

# Veteran's Release Form

6/11

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## ACCEPTED AND AGREED

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Transcribed on April 18, 2005 – April 30, 2005

**MELCHIORI:** March fourteenth, two-thousand five. So what was the ride to basic training like?

**BLACKABY:** I enlisted, I was inducted at, I enlisted in Charleston and I was inducted at Beckley. And I enlisted with a friend of mine who I had gone through high school with and we both left home that same morning and I lived in Dunbar at the time and we (\_\_\_\_ 2 seconds) had to leave to go to Beckley for the induction. We actually got up and I left the house at five or six o'clock in the morning if I remember right and just I kissed everybody goodbye and he and I we actually hitchhiked from Dunbar up to Charleston. And we caught a bus in Charleston, well the recruiters put us on a bus in Charleston and they took us to Beckley to the induction station and they did a physical on us there and we took a few tests, listen I don't even remember what they consisted of and then they actually swore us in and then we got registered that night there in Beckley and we were assigned to basic training in Fort Jackson South Carolina which is outside of Columbus South Carolina and we I remember my buddy and I went up that week that night in Beckley and we went to a movie. I don't remember what the movie was but we went to a movie we figured it was our last night of freedom and we were too young to drink or anything like that so we went to a movie and came back and then the next morning we had some more of the administrative processing to do and it seemed that they put us on a bus until sometime around noon or so a whole bus load of us from Beckley to Fort Jackson and we got in there late into the night the middle in the of the night. And I couldn't even tell ya where it was they just kind of drove us into the barracks and walked us out cause we didn't have any clothes or anything hardly really they took absically all we had really was the clothes on our backs.

**MELCHIORI:** When was this?

**BLACKABY:** This was in February of 1959. And they just dumped us out at this barracks and someone came out and got us and took us in there and put us in a bunk, this is the middle of the night, and we probably didn't get more than two or three hours of sleep and somebody's in there rousing us out at 5:30, six o'clock in the morning. And then there was probably two days, two or three days of process just signing papers and answering questions. I had writer's cramp. I had a good time convincing everybody that my name was not Lawrence, I remember that, most people with the name whose name what they call Larry real name is Lawrence and they kept wanting to write Lawrence on all my papers. I had to keep correcting everybody that my name was Larry it wasn't Lawrence. Thank my mother for that. Seemed like it was two or three days and then we had to make more tests. I mean they tested the crap out of ya.

**MELCHIORI:** Was this before any, like, physical training?

**BLACKABY:** Oh, we actually got into it before we even got assigned to our actual got basic training unit. It was like a new process they take two days just going from one place to another. I think that was where we got our hair cut too. If you want to call it a haircut.

**MELCHIORI:** Did you already have short hair?

**BLACKABY:** I had short hair. Crew cuts and flat tops were part of the in thing those days anyway, there, that was still too long. You hear people tell stories they tell stories about how the barber always asks ya how you want it cut. And that was kinda funny because they really did do that and there were a couple of guys that were worried about how their hair looked, you know had nice wavy flowing locks and they were almost in tears thinking that they were going to loose all their hair and when the barber asked them how they wanted it cut you know they kind of lighten up and their eyes lit up cause they thought they were gonna be able to keep it and then he

takes the clippers and just right down the middle of his head. And they saw his hair fall and he really is crying; no, nobody actually cried but, you know. That was a big joke that was the first real introduction I guess to the way it was going to be. And then it was at that point too that they issued us all our uniforms (\_\_\_\_ 4 seconds) right down to our underwear and you didn't take any clothes or anything with you other than what you got on your back and then they pack that up and ship it back home I mean we weren't allowed to have any civilian clothes at all. And then at that point and I'm not sure if it was immediate but I'm thinking that it was immediate but, we had been assigned to training company that we were going to be assigned to for the whole period of basic training. They were pretty tense days but you didn't know you heard all the stories from the people who had been there they'd always tell you all the horror stories and it's kind of a intense period there because you don't know what to expect if it's all true or if it's all lies you know. And we went through an area which was called Sand Hill, I don't know why they called it that, but we heard that Fort Jackson was real basic training and there were different areas of the base and places for you to run and it was the worst part I suppose that's why it was called Sand Hill. I was trying to remember the name of our base was it C Company? I don't know.

**MELCHIORI:** What state is Fort Jackson in?

**BLACKABY:** South Carolina. I mean near Columbia, South Carolina. We were assigned to platoons, a small unit that you trained with stayed with the whole company stayed together but there's like four platoons in a company. And the one you're assigned to a platoon that's who you stayed with and you had one drill sergeant to a platoon and of course the first time you always hear about the big bad drill sergeant that's the way ours was and he kind of made us think he was too because the first day he had us out there in the company street he said you don't know me

know but you'll never forget me when you leave here. I'm gonna be your mother your daddy  
your preacher I'm gonna. You're mine he says.

**MELCHIORI:** What was his name?

**BLACKABY:** His name was Ralph Neely. Staff sergeant Neely I remember that. I remember the first morning we went out he always called us out every morning for revelry. We had to get up at like five o'clock in the morning and we would get out into the street, we were in two story barracks two story World War II style barracks, and he would get out in the street that first morning and blew that whistle and we were supposed to fall out in the company street and line up. We all just kind of strolled out I remember I was on the second floor went out the back door of the second floor and all the way around to the front. Oh, we all just strolled out like we were still at home or at school or something you know we just casually strolled out. That's when we found out that we had to run out we couldn't just walk out. So he made us all go back in, I was in the second floor everybody in the second floor had to go all the way back to the second floor and go all they way back to your bunk and everything. He blows the whistle again and we had to run out there we weren't allowed to walk out there and when we got out there we didn't run fast enough. So we turn around and go back in we did that probably about four or five times run around go back in blow the whistle and run out into the street. It turned out it was kind of a game every morning and it didn't matter how fast you got out there it was never fast enough the first time I mean we always had to go back and do it at least one more time. Guys fall down the steps trying to get out and everything. And some days you know, of course there was a lot of physical training the first few days I mean we toughened up, the first few days was mostly physical training and exercise and do physical training all day and trying to teach you to march because once you out in the training and going to place to place and you always have to go in marching

and in formation and everything. Trying to teach a bunch of guys to march who's never marched before to march military style carrying a weapon and especially when you're doing it as a group a whole platoon thirty four guys legs and knees trying to do a right turn and left turn everybody's got to do it at the same time because if you don't everybody's falling all over each other and everything else. And it was kind of comical until everybody got the hang of it. I can't I don't remember too specifically what the way we went about or what we trained on specifically or in what order.

**MELCHIORI:** What was the hardest thing you had to do?

**BLCAKABY:** It was just the physical part of it I mean we would exercise and running a lot of running.

**MELCHIORI:** Like where would you run to?

**BLACKABY:** Oh probably a couple of miles. Of course you're doing all kinds of push-ups and sit-ups and pull-ups and things you know and then you run a mile and (\_\_\_\_ 3 seconds). And we would line up outside of the mess hall well you're out side of the door going into the mess hall and they had a chin-up bar so you would when you got up to the chin-up bar you would have to do like ten pull-ups chin-ups you know before you could even go on in to the hall to eat it was like. We marched everywhere we went I mean like if we went out on to do any kind of maneuvers or anything like that I mean we wouldn't ride anywhere. We'd go out to the rifle range and I mean it might be it might be two three miles or sometimes five miles away we didn't ride anywhere. We were never on a set of wheels for five weeks.

**MELCHIORI:** How much weight did you loose?

**BLACKABY:** Well now this will sound strange but they say it's the way it is. I actually gained weight Of muscle. I weighed about 165 pounds when I went in and I think I left there I weighed about 172 pounds. So I gained about seven pounds.

**MELCHIORI:** What kind of weapons did you learn to use?

**BLACKABY:** N-1 was the standard rifle gun. That was before the M-16. Of course everybody had their own individual weapon assigned to them. You had the same weapon all the way through, individual weapon, all the way through basic training. That was another thing you had to remember your serial number and your rifle number you had to remember all that stuff. I still remember my serial number my rifle number I don't remember. My serial number was RA13659451. Cause you had to, that was like your name. Serial numbers actually went out in nineteen; it was in the late sixties they dropped serial numbers and social security numbers. They were on all your uniforms and you had to, that was another thing in basic training too, we had a whole day, every piece of clothing had to be tagged with your initials and the last four numbers of your serial number. Like mine would be LB9451. I had to put that on every piece of clothing on every uniform, your underwear your trunks pants everything. (      5 seconds) Name, rank, and serial number. That's how they knew you. It was always name, rank, and serial number.

**MELCHIORI:** That's all you'd tell?

**BLACKABY:** That's all you were supposed to tell your captives. Name, rank, and serial number. Nothing else. It was in the code of conduct what they called the code of conduct that they give you and if you become a prisoner or whatnot. I could have told you the whole code of conduct I couldn't do it now but that was the main thing: name, rank and serial number. That's all you told 'em that's all the information you know. If they beat ya or what ever that's all you tell them: name, rank, and serial number. Infiltration course I remember the infiltration course.

That was kind of scary because they would actually. They set up an infiltration course it was an obstacle set up with barbed wire across there was little pits that had explosives in it like land mines and that sort of thing I mean they had these barbed wire barrier things that you had to get through or around and you had to really crawl. And while you did that you didn't dare stand because they're actually firing live machine gun fire over the pit while you're. That was probably the most intense the most memorable. You had to crawl through the whole thing you had to crawl under these barbed wire obstacles and they had pits in the ground with these sandbags around them and there were explosives inside of them and you had to crawl around those and everything and they might I mean they would detonate they was explosives in these things as you was crawling through. I was right beside of one. It wasn't enough naturally to hurt you or anything but it would sure make your ears rattle and ring and it'd scare you. That's probably the most nervous I was I mean they fired live machine gun fire over the top of your head and all this.

**MELCHIORI:** Did anyone get hurt?

**BLACKABY:** No. Hand grenade training that was kind that was kind of tense I was a little nervous about that too because you practiced throwing grenades with dummy grenades but then you get qualification with the grenades and you had to use live grenades. And you had to pull the tab and everything and once you pulled that pin you know it was a live grenade and you're about to get rid of it. That was, I mean I just thought to myself what if I throw that pin and draw back to through it and I drop it. You know, it's going off, I mean. You take a grenade it's got a handle on it, of course back then, I have no idea what a grenade's like today, it's got a handle on it, you've seen it probably the way it's got the handle on it and a pin at the top and you got to pull the pin to activate it and as long as you hold that handle down, you could pull the pin, but as long as you hold that handle down the grenade it's not gonna go off. You could stand there and hold it

all day as long as you don't release tension on that handle. Once you let go of that handle you better, I think they tell you got less than ten seconds, it's gonna blow. Actually at one point they made us pull the pin and then stand there and hold it a while until they told us to throw it. And we're standing here holding this grenade with no pin and I had a death grip on it on the handle I wasn't going to let go of it anyway. I was very nervous during that period. I could just imagine either myself or someone accidentally dropping the grenade once we had the pin pulled. It never happened, but it was in my mind it was very much in my mind. I did do well firing the rifle and everything the individual weapon and we had some training normally learning to shoot guns and hitting targets and Browning Automatic Rifle and it was a platoon rifle one guy would get the Browning Automatic he would be our arm man we called him, everybody else would just have their individual rifle. We got some training on that and machine guns and learned to fire a handgun. And we marched everywhere. I had trouble a couple times with the marching. I think I told you about the one where we were talking and we had to go dig the toilet holes when we got to where we were going camping. Another time, I don't know, we were marching back from a range somewhere we had been out there all day it was windy and we were marching back in, probably was one of the longest marches we had been on, and we actually had been out there all day and we went marching in formation with our individual rifle what they call ?right over arm? it was up over our. We were marching in formation and the drill sergeant was hollerin' for somebody to straighten up their rifle cause you know you had to carry it very straight. Well, I couldn't see him and he kept hollerin' straighten up your rifle, straighten up that rifle and he hollered it three or four times well I'm tired I'm weak I'm beyond disguise. I had no idea he was talking to me. Where I was at I was in the middle of the formation and I just didn't know he was talking to me. Some how or other without ever breaking step he skipped through that formation

and got right up along side of me and picked up that rifle up probably a good six or eight inches off my shoulder and slammed it back down on my shoulder. (\_\_\_\_ 3 seconds) Course my shoulder was numb when he did it really that's the first time I realized that he was talking to me. Been hollerin' at me the whole time. I thought when I was in formation he couldn't see me. Well, they did let us off the base on weekend. I was in eight weeks there and they let us off base one weekend and my parents came down and my girlfriend at the time who eventually became my wife. They came down and visited me that one weekend I was probably about four or five weeks into training. That was the only time we were allowed off the base. They kept us busy all the way through Saturday. Usually Sundays they would let us kinda just lounge around and do whatever we want but we usually ended up we was having to do something even on a day off we had to keep everything shined up and get the bunk cleaned up and we had to do other things so if you weren't sleeping or training or whatever you were you had to shine your boots or your brass or something I mean you didn't have time really to and we might have an evening an hour maybe where we could sneak off to the PX maybe and drink a beer or something and that was very seldom.

**MELCHIORI:** Did you ever have to bounce a quarter off your bed?

**BLACKABY:** Oh, well, yeah. Did that too. I never did bounce one off of mine. This guy, this drill sergeant he wasn't really all that bad but he would pick like one guy every day at the beginning of the day and you knew who it was going to be that morning in first formation when you first fell out. Cause he always walked through the ranks checked everybody out and everything. He would pick one guy and that was that guy's day I mean he just couldn't do anything right. He would spend, that whole day he would spend getting yelled at and get down make him do push-ups I mean for things no other than just breathing and that was basically that

was his, he would pick one guy everyday and that was that guy's day to be picked on to be shoved around, abused.

**MELCHIORI:** Did you have your day?

**BLACKABY:** I had my day, yes. Everybody go their day, nobody was exempt. But it wasn't like a continuous everyday thing if it wasn't your day you could know you could usually, I mean whatever rough treatment that you got everybody got, but you weren't singled out. Except for that one day, whatever day it was. And over the course of eight weeks you didn't have just one day he got around to you two or three times during the whole.

**MELCHIORI:** So, by the time you were in Vietnam you were already with the intelligence?

**BLACKABY:** Um hum. I left basic training and went to school for six months, six or eight months. First assignment. When I went to Vietnam I had been in already twelve, eleven years. And I actually missed the worst part of it, in some respects.

**MELCHIORI:** So, your training prior to Vietnam? Was it physical or was it just...

**BLACKABY:** It wasn't so much physical, it was... I was stationed in Arlington, in Arlington, Virginia at the time, and training course was at Fort Daleburg, Virginia which was probably an hour away. I didn't even have to stay there, I just had to be there in the morning and be there in the evening. That training was specifically oriented toward Vietnam, I mean you had weapons training just to refresh everybody on the weapons and a lot of training on the tactics of the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong and a lot of, a little education on them as a people as culture and also their tactics as far as, and that sort of thing. More of an orientation type thing but we did some weapons training some refreshing training.

**MELCHIORI:** Anything new?

**BLACKABY:** Not really anything new, other than like teaching about the Vietnamese themselves and their tactics and that sort of thing. The North Vietnamese they were famous for their traps and that sort of thing you know they had a lot of training. I'm thinking it was like a week. I remember that my grandmother died and it would have been like one day in the train my grandmother died and they wouldn't let me come home. They had me stay they wouldn't let me go home on the train. That's really about all I remember about that. It was probably about a week if it was even a week.

**MELCHIORI:** So, you were married, correct?

**BLACKABY:** Yea.

**MELCHIORI:** So how did she feel about that?

**BLACKABY:** Well nobody was happy about it but of course it was well you're married to it so you just have to deal, it's part of your life and you know that you understand that. I believe my family went back to West Virginia before I went over there and my wife and kids I met them back in Dunbar, that's where we were originally from and that's where both our parents lived at that time. And I moved them back to Dunbar and they stayed there the whole time I was gone. It wasn't like they were off somewhere with no one to support them or anything like that. They lived about three blocks from my wife's mother and about five or six blocks from my parents' house so they were well taken care of. Of course it's always tense I mean they're sitting back here they don't know what's going on over there. I mean, you can write letters back and fourth but we didn't have cell phones and computers and all these things I mean it tickles me these guys over in Iraq and stuff now you know they e-mail home everyday and stuff like that, we didn't have that luxury back in those days. Vietnam itself, you know.

**MELCHIORI:** How did you get over there, I mean, did you fly?

**BLACKABY:** I flew. I went to, let me get this straight now, I went, I left off the west coast, I went to Oakland Army Terminal for probably about two days and then flew on up. They took us to Travis Air Force Base, the GI Travis Air Force Base because it's in that Oakland, California area, charter flight, the military charter a lot of times. It was a military plane, military charter model plane a lot of times back then they had two or three companies that all they did was take troops back and fourth. Of course when we were going to Vietnam you didn't know where you were going to ultimately be assigned once you got there at least I didn't. We flew into Saigon ? airbase and I got off of the plane and this is another scary, I mean I got scared before I ever even.

**MELCHIORI:** How long was the flight?

**BLACKABY:** Oh, gosh, I can't remember exactly how long the flight was, can't even remember where all we stopped.

**MELCHIORI:** Too long?

**BLACKABY:** Yea, it was too long. It seems to me I got there the same day I left because across the International Date Line there. I think it was actually, had I been back there in the states it would have been, I think I left on the sixteenth of March and it was the sixteenth of March over there when I got there even though it had been probably more than twenty-four hours or close to it. But it was still the sixteenth of March when I got there because I crossed the Date Line. I don't remember how long it was. But like I said we got there and got in there in Saigon and it seems like we always got everywhere in the middle of the night. And they took us over, it was almost like basic training they got us there in the middle of the night and they dropped us off in the transit barracks. But you always here about these stories these tales about these snakes I mean Vietnam was famous for its snakes a lot of snakes over there and I'm deathly afraid of snakes. And that was one thing I dreaded about going over there was the snakes, I'm scared to

death of them. But, they took us into these barracks wasn't even any lights on in there hardly, and they just told us to go in there and find a bed and crawl in it and go to sleep. Well, we did that. I got in there and I got up the next morning and I happen to be a guy, there was like four people in one of these little cubicles, it didn't actually have walls they just had these little partitions like to just kind of separate them all. And there happened to be a guy in there that I knew that I had know from some other assignment, so we're sitting there talking the next morning there and he's leaning back against the wall in his chair and I'm sitting over here on a bunk and I'm talking to him and I looked down and behind his chair, crawling along the wall, is a snake, it was probably a good four or five feet long. And I'm deathly afraid of snakes. And he looked at me I don't know what my face must have looked like, but he looked at me and he said "what's wrong?" And I'm just pointing at the floor and I guess my eyes were like this big and I finally said "snake" and he, we're both in a bunk together because he, it was right behind his chair, he got over in the bunk with me we're both in there. That was my first frightening scare in Vietnam, I hadn't been there eight hours. It turned out the snake was a pet. It belonged to one of the clerks up in the front, and it had gotten loose and he crawled back along the wall. To me it wasn't funny. Like I said when you go there you didn't know where you were going you didn't know, they kind of took you into this and you're assigned out from there to where you're actually going to be stationed. And of course I knew because of my certain specialty that there might be certain units that I might be assigned to but I didn't have any idea of which one. I stayed there in Saigon probably three or four, probably about a week basically just waiting around for my reassignment for my actual assignment for where I was actually gonna be stationed for. Thinking back too I remember before I went over there I was in headquarters over

in Arlington, Virginia and we used to get reports back from over there, what was called hostile action reports where any of our units would take

END OF SIDE ONE; BEGIN SIDE TWO

**BLACKABY:** We used to get these reports there all the time and from it was called 407<sup>th</sup> radio research detachment they were communications surveillance, see all our units over there were called radio research units kind of a cover name or whatever, kind of stupid but. We were this unit with antennas everywhere. We used to get the hostile action reports all the time these 407<sup>th</sup> radio research detachment and we would send stuff to the fire support base and stuff like that. And I always thought well I wouldn't want to be in that outfit. Well guess where I ended up. So I knew I was going into some hostile territory but cause I had seen all these hostile action reports for almost a year I had been sitting there reading these things. That's where I ended up. That's where I got assigned to.

**MELCHIORI:** Well let's stop here and just finish up next time.

**BLACKABY:** OK.

**MELCHIORI:** Interview on March 15, 2005, at the Barboursville Veterans Home.

**BLACKABY:** Did I not, well, I hadn't been assigned anywhere yet, right? So, what do you say, I spent probably a week in Saigon waiting to see where I was gonna be assigned what unit I was gonna be assigned to and I was assigned initially to what we call a field station in I Corps, which is a northern section of South Vietnam. And I was been transported up there by military transport plane. And I was there approximately a month and then a position came open in my specialty or my MOS. In a, what we called a support unit, was farther north from there, called the 407<sup>th</sup> Radio Research Detachment was the name of the unit. It was in Quang Tri, it's the northernmost point in South Vietnam where there were US troops stationed and it was a unit the unit was in

direct support of the First Brigade Fifth Infantry Division. Providing direct tactile support intelligence to the Fifth Infantry Division. And that was really my first experience in what we call tactile units or providing support to a line unit or combat unit. And I may have told you the story when I was back in the States before I went to Vietnam I used to get I used to see these hostile action reports coming back from over there and 407<sup>th</sup> had more reports than anybody and I always thought when I was in the States that I wouldn't want to be in that unit. And that's where I ended up. But it turned out that I enjoyed the assignment really because I probably saw the results of the work and what I was doing more than I ever had in my previous assignments because we were right there right directly in support of this unit and handing this information and stuff directly to them practically and you could see action being taken on the information you provided them and it was the most, probably of all my years of service was probably in that respect the most rewarding in all of my assignments as far as actually enjoying what I was doing. It wasn't the best place in the world to be but I got there probably toward the end of the war when things were starting to draw down and US forces were starting to draw back. And in some ways that was good in another way it was bad. We, when I first got there the Fifth Infantry Division was still there in full force and we operated we went on maneuvers missions with them in direct support and we operated out of personnel carriers and what not and we moved around everywhere they went, but shortly after I got there the Division got orders to stand down in other words prepare to return back to the States and were basically inactivated. And then our whole method of operation changed and we became pretty much stationary and operated on very remote, isolated fire support bases where most of the time there was only the only way in was by helicopter you couldn't even get in by road. And it was very heavy in a lot of ways being out on these little mountaintops. I wasn't out there myself on a regular basis because I was one of the

senior NCOs in the unit and I basically, for the most part I was back at the base camp but I had to send these fellas out there and make sure that they were supplied and everything, out there were no facilities out there on these mountaintop fire bases so they had to be supplied with field rations and whatever equipment they needed. Of course I had to see that that was done and I had to go out myself occasionally to these places to assist and one thing or another. The trips out weren't always fun, you had to go by helicopter probably my closest, the closest I came to dying the whole time I was there was on a resupply mission to, called fire support base serge, I went out on a resupply mission and on this fire base we had out little outpost there, there was also a Vietnamese marine unit there an auxiliary unit and there was a battle going on on the mountain across from them and they were receiving fire there at the fire support base serge where I was going, they were receiving fire to suppress their artillery. And we tried to fly in there on this helicopter which I thought was kinda stupid on the part of this helicopter pilot to approach the landing the way he did because he drew fire. As soon as we started to sit down on this pad they started showering the helicopter pad and the helicopter was hit after I got out of it, it was hit it did manage to take off but it was hit. I'm trying to hide in a fox hole that was dug for a 110 pound Vietnamese and I weighed 200 pounds and I didn't fit real good. I was a little bit big but the helicopter did manage to take off and was sitting in a valley across the way and wasn't able to come back and get me so I did end up having to stay out there for a couple of days until I got another helicopter to come back and pick me up and take me back where I belonged. And that's where we lost two fellas out there too. That actually that was after I had left. I'm getting ahead of myself on that one. But we operated off of four or five different fire support bases, one of them was a little base called ?Alpha Ford? which was within eyesight of the DMZ, demilitarized zone, I mean we were probably no more than two miles south of the DMZ on that one. They took fire



constantly I mean we operated out of bunkers and things that were dug in the ground. They took fire there constantly. We operated out of another place called fire support base ?Caro? and fire support base ?Four?. I made a trip to Four on day, we hadn't even set up operation there yet, I made a trip out there one day by helicopter to survey the fight and after I, we that was in the afternoon and then we attempt to go in there and set up operation the next day and that night it was completely overrun by the North Vietnamese. I barely missed that one also. I often thing that while I was climbing up that mountain from the way the helicopter let me out, they were probably all around the mountain waiting they had to have been there, watching me. But as time went on when the Fifth Infantry Division when they did finally stood down and left all together that whole base which had been, probably that main base there with all those units there, probably was four or five thousand people when I first got there and I got there in March of '61, or '71, in August of '71 they left, our unit was totally deactivated, and there was that whole compound went from four or five thousand men down to one little compound of Americans there was about forty-five of us left out of our unit and the rest, probably the total American compliment there was less than 100 people and we all moved in together into what had been a field hospital, Eighteenth Surgical Hospital was the name of that hospital, designation of the hospital. Of course they all left too when everybody else left and the remaining American continuum was I'd say about less than 100 people. There was a couple training troops around when they were training some Vietnamese and they did move a newly formed South Vietnamese brigade, if I remember right, or division, if I remember right it was third division it was a newly formed division of the South Vietnamese army. They moved them over into the main base where our Fifth Infantry Division, the American Fifth Infantry Division had been. It wasn't real comforting having them there either because they were a newly formed division and they weren't

well trained they weren't disciplined. That was basically all that was left in the northern part of South Vietnam at that time and so we felt pretty isolated up there, it got to the point where we had a hard time getting supply missions in there. Like I said, we still had these guys operating out on these fire bases and they needed to be resupplied and everything at one time our helicopter support was very plentiful but after the big draw down they started drawing down forces and everything and we really didn't have any local helicopter support anymore and sometimes they had to come from quite a distance away and sometimes they couldn't always get there and keeping our guys out on these fire bases and things became a bit of a problem. We generally got the helicopter when we needed it, or maybe not when we needed it, it might have been a day late or something, but we never knew for sure when it was going to show up. I mean we just had to pack the stuff up like we was going out and just take it out there to the pad and just sit there and wait and hope that somebody would show up. But, that's the bad part about being there toward the end, toward the draw down the support just kind of went away and we were up there about 100 of us or so with just limited support and the battles and the fighting weren't what they had been but they were building up for it. You know the big push they always draw away when. I left there in the middle of March in '71 and we knew they were building up all around us. We could see it and there wasn't that much up there but about two weeks after I left at the very end of March is when the North Vietnamese started to push south, and they actually overran that base where I was or what was left of it about two weeks after I left. And all the guys that did remain up there they all had to evacuate and head south because and that's when they started the big push south and that was basically the beginning of the end of the war. That all came really about two weeks after I left so I just missed that. And it was during that same period I said that we had lost two fellas out on fire support base serge that I had I'm

actually like I said this happened probably two weeks after I left but I was the one that sent those two fellas out there to start with and I remember sitting on the chopper pad talkin' to 'em the day before they went out there. But, yea they waited in a bunker, a sand bay bunker on top of this mountain and there was a marine battalion out there with them and one American advisor was with that marine battalion. These two called Gary Westcock and Brose Crosby. They took a direct rocket hit right on top of the bunker that they were operating out of and the equipment that we had out there was classified equipment and it was all wired up with what we called bermite grenades that to detonate to destroy the equipment if it ever looked like it was gonna be captured or anything like that but when this rocket hit it was a direct hit right on that bunker and the bunker collapsed on these guys and the explosion and everything from the rocket ignited all the bermite grenades and the destruction device and it just (\_\_\_\_ 1 second) and their bodies have never been discovered to this day. They're still out there on the top of that mountain as far as I know. There's been recovery missions that have gone in there you know after the war you know they have these recovery missions that's probably when they come in to try to find bodies and things that have never been recovered and there's been two or three missions out there to try and find the remains of these two fellas and to my knowledge to this day they have never been they've never been able to find them. Now this was (\_\_\_\_ 1 second) see I was already gone but you know I still remember these two guys and I always think about the fact that I was the one that sent them out there you know. I remember talking to them out there on the chopper pad waiting for them to be picked up and taken out there that day. When I got ready to leave the country me and another fellow we were supposed to meet them sometime there, we had trouble we had to go to DaNang airport base back to catch our to both to process back to the States and to get our flight out of Vietnam. We didn't even have there was no regular transportation we had

to go out to the chopper pad and just sit out there for and just hope something came through to pick us up to start us on our journey back home. And we went out there we sat out there for about two and a half days before anybody showed up and then it was a Vietnamese air force plane, transport plane, and they were going to DaNang where we had to go. And it was full of civilians, I'll never forget this, it was full of civilians and they had goats on there and chickens they had to ride us up in the tail end of that plane. That's how bad the support was at that time because most of the American force had pulled out of that part of Vietnam and it pretty much pulled out and it was just a small, small element up there and we were just kind of on our own. But we rode that Vietnamese air force plane from there to DaNang Air Force base with chickens and goats and everything. We still some of us still communicate with each other and there's a website of 407<sup>th</sup> Radio Research Detachment has a website but. Like I said the guys still communicate and there's a lot pf pictures and things on it.

**MELCHIORI:** Is there a picture of you?

**BLACKABY:** There is one as a matter of fact.

**MELCHIORI:** Could you give me a good example of how your job was, of your position?

**BLACKABY:** Well, general or specific? I mean I was in that unit in that particular unit when I first got there I was what you call the operations sergeant. I was in charge of the operational aspects of the unit in other words when I say operational aspects I'm talking about the actual intelligence collection activities. And the reporting and everything that went along with it I mean the operations part of it. And then after they started the draw down and the unit was reduced down to this forty-five men or so detachment that was left up there then I was in charge of the whole unit and all aspects of it, I was their, well they referred to me as their First sergeant but I really wasn't the first sergeant we really didn't have a position of First sergeant but I was the

senior NCO, non-commissioned officer in charge of the entire detachment and everything that we did. Before I had been the operation sergeant and now I'm in charge of the operation the administration part of it and the whole. And before our, back when we were a whole detachment we had a captain as a commander and then after we drew down we didn't have a commander any more it was just a warrant officer. And then Jim Wilson was actually the officer in charge. He wasn't our officer he wasn't a commissioned officer. But I don't know if you could say I had a nice specific job I mean (\_\_\_\_ 4 seconds). And to get into the examples of I don't know if I can do that, get specific enough. I mean basically like I said we were a signal intelligence communications intelligence unit and we were monitoring communications of the North Vietnamese BC units that were operating in and around us in our area of operation and supplying the information that we gathered initially to the commander or the intelligence unit with the Fifth Infantry Division that we were in support of. But a lot of the times the information that we gathered then they acted on and they you know we could identify targets through communication I mean we could end up result in having air strikes called in on them or artillery fired on them or sweeps made of certain areas or sometimes we were able to predetermine that some elements within our division were gonna be hit with artillery fire, ? fire, rocket fire and we were able to warn them ahead of time hey, you know get yourselves in a hole 'cause you're about to get hit you know that sort of thing. So you know you're kind of saving lives and directing their forces where they need to be looking and where they need to be operating, that's the general. Can't get into too much. I don't know how much I, I mean I know it's been a long time ago but it was all highly classified stuff, they beat it in your brain that you don't talk about it and still to this day. And I know a lot of that stuff has been declassified and everything else but I still have that beat in my head that you don't talk about this stuff. That's why I was really reluctant to you know.

But if I had been out there in that bushel with like a rifle like an infantry man or something going out and going through the jungle and things seeing face to face combat I could tell a whole lot more probably more interesting or more exciting stories. But after I left I said ?. Once we finally got on the plane with the chickens and the goats and everything I was pretty much out of there. I don't know if you want anything in between.

**MELCHIORI:** Just some little details like what was the weather like?

**BLACKABY:** The weather was it was hot but I don't think it was I don't think it was like it wasn't as hot it wasn't as humid I don't believe as you hear them talk a lot about how hot and humid and everything it was over there. I think up in the northern part where we were it was not as hot and as humid as down in the southern part of the country I mean I never was down in there other than just a short period of time in Saigon but I don't think it was as hot and miserable as it was in the southern part of Vietnam as where we were up north. Really, it wasn't bad. It wasn't as hot and humid that you will suffer. It settled on occasion I mean like here you know you get kind of chilled I mean you can't breathe I mean. And we would have those days but I think in other parts of the country it was from what I've heard and been told it was definitely a lot more often or on a more tedious basis than where we were.

**MELCHIORI:** Did you write home?

**BLACKABY:** I did, probably not as often as I should have but. Well, you know that was the other thing we wrote home and didn't have the usual computers and cell phones and all to communicate with like these dies do today. You know snail mail and sometimes it take you a couple of weeks to get a piece of mail back and forth.

**MELCHIORI:** Did they ever censor your mail?

**BLACKABY:** Well, you know I don't know that I. They said they were but I no one ever read my mail before it went out and I don't recall ever receiving a piece of mail that I thought somebody had been in. So I wouldn't say that was a routine practice I don't think, not from my experience. I didn't, never saw the evidence of it. I did, when I first got there they allowed us to make a call home one and only time it was on a MARS radio, that's an acronym for something but I can't even remember what it was. It was almost like a HAM radio. I mean they allowed us to make one call home when we first got there and I, you weren't supposed to say where you were, where your location was or anything and I did. I blurted it out, said where I was, and they cut me off. They warned me that I couldn't do that. I did go home my R and R was like my, yea everybody got a second day R and R out of Vietnam. A lot of guys went you know they went to Australia and Tai Land and Hawaii and different places like that for their week of R and R, rest and relaxation. But I came home because they had a special deal then at the time. They would fly you to, if you wanted to go home, you could take seven days of leave in conjunction with your seven days of R and R and they would fly you free of charge to Hawaii and then you had to fly from Hawaii to home and back to Hawaii free of charge and then they would fly you from Hawaii back to Vietnam. No, you had to pay for it, Hawaii to home and back to Hawaii. The trip to Hawaii and back to Vietnam they paid for that. And I did get to come home like in the middle of my tour and spend a week with my family and everything. That was harder coming back from that than it was going over initially. So at least you know I did get to spend a week at home with my family in the middle of the tour. As far as all the controversy of the war I never really paid any attention to it you know when you hear all the stories of all the protests and all the people spitting on military guys and throwing rocks at 'em. And I never personally experienced any of that but all of the hassling and the other negative stories and all that stuff I never really paid any

attention to that I just served and as far as I was concerned I was a professional worker and I was just doing what I was told to do I mean. I really didn't pay much attention to them they didn't affect me one way or the other.

**MELCHIORI:** So you stayed in the military after that?

**BLACKABY:** I still another eight years after. From '59 to, let's see Vietnam for '71 to '75, about another eight years nine years after I left Vietnam.

**MELCHIORI:** So how was your homecoming, when you got back from Vietnam?

**BLACKABY:** When I got back from Vietnam, well everybody was happy, daddy's home and. You know it just where we goin' from here. Like I said I never experienced any negative reaction from people. And of course getting home you know that was great, getting home get back home with the kids you wife and get back to a normal life again. Didn't have any big celebration or anything.

**MELCHIORI:** How long did the war go on after you came back? How long was it until we officially leave?

**BLACKABY:** Well, the official ending date at least as far as, you know I can't remember the exact date that.

**MELCHIORI:** Well what day did you get back?

**BLACKABY:** I got back in March of '72. But I don't remember the exact date, well I guess when the embassy fell in Saigon that was the end of it and I can't remember exactly when that was, let's see I'm thinking it was in some time in '74. The Veterans Administrations concerned the official ending date of the Vietnam era was May the fifth of '75.

**MELCHIORI:** There was no possibility; I can't think of what I'm trying to say. There was no possibility that you weren't done with your service in that war when you came back?

**BLACKABY:** Well, nothings 100 percent but yeah, I was ninety-nine percent sure that I was done with it.

**MELCHIORI:** Were any of your family members there in the war?

**BLACKABY:** No. Well, I was just me in my sister I didn't have any brothers or anything like that. I don't recall any of my cousins or people I don't even remember any of them. My dad was a World War II veteran.

**MELCHIORI:** Do you think he viewed you service differently, because he was a veteran?

**BLACKABY:** Probably, 'cause well, like I said my dad was a World War II veteran and I has, everybody, just about everybody I can think of, all my uncles and everybody had all been in the service. Had all been in, I had one uncle who was a Korean veteran, a navy man. But all of them had served in the military and that kind of you know it makes it an acceptable thing to do or kind of the thing to do when you have a family that's all been in the military and served in the military. I had one of my uncles one of my uncles was killed in World War II. That's kind of a strange thing too. When my mother passed away we were going through her things and we found a letter in there that my uncle, it would have been her brother, had written home probably about two weeks before he was actually killed. And nobody even knew that she had this letter or anything. And he was in Belgium at the time and he was telling all about the Belgians and he actually wrote the letter to his grandfather which would have been my great-grandfather, who was a farmer and he was telling him all about these Belgium horses and things and how he'd like to ship a couple of them back home to work the farm and stuff. But that was written up and he was killed sometime in September but it was maybe 1944 I'm thinking. The letter was written in the same month that he was killed, it was probably the last letter or anything that he wrote to anybody. And we found that letter in my mother's things when she passed away.