. The survivors were all floating in the water trying to dodge the heavy beach gunfire and finally planes swooped over the beach and began dropping the bombs. Every time a bomb struck a gun mount, we could see the ball of fire. I was later told these planes were supposed to bomb the area before we got there, but, apparently, due to failed communications, they didn't get notified until all the action had taken place. The *Endicott* was in the area and sent all its lifeboats in to start picking up survivors. They picked up the badly injured first and made several trips back until all the remaining survivors were picked

up. When we boarded the *Endicott*, the crewmembers were kind enough to donate as many dry clothes as they could to care for the survivors. After being transferred to the destroyer *Southerland*, we traveled most of the night back to Pusan, Korea where we were transferred to the hospital ship *Repose* for treatment.<sup>7</sup>

Boats from the *Pledge*, *Incredible*, and *Endicott* took the wounded aboard and towed the rafts and nets to the latter two ships. Small boats, helicopters, a long-range patrol plane, and underwater demolition team divers embarked in the high-speed transport *Diachenko* (APD-123) searched the area and recovered as many men as possible. Ten of twelve missing men were engineers, undoubtedly trapped below as they worked to provide power to their ships and keep them afloat.<sup>8</sup>

Immediately after the mine detonation, as *Pledge* slowed to launch her whaleboat to recover survivors, previously undetected shore batteries on the tiny island of Sin-do, located about three miles off *Pirate's* port bow, opened fire on the sinking vessel and those members of her crew already in the water. The shelling continued after the minesweeper went down, and shrapnel from bursts overhead fell out of the sky like hot hailstones among survivors, who were also receiving small arms fire from the island. *Pledge* responded with her single 3-inch gun, whereupon the enemy fire shifted to her. During the ensuing gun dual, 13 mines lay floating on the surface and nearby countless others lay undetected beneath the sea. The first thought of *Pledge's* commanding officer, Lt. Richard Young, was to rescue *Pirate's* survivors and continue with his tasking. However, in view of the high concentration of shore battery fire, he ordered all battle stations manned as quickly as possible to counter both the artillery fire coming from Sin-do and small caliber fire from Yo-do. He then made a quick radio call for air support and ordered his minesweeping gear cut. In response to enemy rounds now directed at *Pledge* and *Pirate* crewmen, *Pledge* and *Endicott* commenced counter battery fire and pressed ahead with rescue operations while a PBM seaplane circled overhead to spot the effects of the vessels' gunfire on enemy positions. *Pledge* continued to fire until all her ready 3-inch ammunition had been expended. By now, Sin-do's shore battery had bracketed her and Young knew his position was fast becoming untenable, since enemy rounds were now finding his ship as it was being slowly set seaward toward *Pirate*. With the hope that he might turn away from the sinking vessel back into safe swept waters, he ordered "Left full rudder; starboard engine, ahead two-thirds." At 12:20, thirty

degrees into her turn, *Pledge* struck a mine amidships on the starboard side near the forward engine room, and the resulting explosion split the starboard side of the hull beneath the waterline. When Young, who had been temporarily knocked out by the blast, regained his senses and saw the status of his ship and crew (he thought all of his men had been seriously injured), he gave the order to abandon ship.<sup>9</sup>

A *Pledge* survivor remembers mine clearance operations that day, the loss of *Pledge* thereafter due to both enemy mine and artillery damage, and rescuers trying to save the sailors in the water in the face of enemy fire:

We entered Wonsan harbor with the *Pirate* off our starboard bow. About a mile in, the *Pirate* hit a mine, then the shore batteries, plus everything they had opened up on us. . . . we were returning fire the minute they started firing. We had just completed our turn when we took a shell in the bridge and hit a mine at the same time. . . . Ships tried to reach us but the shore batteries drove them back. The USS *Endicott* with its UDT team and fast boats rescued us. We were in the water about 4-5 hours. . . . The wounded were transferred to the hospital ship *Repose*. From the *Repose* we were taken to the Japanese transport ship *Kauna Maru* and then to Sasebo. At Sasebo, we boarded the USS *Piedmont* for transportation to San Diego, California.<sup>10</sup>

Water rushed into the holes in her hull caused by artillery fire and the mine strike and *Pledge* sank within an hour. In quick succession, two ships had been lost, 15 sailors were missing or dead, and the remaining survivors, many wounded, would endure both the cold sea and enemy fire during a very long time in the water until their eventual rescue, transfer to a series of vessels, receipt of medical care and, ultimately, return home.<sup>11</sup>

The highest award that may be received by a Navy ship is the Presidential Unit Citation, which is the unit equivalent of the Navy Cross for extraordinary heroism not justifying the Medal of Honor. Although the vessel itself was resting on the harbor floor at Wonsan, *Pirate* (along with Commander Mine Division 32 and staff serving in her) received this award for the courageous actions of her crew on her last day of service. Signed by Secretary of the Navy C.S. Thomas for the President, the citation reads:

For outstanding performance in action as a minesweeping unit during operations against enemy aggressor forces in Korea on 11 and 12

October 1950. Operating as a part of Task Element 95.62, the USS *Pirate* assisted in the extremely hazardous and difficult task of sweeping and buoying a channel, 2,000 yards wide and 14 miles in length, to the outer limits of Wonsan Harbor, during which time heavy concentrations of enemy contact mines were swept in the face of the ever-present threat of mine explosions and attack from hidden hostile gun batteries on the beaches and surrounding islands. On 12 October, after leading the assault formation in a dual role of Flagship for Commander Mine Division Thirty-Two and minesweeper in the clearance of a channel through two heavy contact-type minefields, the *Pirate* encountered a third field of extreme density, struck a mine and sank in approximately four minutes with casualties numbered at six killed and forty-three wounded. During rescue operations, her survivors were repeatedly fired upon by enemy shore batteries and machine guns. The fortitude, superb teamwork and unrelenting determination of each individual serving on board the *Pirate* were contributing factors in the success of vital minesweeping operations and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service.

The Navy also awarded Silver Star medals to Lt. Cdr. Bruce M. Hyatt, USNR, Commander Mine Division Thirty-Two, Lt. Cornelius E. McMullen, USN, and Lt. Richard O. Young, USN, the commanding officers of *Pirate* and *Pledge*.<sup>12</sup>

*Pirate* and *Pledge*, built entirely of steel, had already been obsolete when constructed and commissioned seven years earlier. The employment of magnetic mines by Germany in World War II had placed at great risk “steel-hulls” operating in the same waters as these sea denial weapons, whose presence a ship most probably would not recognize. To thwart magnetic mines hidden in the depths, triggered by disturbances to the earth’s magnetic field caused by the passage of vessels constructed of or carrying a sufficient quantity of ferrous metals, naval architects once again began to design wooden hulled ships for service in the U.S. Navy, although they were diesel engined rather than sail propelled.<sup>13</sup>

The idea of minesweepers constructed of wood was not new in 1950. During World War II, the U.S. had some 592 wooden mine craft, consisting of 111 coastal minesweepers and 481 motor minesweepers, the latter the workhorses of the fleet. One might well wonder why some of these ships were not used at Wonsan. Seven former motor minesweepers were there, *Chatterer*, *Merganser*, *Mockingbird*, *Osprey*, *Partridge*, *Redbead*, and *Kite*. Most of the others, however, had been scrapped, sold, transferred to other countries, laid up, or placed in reserve status following the war. Moreover,



cuts in the 1948 defense budget had sounded the death knell of the mine countermeasures force when the Navy was forced to reduce or eliminate programs. These included *Minecraft*, Pacific Fleet (the command responsible for support of mine clearance operations in the Pacific during the war), as a result of which Pacific Fleet minesweeping became a collateral duty in service and cruiser-destroyer commands. Ultimately, the Navy retained only 37 mine countermeasures craft in the active fleet, dispersed over several geographical areas, with another 143 in reserve. The Navy pressed reserve steel-hulled minesweepers into duty during the Korean War because they were available.<sup>14</sup>

The loss of the fleet ocean tug *Sarsi* to a mine during the Korean War and damage to destroyers *Barton*, *E.G. Small*, *Walke*, *Mansfield*, and *Brush* served as a wake up call. Although the Navy by its own long-standing doctrine still required a sufficient number of sweepers to enable it to go anywhere at any time, it now had too few to serve the fleet. Additionally, the loss of minesweepers *Magpie*, *Partridge*, *Pirate*, and *Pledge* demonstrated that pressing a few remnants of World War II into service when “sea mines began to shout” was not good enough. *Pirate* was in a caretaker status, out of service, in reserve, when ordered for duty in Korea on 14 August 1950 at Yokosuka, Japan. *Pledge* had similarly been in reserve before her status was changed to reduced commission on 10 January. Rear Adm. Smith sent a cable to the Navy’s Washington headquarters that succinctly characterized the dismal Wonsan experience and helped energize the sea service, spurring the construction of large numbers of mine warfare vessels employing an entirely new design. The service of the largest of these is covered in the author’s *Wooden Ships and Iron Men: The U.S. Navy’s Ocean Minesweepers, 1953–1994*. This present work is devoted to the history of the World War II coastal minesweepers (AMc), motor minesweepers (YMS), and auxiliary motor minesweepers (AMS) [former YMS-class ships] that served in the Korean War.<sup>15</sup>