

DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY
U. S. S. BENEWAH (APB-35)
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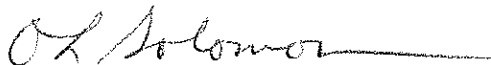
From: Commanding Officer, USS BENEWAH (APB35)
To: Chief of Naval Operations (OP-09B9)

Subj: Command History

Ref: (a) OPNAVINST 5750.12 of 8 Nov 1968

Encl: (1) USS BENEWAH (APB35) Command History for 1968

1. In accordance with reference (a), enclosure (1) is forwarded.



D. L. SOLOMON

USS BENEWAH (APB35)
 COMMAND HISTORY
 1968

The first week of January saw BENEWAH and her crew in Vung Tau, Republic of Vietnam for repairs. During the two week restricted availability, BENEWAH had three AC generators installed while alongside the USS TUTUILA. The limited tender availability at Vung Tau was the first liberty port for the BENEWAH crew in eight months.

BENEWAH got underway from Vung Tau back to the operating area 12 January. Commander River Assault Flotilla ONE (CTF 117) and Commander Second Brigade and staffs embarked at Dong Tam after spending four weeks aboard WESTCHESTER COUNTY.

During the first three weeks of January, BENEWAH operated in an area between Dong Tam and My Tho. During this time BENEWAH was visited by several distinguished people: Major General ECKHART, Senior Advisor IV Corps, and Major General O'CONNOR, Commanding General 9th Infantry Division came aboard for Mobile Riverine Force operations briefing. The following Congressional Representatives visited BENEWAH to talk to constituents: EDMUNDSON of Oklahoma, FOLEY and MEEBES from Washington and RUPPERMAN from New York.

On 25 and 26 January, BENEWAH transited from Vinh Long to Ben Tre and then from Ben Tre to an anchorage 9 miles east of My Tho, a total of 60 miles in the treacherous rivers of the Mekong Delta. Then on the 27th back to Vinh Long (31 miles) for a three day total of over 90 miles; a Mobile Riverine Force record.

January saw little action from the Viet Cong. During the transit from Ben Tre to My Tho on the 26th, BENEWAH gun crews fired on the south bank at Dong Tam for practice expending 445 rounds of 40mm and 31 rounds of 3"/50. The entire firing run lasted about 20 minutes.

On the 28th of January BENEWAH celebrated her 1st anniversary of recommissioning. Onboard for the occasion were Vice Admiral Sir Alan McNICOLL, Chief of Staff of the Royal Australian Navy and Major General A. D. McDONALD, Prospective Commander Australian Forces, Vietnam.

On the 31st of January, the Tet Truce was cancelled and embarked troops of the 9th Infantry Division resumed search and destroy operations.

FEBRUARY

The month of February began with BENEWAH and the IRF being rushed to My Tho to support allied troops battling an estimated force of 500 Viet Cong for control of that city. Later that same day, BENEWAH transited back to the Dong Tam anchorage.

On the 4th of February the IRF put on another demonstration of its ability to react rapidly to any contingency, moving into its fourth operating area in 5 days, shifting from the vicinity of Cai Lay into the area surrounding the embattled City of Vinh Long.

From the beginning of the Tet Offensive until 0001 on 6 February, the MRF with its 9th Infantry Division troops accounted for 189 VC killed, 163 detainees, while sustaining only 7 U.S. killed and 97 wounded.

On the 8th of February BENEWAH transited back to its old anchorage at Dong Tam from Vinh Long. Upon returning, BENEWAH was visited by retired Army General, Bruce CLARKE and former Congressman HOLT, both receiving a briefing on the MRF operations and recent Tet Offensive.

The 12th of February saw BENEWAH and the MRF on the first leg of the longest transit since arriving in country. The first anchorage was located almost 60 miles up river from Dong Tam and 25 miles northwest of Sa Dec. During the second leg of the journey, the MRF transited the Vam Cao crossover which connects the Mekong and Bassac Rivers and is 20 miles from the Cambodian border. On the 13th of February the MRF completed the 111 mile transit from Dong Tam to Can Tho at 1300 and began operations on the Bassac River for the first time. The MRF was now located farther south than ever before in its one-year history of operations in the Delta. Can Tho is located about 30 miles southwest of Dong Tam and 85 miles southwest of Saigon.

The BENEWAH logged her 5000th helo landing 16 February since arriving in Vietnam a little less than 10 months ago. Commodore SALZER was aboard the Armed Huey when it touched down and was greeted by Lieutenant Commander SAUCIER, BENEWAH's Commanding Officer.

On 17 February the MRF completed its first campaign in operation CORONADO XI.

February 20th saw a farewell luncheon hosted by the BENEWAH for Major General O'CONNOR who was leaving Vietnam after a nine month tour as Commander of the 9th Infantry Division.

On the 21st of February the MRF was featured as the unit of the day on the Armed Forces Radio Station in Saigon. The five minute broadcast discussed the five ships of the Mobile Riverine Base (MRB) and the four major types of assault craft.

On February 27th Lieutenant Commander SAUCIER, Commanding Officer of BENEWAH was relieved by Lieutenant Commander STOMELL with a colorful ceremony on BENEWAH's flight deck.

The month of February ended with a visit to BENEWAH by Charles EBERHARDT, Director of the Far East Bureau of Voice of America and Chris ECONOMAN, a war correspondent for "Eikones", an illustrated weekly magazine published in Athens, Greece. Both men were briefed aboard BENEWAH on MRF operations and toured River Assault craft alongside BENEWAH.

MARCH

March started by seeing BENEWAH and MRF completing the longest single day transit in its history. On March 3rd, BENEWAH completed a 106 mile trip from Can Tho to Dong Tam in 12 hours. During this transit, BENEWAH destroyed four Viet Cong bunkers with its 3"/50 and 40mm guns.

On March 5th, River Division 111 moved onboard BENEWAH to assume responsibility for MRB defense.

March 6th saw the BENEFAN conducting the longest firing run of the year, a three hour bombardment of the south bank at Dong Tam. During the firing run, BENEFAN was credited with destroying 8 Viet Cong bunkers, 3 huts and damaging 3 more bunkers. BENEFAN expended 101 rounds of 3"/50 and 1440 rounds of 40mm ammunition.

BENEFAN went to General Quarters March 9th when she came under attack at the My Tho anchorage. BENEFAN's rescue and assistance detail were instrumental in extinguishing an ammunition fire aboard an artillery support barge. The fire was caused by a direct hit during the VC motar attack. Later the same day BENEFAN returned to Dong Tam and was visited by General BESSON, Commanding General of the U.S. Army Materiel Command.

On March 22nd BENEFAN received the severest attack in its history. It was early Friday morning, March 22nd, when the Viet Cong opened up with rocket and motar rounds off the south bank at the My Tho anchorage. BENEFAN suffered moderate damage when it took two 75mm recoilless rifle heat rounds on the port side forward. Three other rounds exploded close to the ship on the starboard side. Fortunately, no personnel casualties resulted from the attack. One of the rockets penetrated the bulkhead on the forward mess decks, rupturing a steam line and air vent, damaging a fan room and spraying the area with sizeable pieces of shrapnel. A second rocket struck just forward of the port accommodation ladder about one foot below the waterline. This blast opened a hole 10 inches in diameter and ruptured two ballast tanks, causing minor flooding. The ship was listed five degrees to starboard to facilitate repairs. Ship's forces quickly welded a permanent patch over the hole. Simultaneous with the attack, BENEFAN strafed the south bank with 3"/50 and 40mm fire with unknown results. March ended with visits to BENEFAN by Captain DUNCAN, Prospective Commander Landing Ship Flotilla ONE, both were given briefings on MRF operations.

APRIL

On April 1st, BENEFAN took under fire and destroyed extensive bunker complexes on the bank of Tien Giang River west of Dong Tam.

April 2nd, 3/47 Infantry Battalion embarked aboard BENEFAN as 3/60 Infantry Battalion departed to assume defense of Dong Tam.

Several distinguished visitors came aboard BENEFAN for briefings of tactical operations in early April. Major General THANH, Commanding General of IV Corps accompanied by Major General ECKHART and Major General HAY, Deputy Commanding General, II Field Forces, were briefed.

A special Easter Service was held aboard BENEFAN for a television program to be shown on Easter Sunday in the United States.

Mr. Paul EDMONDS, Prospective New Zealand Ambassador to Vietnam was briefed by Captain ALLEN on MRF operations on 6 April.

On 15 April the MRF came under the most intense Viet Cong attack since its conception. Eighteen Navy and Army personnel were wounded in the intense recoilless rifle attack at the My Tho anchorage. BENEFAN received 3 rocket hits in the sudden attack at 1407, all the hits were above the waterline and no serious damage was done. Eleven personnel aboard BENEFAN were wounded during the attack. Destroyed was a converted LCM-6 which had

been configured to serve as a refueler for the assault boats. It was struck by a round while alongside BENEWAH and was immediately cast off as it burst into flames and later sank. BENEWAH rapidly responded with 40MM, 3"/50 and machine gun fire within three minutes of the initial attack. The accuracy of the fire quickly suppressed the enemy attack and successfully covered the withdrawal of the USS TOM GREEN COUNTY (LST1159) which was loaded with ammunition and had also been hit by VC fire. BENEWAH later transited back to Dong Tam.

During the next week BENEWAH had some very distinguished visitors aboard for briefing. Congressman Waldie (D-Calif) and Murphy (D-N.Y.) visited with constituents. General JOHNSON, Chief of Staff, U.S. Army and member of Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Vice Admiral DUNCAN, Chief of Naval Personnel presented awards aboard BENEWAH and were given briefings on MRF operations.

On the 22nd of April, Army and Navy personnel embarked in BENEWAH were treated to an afternoon of folk music complimentary of USO in Saigon.

The 23rd of April saw the BENEWAH visited by General William WESTMORLAND, Military Assistance Commander, Vietnam. He was briefed on past and present MRF operations by Commodore Salzer and Colonel COLLIN, USMC.

The rest of the month was hi-lighted by several distinguished visitors aboard BENEWAH. LT General Ferris WALT, Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, was briefed by Commodore SALZER on MRF operations. General WALT was given a demonstration of the fire power of the assault boats alongside BENEWAH and given a briefing on the MRF mission in the Delta.

MAY

May started out with a severe rocket attack from the south bank at the Dong Tam anchorage. Despite the severness of it, there were no hits or casualties. An estimated 25 rounds were fired at the MRF between 0200-0215. the MRF quickly suppressed the attack.

Admiral John HYLAND, Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet visited the BENEWAH for lunch and briefing on MRF operations. Later the Admiral presented awards to Flotilla personnel. Various river assault division personnel were awarded 33 Purple Hearts for wounds received in recent action.

Early May saw many visitors come to BENEWAH for briefings on MRF operations. Some of the more prominent visitors were: Major General COFFIN, Deputy Commander of the Army's Research and Development Program and Major General PRICKEET, Vice Director of Operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

On 17 May, BENEWAH departed Dong Tam and completed the 62 mile trip to the vicinity of Cua Soirap and Song Vam Co which necessitated the MRF entering the South China Sea for the first time since November 1967.

While in this anchorage several more distinguished visitors came to BENEWAH to be briefed on MRF operations. Major General GARRISON, U.S. Army Inspector General, Rear Admiral J. V. SMITH, Prospective COMPHIBPAC, conducted an inspection of BENEWAH with the Commanding Officer and spent the night.

The rest of the month was spent mostly in traveling the rivers between Dong Tam and Ben Tre.

The 28th of May, Colonel Robert ARCHER assumed command of 2nd Brigade 9th Infantry Division, relieving Colonel DAVID in a colorful ceremony on BENEMAH's flight deck.

JUNE

Early June saw Rear Admiral G. B. CRABE, Commander of the Australian Fleet, and Major General A. C. McDONALD, Commander of the Australian Forces, Vietnam visit the BENEMAH for MRF briefing and a tour of the assault craft alongside.

River Assault Division 91 embarked BENEMAH to assume base defense 3 June.

Mid June saw the BENEMAH's Medical Department conduct a MEDCAP during which approximately 200 people were treated.

June 11th the BENEMAH was visited by General Croighton ABRAMS who recently succeeded General WESTMORELAND, was briefed on MRF operations by Commodore SALZBER and Colonel ARCHER.

On the 23rd of June BENEMAH transited from Can Tho back to Dong Tam. BENEMAH played a PSYOPS tape during the transit explaining the MRF's presence in the area for the benefit of listeners ashore as the ship's were passing through the Vau Hiao Crossover.

June ended with a visit from LT General LAMPENT, USA, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, and Major General BERG, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Military Personnel. The party was briefed on Force operations to date and talked at random with enlisted personnel regarding personal affairs, tour lengths, and promotions.

JULY

The beginning of July saw the BENEMAH again located at Vam Co and Soirap Rivers about 15 miles south of Saigon. While in this anchorage an Army spotter plane discovered a complex of VC bunkers which the COLLETON and BENEMAH destroyed with 3"/50 fire.

The 4th of July was not celebrated this year for BENEMAH personnel. The Medical Department, however did conduct a MEDCAP. Lieutenant [REDACTED], the ship's doctor, and Lieutenant [REDACTED] the ship's dentist, treated over 450 Vietnamese in the city of Go Cong.

The BENEMAH got underway for Dong Tam on 7 July. Upon arriving, BENEMAH was visited by combat artist, R. J. SMITH, who spent 3 days aboard. Mr. SMITH was sponsored by the Office of the CNO. Mr. SMITH is a member of a two artist team which is creating a series of works depicting Navy operations in Vietnam.

On July 19th BENEWAH spent 7 hours in transit while relocating from Dong Tam to an anchorage on the Song Co Chien, 6 miles southwest of Mo Cay. Until this transit, the Co Chien was the only major branch of the Mekong River which the MRB had not traveled. During the transit, BENEWAH destroyed a bunker and house from which snipers had been operating.

Another MEDCAP was held by the BENEWAH Medical Department on 12 July south of Mo Cay. Approximately 300 persons were treated by the medical team. Mr. Lawrence Pickering, Special Assistant to the U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam also visited BENEWAH on the 12th for a briefing and tour of assault boats alongside.

General Andrew J. GOODPASTER, Deputy Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, got a briefing from Commodore SALZER and Colonel ARCHER on MRF objectives and operations aboard BENEWAH July 20th. This was General GOODPASTER's first visit since General ABRAMS took over for General WESTMORELAND.

Another MEDCAP/DENTCAP for approximately 150 patients was held on July 25th. Dr. [REDACTED] and Dr. [REDACTED] were really busy in the month of July with more than 800 patients treated. BENEWAH is very proud of the Medical Department and the part it has been playing in establishing good relations with the Vietnamese.

AUGUST

The month of August was rather slow. Other than many transits between Dong Tam, My Tho and Ben Tre, it was a rather tiresome month. However, BENEWAH was visited by several distinguished people. On 12 August, Admiral Thomas E. MOCKER, Chief of Naval Operations, received a briefing of MRF operations aboard BENEWAH and presented five bronze stars during his one hour visit.

GMCM Delbert D. BLACK, Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy visited BENEWAH on 16 August. Chief BLACK visited with enlisted personnel to discuss their problems and futures in the Naval Service.

August 25th saw Admiral HYLAND, Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet, visit BENEWAH for awards ceremony and luncheon. Admiral HYLAND toured the ship with BENEWAH's Commanding Officer and met with ship's company in the wardroom for an informal discussion on MRF operations in the Delta.

SEPTEMBER

The first of September marked a change of command ceremony aboard BENEWAH. Captain T. F. BOOKER relieved Captain R. W. ALLEN as Chief Staff Officer for the Flotilla.

The next several weeks were uneventful for BENEWAH, operations being limited to transits between Dong Tam and My Tho.

On the 13th of Sept BENEWAH was visited by Admiral V. A. SMITH, Chief of Staff of the Royal Australian Navy. He was briefed on MRF operations by Commodore SALZER. Admiral SMITH lunched aboard BENEWAH and toured assault craft alongside.

Admiral John S. MCCAIN, Commander in Chief, U.S. Forces in the Pacific, and Rear Admiral VETH, COMNAVFORV, visited BENEWAH and were briefed on MRF operations by Commodore SALZER. In addition to eating lunch on the BENEWAH, the Admirals conducted an extensive tour of assault boats alongside and presented three medals to RIVRON 9 personnel.

The rest of September was spent traveling the Mekong Delta Rivers and conducting harrassment and Interdiction (H&I) fire.

The last two weeks of September quite a few distinguished visitors come aboard BENEWAH. Several of the guests were: Rear Admiral PRATT, Commander Amphibious Training Command PACIFIC, Commodore Iran Van Chon, who is the highest ranking officer in the Vietnamese Navy, equivalent to CNO, Vice Admiral Elmo ZUMWALT, Prospective COMNAVFORV. All visitors were given operation briefings and tours of assault craft alongside. Admiral ZUMWALT was given a firing demonstration of assault craft on the south bank at Dong Tam.

OCTOBER

BENEWAH was visited October 6th by the Secretary of the Navy, the Honorable Paul R. IGNATIUS. The Secretary was accompanied by Vice Admiral ZUMWALT, COMNAVFORV, and Rear Admiral HARNISH. The Secretary and Admirals were briefed on MRF operations and given a firing demonstration by assault boats alongside.

On October 15, BENEWAH moved alone approximately 17 kilometers east of Dong Tam to give support to operations taking place. While at this new area, BENEWAH was again visited by Vice Admiral ZUMWALT who appraised the action taking place and was briefed on objectives of the recent mission.

The 15th of October was a historic occasion aboard BENEWAH. She recorded her 10,000th helicopter landing with the arrival of an Army "Slick" carrying Colonel ELAND, Captain BOOKER, Vietnamese Major, Nguyen Duc-An and 2nd Brigade Sargeant Major [REDACTED]. The helo was greeted by LCDR Marshall A. STOWELL, BENEWAH's Commanding Officer. The passengers were presented with plaques in recognition of the historic event.

Vice presidential candidate, General Curtis LEMAY (USAF, RET), former Air Force Chief of Staff, visited BENEWAH. The General was on a fact finding tour of Vietnam and was briefed on MRF missions and objectives by Commodore SALZER.

BENEWAH went to General Quarters 21 October at 0300 when watch personnel observed rocket fire passing between 50 and 200 feet overhead. Fired from the south bank of the Song My Tho, the rockets were apparently not intended for the ships, but were directed at Dong Tam. The BENEWAH took the enemy positions under fire with her 40MM and 3"/50 guns suppressing the rocket fire in a record time of 3 minutes after sounding GQ.

Captain Dale SCHERMERHORN, Prospective Commander River Assault Flotilla ONE, arrived onboard 30 October. Captain SCHERMERHORN is due to relieve Commodore SALZER on 3 November aboard BENEWAH.

NOVEMBER

On the 1st of November, at 0322, the WESTCHESTER COUNTY was mined by 2 large explosive devices approximately 400 lbs apiece. There were 2 explosions on the starboard side amidships between the bulkhead and the ammo pontoons along side. The explosions left two holes, both more than twenty feet in diameter. A first class petty officer compartment and Army bunkroom were the hardest hit, but there were also casualties on the pontoon and on RIVDIV 111 boats tied up alongside. The ship took on water, but rapid reaction by damage control parties quickly controlled the flooding and the ship was never in danger of sinking. Wounded men were rushed to BENEWAH by assault boats during the early morning hours, the more severely injured were immediately evacuated from BENEWAH to Dong Tam hospital.

The entire ship's office force was killed and BENEWAH sent a team of personnel to the LST to straighten up the necessary paperwork involved in notifying next of kin, processing of the deceased records and other reports. The WESTCHESTER COUNTY lost 17 ship's company or 13% of its crew, a total of 25 men were lost altogether.

Shortly after the explosion, Admiral ZUMWALT landed on BENEWAH and took a boat to WESTCHESTER COUNTY to get a first hand report of the situation.

On November 3rd, Captain SCHERMERHORN relieved Captain SALZER as Commander Task Force 117 in charge of command ceremonies on the BENEWAH flight deck. The ceremony was attended by high ranking officers from all over the Delta. The ceremonies featured the presentation to Captain SALZER of the Republic of Vietnam's two highest individual awards, the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Crossed Palms, and the Vietnamese National Order Medal. Featured speaker was Admiral ZUMWALT, COMNAVFORV.

The BENEWAH was visited by Ernie BANKS of the Chicago Cubs and Pete RICKERT, a pitcher for the Baltimore Orioles on November 15th. The two baseball players conducted a hand shaking tour aboard and met several hundred personnel on the middle mess decks.

Later the same day at 2200, while anchored in the Ham Long River approximately two miles south of Ben Tre, YLLC-4 was sunk. This casualty which cost the lives of two people and wounded nine was caused by a Viet Cong swimmer planting charges on her stern, the craft sunk in 30 seconds. BENEWAH received her entire crew. Personnel from YLLC-4 were provided quarters and given clothing and all necessary toilet articles.

The BENEWAH was visited by LT General Vinh Loc, ARVN, Commandant of the National Defense College and 20 students on November 22nd. The group received a briefing of mobile riverine tactics and operations and toured several types of assault craft tied alongside.

The Medical Department was busy in November with two MEDCAP's/DENICAP's. Approximately 500 patients were treated by BENEWAH's medical team.

Senator Ralph Yarborough (D-Texas) visited BENEWAH to talk to constituents on November 25th.

BENEWAH's Executive Officer, Lieutenant R. J. WILSON, USN, was relieved by Lieutenant M. H. GRIFFITHS, USN on November 28th.

DECEMBER

The month of December was a rather slow month.

BENEWAH as usual had a large number of distinguished visitors.

Admiral ZUMWALT came aboard for awards presentation on the 24th of December.

The MRB observed cease fire in accordance with truce on the 24th and 25th of December.

General WALLNOUGH, USA, Commanding General Continental Army Command and Major General EWELL visited BENEWAH on December 26th for a tour of the afloat units and several fire support bases.

A Christmas program given by Bob Hope was held in Dong Tam on the 27th of December. Approximately one half of ship's company were able to attend the show.

The last day of 1968 was uneventful for BENEWAH. The past year has been profitable for BENEWAH and all things taken into consideration, it was a profitable year against the Viet Cong.

DECEMBER

On 7 December VADM ZUMWALT, Commander Naval Forces Vietnam visited BENEWAH and spoke to the entire crew, reviewing the progress of the war throughout the Republic of Vietnam, congratulating the BENEWAH on her extensive role in the success of operations in the Delta, and assuring the crew that there would be a continuing requirement for BENEWAH's services for many months to come. While Barrier operations on the Grand Canal were successful and largely uneventful throughout the month, BENEWAH's calm days were disrupted only by an accidental explosion on the base defense boat that put it out of commission, and a particularly pleasant afternoon on the 31st being entertained by a USO sponsored singing group on the flight deck.