

**GOODBYE DONG TAM:
The Troops Begin to Leave
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Early in 1969 President Richard Nixon announced that the US would begin withdrawing troops from South Vietnam. This was part of a program that he called "Vietnamization" of the war. South Vietnamese units were supposed to eventually take over the major responsibility for fighting the war. Part of that withdrawal process involved the 2nd Brigade of the 9th Infantry Division station at the combat base at Dong Tam. The 2nd Brigade, along with U.S. Navy elements formed what was known as The Mobile Riverine Force. Their mission was to carry the war to the enemy via the My Tho River. The infantry lived on board floating barracks ships stationed on the My Tho River. The Navy would carry the soldiers to their missions on fast attack boats instead of Huey helicopters. The Navy manned the boats and the Army slugged it out with the Viet Cong in that area of the Mekong Delta.

The base at Dong Tam had long been known as Mortar City, a nickname richly deserved due to the constant rocket and mortar attacks the base endured over the years. It was not a nice place to visit, and we never wanted to spend the night there. Between 6-8 July 1969 DASPO was assigned to document that withdrawal.

For weeks prior to the beginning of that withdrawal, armed forces radio (AFVN) had been running announcements offering to let any soldier from any other unit in-country with 90 days or less on their tour of duty sign up to join the 9th Division troops leaving the war. It seemed that soldiers who were part of the 2nd Brigade and who had more than 90 days left on their tours were being transferred to other brigades of the 9th Division that were not leaving the war zone. In the short term it was to be a downsizing of American forces on paper only.

On July 6th an honors ceremony commemorating the activities of both the 9th Division and the Navy Riverine Force was held on the USS Benewah, a self-propelled barracks ship anchored in the middle of the My Tho River. At the end of the ceremony aboard the Benewah, a US Navy force consisting of approximately thirty troop carriers and river assault boats passed in review.

We all hoped this was the beginning of a quick end to the war. Unfortunately, the war would continue for nearly three more years, and thousands of American troops were to die before the last military units were pulled out of South Vietnam early in 1973.

While I was covering the withdrawal ceremony on board the USS Benewah I carried with me a sense of *deja vu*. While photographing at the US Mortuary Facility-Personal Property Depot at Tan Son Nhut Airbase a week or so prior, I had saved from a trash can a diary belonging to a soldier who had lived on board the Benewah as part of a 9th Division infantry unit. Reading that diary had given me a true sense of what it was like to live and fight in that part of South Vietnam. To be standing on the deck of that same ship put a chill through me that is hard to describe. I had hoped to someday figure out who

that diary actually belonged to and return it to his family. Unfortunately there was not enough information in the diary to do this.

A Xerox copy of that diary is in this collection. The original is in a special collections library at La Salle University in Philadelphia.