

CHIP SEYMOUR, USN: '72-'73 “OP. END SWEEP”

Chip Seymour: My name is Chip Seymour. I'm from Annapolis, Maryland. I served in the United States Navy in the surface warfare community as soon as I graduated from the Naval Academy in 1965 through 1989. My time in Vietnam as you can imagine from 1965 until 1973, that was the conflict, but in 1972 I became commanding officer of a minesweeper. We were the ones sweeping the mines leading to Haiphong and finished that in 1973. Chip, C-H-I-P, Seymour, S-E-Y-M-O-U-R. I was born in Norfolk, Virginia. My dad was also in the Navy, also a surface warfare officer. He was in Naval Academy class of 1939, and as you can imagine since he stayed for a whole career, I went from place to place to place to place. Fast forwarding it to before I became a midshipman in the United States Naval Academy with the class of 1965, I lived in Hawaii and I graduated from Iolani School in 1961 and then went right to the Naval Academy.

Producer: You finished the Naval Academy in 65, obviously this war is just starting to really gather some steam, did you have a sense that you would be going to this little country on the far side of the world that half of America, three-quarters of America, couldn't even identify?

Chip Seymour: I would say that nobody knew it was going to last as long as it did. In 1965, we had our first prisoner of war captured, Everett Alvarez, and ... Unfortunately between 1965 and 1973, we lost 58,000 Americans. During those times I was on various destroyer escorts, destroyers, and finally ended up ironically enough the very end of Vietnam being involved with Operation End Sweep on the USS Fortify, MSO-446, which is an ocean going minesweeper. Those 5 minesweepers in Guam had anticipated the signing of the Paris Peace Accords. We were actually moved to Subic Bay, Philippines, so we could be closer to Haiphong Harbor because it turned out when the Paris Peace Accords was signed, there was a connection between sweeping those mines and the release of our prisoners of war.

That all took place, really 1973 was when we finally headed over to Subic Bay up to Haiphong. In 1973, we headed over to Haiphong on the 27th of January, and we started minesweeping on the 6th of February.

Producer: Where were you stationed at various points?

Chip Seymour: I was stationed entirely all my sea time was in the Pacific, so I was on a destroyer escort, a destroyer, another destroyer ... Plane guarding behind

the aircraft carriers as they were launching and recovering aircraft, providing gunfire support for our Navy, our Marine Corps, our Army. That was pretty much what went on except for the time was ashore, which was not very often, but from 1965 to 1972, it was pretty much plane guarding and shore bombardment.

Producer: Now when you say shore bombardment, where were you stationed when that was occurring?

Chip Seymour: The ships were based out of San Diego but we were primarily deploy usually 7 months at a time, and again, because of what was going on in the Vietnamese waters, and lobbing our shells to support the Marine Corps and the United States Army from the Vietnamese, the North Vietnamese, so we were doing that.

Producer: You were actually in the Vietnam conflict earlier in this bombardment. Where were some of the positions that you were-

Chip Seymour: I was on Yankee Station and we were in various parts of the North Vietnamese coast where our marines and our army personnel were needing support. We were providing as were many of the destroyers and cruisers and aircraft carriers, providing support and protecting their lives.

Producer: How many tours actually were you involved in during that period of time?

Chip Seymour: Let's see. I'd say, 1, 2, 3, probably 3, if not 4, deployments overseas, and again they were all around 7 months in length. We had pretty much withdrawn by 1972, all but maybe 50,000 or so American troops. Then as you pointed out, the North Vietnamese got a little nasty again, and we ended up doing the Christmas bombing in 1972. We also on May 10, 1972, President Nixon ordered Haiphong Harbor to be mined by our aircraft. I know that date because amazingly that's the day I became commanding officer of the USS Fortify, this minesweeper, that I commanded. It all of a sudden became a matter of, "Oh, well, we're going to be doing this someday, are we not?"

It was fascinating because you could imagine I think since Korea we really hadn't been used a minesweeper. All of a sudden we had to get up to speed in a hurry, and we did. We had a wonderful crew. We had about 6 officers and 75 enlisted. We spent months just preparing on how to do our operation as a minesweeper, and we were moved to Subic Bay, Philippines, from our home port of Guam. There were 5 minesweepers then. They were eventually complemented by 2 from Pearl Harbor and 3 from Long Beach, so in the end there were 10 minesweepers involved

with this Operation Mine Sweep, the demining of Haiphong. We didn't know when the effect of that Christmas bombing was going to take affect to the point where the Paris Peace talks would in fact result in something fruitful, i.e., the end of the conflict.

That did happen on the 27th of January 1973, and all of a sudden, us, the 5 minesweepers in Subic Bay headed over to Haiphong, and that's when we started the operation. We started actually sweeping. The minesweepers swept the approaches to Haiphong starting the 6th of February 1973. Now the approaches, not the channel, the approaches because we were soon to have mobile helicopter mine warfare involved, minesweeping involved, and we had big heavy ships like LPD and LPH, and a lot of helos. What we did was swept those areas where those big ships would be anchored and where helicopter operations could commence. We did that and they came into play around the 27th of February, about a month after we swept.

Interesting enough, the North Vietnamese started balking about releasing the second phase of POWs. Under bad visibility and also at night, I remember that evening very well, all the ships that were positioned to continue the sweeping, and now with the mobile mine helicopters actually sweeping the channel of Haiphong ... We left, we just left. I can just imagine the North Vietnamese's shocked expressions when the next morning and looked out there all those ships were gone. It didn't take very long, very short period of time, the POWs resumed coming back. The Vietnamese realized we better get those ... Incredible heroes back, and so we continued sweeping after that.

That was very helpful to me as commanding officer of that ship because first, I was a young commanding officer but it was a fairly simple leadership opportunity because first, everybody wanted to come back home safe and sound, but two, we really hooked the minesweeping operations to the return of the POWs. When the POWs phase 2 stopped, we made sure that the crew knew exactly this is why we're here. Our young people, my crew was very young, and we swept those mines for something like 60 straight days or the approaches to the channel. We swept from 6 a.m. in the morning until midnight, so it was challenging.

Producer: [inaudible 00:09:28].

Chip Seymour: Our bosses, Commander Task Force 78, Admiral McCauley, I'm sure knew exactly how many mines had been laid, I'm sure of that, but we as commanding officers and crews of these minesweepers were just simply told, not simply, but told, "Go sweep the approaches." Now, we didn't

know how many were actually laid, I didn't know, but we were just doing our job, just sweep those waters. There were magnetic mines and they were acoustic mines.

Producer: Explain those differences for us.

Chip Seymour: If your magnetic field is disturbed by a ship going in that area, it's going to blow the mine. Same thing if you have a particular frequency of your ship, a merchant ship for example, and it has the same frequency that will trigger an acoustic mine, that's going to go off. Interestingly enough, it surely validated the value of mine warfare because when we got close to the head of that channel, we looked down and there were over two dozen civilian merchant ships just sitting there. They weren't about to go down that channel knowing that they could be blown up.

Producer: If a junk came by, which is all made of wood, would that ship still trigger a magnetic mine?

Chip Seymour: Because minesweepers are what we called, degaussed, demagnetized, and they're wooden, we're safe to an extent. I would think that the junk would be relatively safe versus a metal ship. What we did to sweep these mines we would actually pull a magnetic tail, a magnetic piece of equipment, and we would pulse energy enough to we could affect, if there was a mine available, if it was still alive and many were not, most of them were not by design but the North Vietnamese didn't know that, we pulse this energy in the water, that would have blown the magnetic mine. We also made a racket with our noisemaker, our, I think it was called a V6, but whatever it was, there was a noisemaker that we also be pulled behind us but more on the side of the ship than directly astern of us.

This magtail went way out, maybe 2000 yards, and the acoustic device was not that far out but it made enough noise that between the two of them you would blow a magnetic mine or you would blow an acoustic mine. Now, we did this for a long, long time, many, many days, and my crew started getting a little complacent. They said, "Well, obviously they're all dead. We're just making sure they are dead." On occasion, a few of the battle helmets came off and some of the flak jackets came off because we started saying, "Yeah, we done this for 60 days," and the day we stopped up to the channel, the day we stopped that and the helos came in, one blew, and then all the helmets came back on and all of the life jackets went back on because you weren't sure. That was the only one that blew, but you have to do these sweeps, the sweeping, because you're not sure how many more out there might not have been programmed correctly.

There's a battery life in these mines. There's a battery life and the battery's going to die. I'm sure the planners back in 1972 must have realized, "Well, what kind of mines do we want to eventually sweep, and they could be relatively sweepable if you limited it to magnetic mines and acoustic mines. We have the capability on our minesweepers to sweep both kinds." I'm assuming that's what went into the planners' brains. Then they knew or they thought, and I'm not sure what the battery life was, but they must have known that, okay, we're going to set this battery life. The enemy will not know what the battery life is, but just in case the thing will last longer than the battery life is programmed, we're going to have to sweep those things. That's what happened.

Producer: You're sweeping and you come across a dead mine, do you hoist it out of the water and onto a barge or what do you do with it?

Chip Seymour: It just sits down there. It doesn't blow, they sit down there. All of these things are down below. We didn't pick them up.

Producer: You mean it sits down there.

Chip Seymour: It's just down in the water below the surface, way down below the surface. Any magnetic mine would've blown because what we were doing was sweeping. Any acoustic mine would've blown, but we didn't go down and recover them.

Producer: Were they anchored with a little bit of a weight buoy that holds in certain points underneath the surface? I don't quite understand how that works.

Chip Seymour: I'm not sure I understand that either, honestly. I just know that the magnetic mines were down below the surface. There were no little pennants up in the air saying, "Here I am." The same thing applied for the acoustic mines, so they were in fact there, somewhere in the water and nobody wanted to tread on that water.

Producer: They represented no danger once they were dead to any ship, enemy or otherwise, that would go through.

Chip Seymour: Correct. Correct. They were not like the World War II contact mines. Many of those mines were actually located and detonated. We did not have to worry about that. We had to worry about the magnetic, the acoustic, and we had the capability to blow them both, which we did. What nobody really knew is how do you make sure that they're dead and so it turns out one of them wasn't, so that got everyone's attention. When the helos finished their minesweeping in the channel itself, they

actually put, I think a modified LST, a navy ship, full of a lot of stuff like foam and they drove it right down the channel to prove to the Vietnamese that we had in fact done our job, and it was safe to transit. Once that happened, then I'm assuming those over two dozen merchant ships finally got under way and got out of the channel. I would think there were hundreds for sure, and again if they don't blow, they don't blow.

Everything we did in getting ready for the big heavy ships, that would be support ships for the helos, nothing blew there, but once you got a little closer to that channel that one blew, which must have gotten everyone's attention. That was the only one that blew, but at least we proved, not only to ourselves but to the North Vietnamese, that there were safe waters now.

Producer: The other thing I'd like to ask you about is that obviously through history mines were always swept by other ships. This whole aspect of bringing in helicopters to assist in the sweeping was really, wasn't that a new operation?

Chip Seymour: It was very much new.

Producer: Have they ever been used before, like that before?

Chip Seymour: No, this was the first time we had a combined surface minesweeping operation and an airborne minesweeping operation. Before we got into the actual end sweep, they, being the helos and the airborne mine countermeasures experts, had been practicing doing just exactly what they did. They kept dragging this, we called a mop, I think. It was a magnetic orange pipe, but it was a lot more sophisticated than an orange pipe. When they went down the channel, the helos would be dragging the pipe and that's what blew that one mine, but rather than having the minesweepers go all the way up the channel, this was certainly a lot safer obviously. We wouldn't have a crew at risk. It was very effective. You had both what we did as the minesweepers and then the helos were a little safer because they were up in the air away from having themselves in harm's way.

Producer: That orange pipe that they were dragging, are they dragging it in the water or just over the surface of the water?

Chip Seymour: They were dragging it ... Pretty close to the surface of the water, but I can't remember what the depth was. Yes, they were dragging it. You could see the wake in- I think we could see the wake of that thing. It was

effective and it did blow that mine, and again, the whole idea was ... You're not going go anywhere if you're the enemy if you think you're going to be blown up in the channel or outside the channel. Again, what I think is so important for the American public to know is you have these young 75-member crews out there on these minesweepers, as an example, who were working 18 hours a day knowing that their hard working commitment and selfless service to our country was directly responsible for the release of the POWs, and particularly when the North Vietnamese stopped that for a short while.

If anybody had any idea that maybe this has nothing to do with the POWs coming back, all of a sudden they knew for a fact that it was. That was very, very satisfying to all of us. Once we started sweeping on the 6th of February, if not before, I'm not sure whether the POWs were in fact starting to come home on the 27th when they signed the agreement, but certainly from the 6th on when we were sweeping, and then we stopped on the 27th of February because the next group of POWs were being held and they were supposed to have been released. All of a sudden we left, everybody left. The North Vietnamese must have been amazed looking at there, nobody is there, and that certainly was the impetus [inaudible 00:19:51] return, continue the return of the POWs.

Producer: By the way, where did you go in that 24-hour hiatus?

Chip Seymour: We went in various directions in the waters but farther away from, to the point where the Vietnamese, [inaudible 00:20:07] they looked in Haiphong looked out, there was nobody there. We went various directions and just made the point, we're not doing this anymore. The interesting thing was for the minesweepers, back to that for a second, we were only about 30 miles, I believe, from Haiphong Harbor itself as were sweeping, and then we handed it over to the helos once we got to the channel.

Producer: You mentioned that a VC ship actually somehow accidentally came into the sweeping area. Tell me about that.

Chip Seymour: When you have your sweep gear out, your equipment out, you're pretty well hamstrung. You've got special day signals that's indicating that I cannot course and speed very quickly here. I've got stuff behind me, the magtail, we called it, and then the noisemaker on the other side. We simply were boxed in. We have to go this way and you're stuck. The rules to the road change. You can't just give way to somebody or let's say you have to give way, they have to give way to you. You're stuck. It turned out that while we were in this situation, unable to change course and

speed, a North Vietnamese gunboat came by, and this was very early in the minesweeping operation. If I remember correctly, they actually had their guns trained on us, but I'm not, looking back now I'm not so sure they did but they certainly had guns. They were not supposed to be there. In fact, we had a couple of destroyers put with us to make sure that nothing untoward would happen to the minesweepers as we were sweeping.

All I remember was sending Admiral McCauley a message indicating that this had happened and it wasn't well taken by my crew or me. From then on, we didn't have any more Vietnamese boats out there, none. That was certainly an exciting little moment because we didn't know what the guy was going to do. We didn't know whether he didn't know the war was over or what he was thinking. It wasn't a very pleasant couple of hours.

Producer: During the 60 days, you said there was 5 ships originally in your group. How many ships did this grow to be, this entire Operation End Sweep?

Chip Seymour: The minesweepers became 10 in number throughout the time, not ever all at once because we had a couple of situations where we had a fire on board one of them and one of them was going back to Guam for an overhaul. We had the other, that was enough to do the job, and then we had the LPDs and the LPHs. We had a couple of destroyers. What the final numbers was, I have to go look at that. I know at one point in time we took a picture and there were 19 actually in the waters, but it might have gone more than 19. It was fascinating though because again nobody was complaining. Nobody complained because we all knew what was happening. We all knew we're doing this to get those heroes back in that horrible situation as a POW for far too many years, and we also had lost 58,000.

Producer: It started almost 10 years earlier and it was finally coming to an end. What was the sense of the men's feelings that you-

Chip Seymour: I think that we were all very, we were very excited that the war was over, but we were very excited to have the opportunity to do something for our country that has everything to do with bringing those POWs home. I think there was euphoria but it was certainly time for this war to end and I'm glad it did.

Producer: This is probably a dumb question. Was there television on those ships that you could see some of the POWs being released in the evening? I don't know if you got anything or did you hear- How was it communicated to you?

Chip Seymour: We didn't have email back then and all that kind of stuff. We had messages and so we got messages indicating they were being released, but we didn't see the pictures, not for a long, long time. I still would think that my crew and myself when we see the video of them coming home, we knew that it was time for them to come home. Not that we were the be all, end all bring them home, of course, but the point is we had some part to play in their release and we felt very good about that. It was, I say as leadership, not a difficult thing to be a commanding officer of a minesweeper doing something like that with that cause and effect, so it was fairly ... Fairly simple leadership exercise, but yeah it was still hard work for those young people and they worked very, very hard.

That's the thing. I think the American public needs to know that all these folks that were on the LPDs, LPHs, the MSOs, the helos, they were all working incredibly long hours but for a good cause. The [crosstalk 00:25:28] LPH is a landing platform helicopter, was a helicopter aircraft carrier. LPD was a landing platform dock. I hope I have that right, had some amphibious support groups in it. The destroyers were there because they have guns and missiles, and they were protecting all of us in case something untoward might have happened. The minesweepers, MSOs or minesweeping ocean. There's also MSCs. We didn't have MSCs. They were coastal. We were actually out there doing it in a pretty touch environment.

I think Task Group Commander CTF78, it was Admiral McCauley, and he had a lot of people under him doing different things. The helo people had a different designator. The minesweeping surface people had a different designator. We were task group 78.2, [inaudible 00:26:34] 0.2s, 0.3s, 0.4s. Everybody had their own responsibility and they had their operational commander, but overall it was Admiral McCauley CTF78 Commander Task Force 78. Of course, above him was Commander of 7th Fleet, above him Commander of Pacific Fleet, and all the way up the chain of command.

Producer: I understand that while the helicopters were certainly had this element of safety, compared to the ships, they were pretty labor-intensive on keeping those damn things in the air properly. Were you aware of this other issue with the helicopters?

Chip Seymour: I think the fact that they had the LPHs and the LPDs and have facilities maintenance opportunities to maintain them, fix them, et cetera. Oh yes, I think what happens in the Navy, sometimes you say, "Well, if there's no war on, it must be pretty easy out there," but you've got to maintain your

equipment. You've got to maintain the ships. You've got to maintain the aircraft. You've got to maintain the helos. This was going on in a very brutal environment. Nobody's shooting at us, but still very difficult out there and people were doing that. If they needed a help, a part, or they needed something to be fixed, that's what those big ships were there for. Yeah, the whole time all this is going on, there's people working around the clock making sure it's an effective force.

Producer: All the POWs were released by the end of the 60-day operation?

Chip Seymour: I'll have to check that. I don't know the answer to that. Yes, I believe they were all released within two months of the Peace Accords being signed.

Producer: Are all those ships basically leaving the Tonkin Gulf at that point?

Chip Seymour: Piece-meal, I think. You needed 10, 9, 8, 7, et cetera. USS Fortify was ready for an upkeep overhaul-type environment, so we were finally released ... And we headed back to Guam in June. I think the other ships stayed a little bit longer until the whole thing was over. It was not just Haiphong. There were a couple of waterways they were also sweeping, but we were able to go back in June. We were pleased. Talk about euphoria. Everybody coming home after a long time. I think we were gone actually from the time we left Guam to the time we returned to Guam was 9 months, so it was a long deployment. That would normally be a leadership challenge, to say the least, but again when you have this opportunity to really help your country and certainly help the POWs, then it becomes certainly less onerous and morale was high.

We were in Guam. We got back to Guam. I was relieved as commanding officer in September of 73. My tour of duty was up. Somebody else came behind me and then I was given orders to the United States Naval Academy for my next tour of duty, which was great, but shorter. We actually were home a lot more.

Producer: Your reaction in April of 75 after all that work and the war's over, and then suddenly we find out that the North Vietnamese are roaring down Route 1 and taking Da Nang and on their way to Saigon, what was your reaction when you saw on the television that suddenly all these people trying to flee? This country that had agreed to a peace agreement to be separate countries was suddenly back at war, they were basically taking over and undoing everything we've done.

Chip Seymour: I think we all had different opinions. I think I was just simply exasperated. I'm not sure that I was terribly surprised. I don't know what I felt. I just

said, "That was a shame." I think the big feeling for a lot of us was 58,000 Americans killed, and now, for what? Personally, when I saw the high-and-dry merchant ships when we got to the head of the channel interdicting their supply routes ... Why didn't we do this way earlier, way earlier. Now, I'm sure there's some politics and concerns about different countries, et cetera, but, boy, if we had just stopped those supply routes in 65 rather than in 72, we would not have lost that many people.

Producer: How do you look back on this period of your life, that 9 months in 1972 and 1973.

Chip Seymour: I think it's the highlight of my career. I think all of us who were on those sweeps, all of use involved with that Operation End Sweep that we did something very special for our country. No matter what happened afterwards in my career. I was lucky enough to put a guided missile brigade in commission later on and things like that, but I think in all honestly, that was the highlight. It was certainly a great highlight putting a ship in commission with a great crew, but doing something that definitely impacted on the POW release was a real plus for us and I will never forget that.

Producer: Chip, I want to thank you for sharing your stories for us and-

Chip Seymour: Thank very much, Kenneth. Thank you for what MPT is doing to salute these veterans. It's terrific and we appreciate it very much.

Producer: Sure. You're welcome. Thanks.