

**Michael Edward Canavan
Veteran**

**Michael Russert and Wayne Clarke
Interviewers**

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**Interviewers: INT
Michael Canavan: MC**

INT: This is an interview of Michael Canavan at the Lexington Avenue Armory, New York City, August 7th 2002, approximately 9 am. Interviewer is Michael Russert.

INT: Could you tell me your full name, your date of birth and place of birth please?

MC: Okay, Michael Edward Canavan, born January 22nd 1947, Brooklyn, New York.

INT: And what was your pre-service education?

High school. High school graduate. Year out of high school.

INT: Okay, and did you work at all prior to...?

MC: Ahh yes, I was an electrician.

INT: Were you drafted or...?

MC: Drafted.

INT: Okay, just tell us about you induction, I guess, and basic training.

MC: Okay, induction was through Fort Hamilton army base, Brooklyn. They put us on a bus over to 34th street, Manhattan, the train station, well later the Am Track or whatever, and they bussed us down to Jackson, South Carolina, for induction, and we went off to Fort Hood, Texas, for our basic training.

INT: Okay, could you describe your basic training?

MC: Ahhh, basically 9 weeks of concentrated Hell. It's eight weeks now but back then it was a little longer. If you've seen the movie Full Metal Jacket with the platoon sergeant, same guy, different name. Same guy. You didn't want to piss this guy off. *laughs*

INT: Do you think there was a, that you were being picked on for being a northerner, especially a New Yorker, by any southerners or anything like that?

MC: Yes, that was, that still is. That was, they still have situations like that.

INT: A lot of World War II veterans?

MC: Yeah. Quite a bit of that.

INT: Do you think that the basic training you received prepared you for Vietnam?

MC: Not really. Not really.

INT: Why?

MC: We basic - the basic training we had with like weapons qualification, that's what they - we had nothing at all as far as survival in a jungle environment. Nothing as far as reacting to ambushes, it was all you know world war II type, maybe Korean War type line defense type thing. Nothing by helicopter riding. You rode around in helicopters half the time. No it -

INT: What unit were you assigned to?

MC: I was with the first battalion 50th mechanized infantry company.

INT: Okay, so when did you end up going to Vietnam? So you just had the nine weeks straight?

MC: Nine weeks we went, they sent me away to radio repair school. I was a radio repairer down at Fort Benning, Georgia, for I guess about maybe six, seven months, then back to Fort Hood again. The original unit I was assigned to was the 141st infantry, and when I got back to Fort Hood they were packing up to go to Germany. Germany gets cold, you know, but there's a war. They forgot about me, I was transferred down the street to the 151st mechanized infantry. Alright, no problem. They're packing up too. 'Oh, you going to Germany?' 'Nope, we're going to Vietnam.' Whoops.

INT: Okay, could you describe going to Vietnam?

MC: Okay, they basically packed us up, all our equipment, we were a mechanized infantry we had personnel carriers, a couple small tanks, that's about it. They packed us up, shipped everything out to California, put us on a troop ship, the USNS John Pope, I believe it was. And for about a month we floated across the ocean over to Vietnam. A long trip.

INT: When did you arrive in Vietnam?

MC: Ahh, 1967, early '67.

INT: Do you remember what you wanted to do?

MC: It was probably July, August, something like that.

INT: Mhm, why don't you just describe your experiences from arrival to departure?

MC: It was hot, very very humid; like I said we flew around in helicopters half the time, the other half the time we were running around in personnel carriers. The area we were working in is almost, I almost consider it like the central highland but it was closest to the coast, in Binh Dinh Province, a little town called Phu Bai. Ah, Fong Song that, just north of Phu Bai. The area we operated was basically along the South China Sea, which was about, the beach area over there's about a mile wide and we're going up and down this thing in helicopters and all our personnel carriers, searching villages, cornering off for the national police to come in and search for their contraband people and whatever they're looking for. At the time, at the beginning when I was over there, I was a company commander's radio operator. So I got to run around with a 25 pound radio on my back and an antenna saying, 'I'm here!' When we flew in the helicopters, my position was in the door. I couldn't sit on the seats with the radio, it was just too big and you didn't have time take it off and put it on. So I had to sit in the door with the strap going across

my chest, first one out, let everyone know that, 'hey, we're being shot at', or 'hey, it's cool come on in', that sort of thing. After a while we rotated back and, I as a radio operator because it was a very high nutrition job, obviously. I rotated back to the base camp and the put me up on top of a mountain just outside camp where they had a radio relay site. We built that. We're basically in a valley, and communication was really bad because you can't transmit out of the valley, so we had a radio relay site up on top of the hill – this way we could double, triple our ranges. Really good – it worked out really well. Toward my end of service they basically broke the unit up, and scattered us basically to the wind. This way there wouldn't be any manpower draining any one particular area. I ended up going with the 101st who had just come into the country back in '68 and working with them, setting up their operations. We got a couple of veterans, with mostly cherry unit, so to speak. We showed them the ropes, how to get around.

INT: What do you mean by cherry...?

MC: They were just in country. They were actually doing foot locker inspections in Vietnam, if you can picture this in combat, you know. Dotting all the 'I's, crossing all the 't's, you know we were hysterical – 'this is Vietnam, you know, you don't do this here!' And they were basically screaming because they had just taken their air woman away from them. They just became air mobile and they were not happy, because now they're not getting their jump pay. Where are you going to parachute out of an airplane in Vietnam? But, you know, this is life. What are you going to do?

INT: When you said you were on a hilltop and you prepared the site, what do you mean?

MC: We actually built the fortified bunker out of sandbags and the engineer came up and gave us a little bit of a hand putting these I guess like 4x4's in to support the roof on this thing. We actually built the radio relay station up on top of the hill. It was operating through wire from the base camp. We had all the radios up on top of the hill, a little generator powered everything up, couple of truck batteries cause at night we had to shut everything down so the enemy didn't know where we were. But, all these a big cluster of antennae's on top of the hill; we had a tank up there but it was not really a tank, but what they called it dustard which was a modified tank where they ripped the turret off and put a 50mm Remi aircraft on it. You wouldn't want to be on the wrong side of this thing. Like the World War II movie where they're trying to shoot down the Japanese kamikaze's with them, with that gun on the tank. Cool.

INT: Do you want to describe some of your experiences, I know you were talking earlier of some of your raids in more detail?

MC: We had some unusual situations, I've actually had the bullet home with my name on it, literally. We were going through a village, being a radio operator I had antennae up and talking on the radio, saw something outside of my peripheral vision that shouldn't have been there. As I turned around, I had a 45 at the time, drawing the weapon, this guy had the biggest rifle I ever saw in my life pointed right at me, looked like a cannon. And he pulled the trigger and it went 'click'. Found out later he hadn't been doing maintenance on his weapon, defective firing at me. But everybody jumped on him, he had about fifteen bullets in him before he hit the ground. I got the bullet, they can do whatever they want with the weapon but that bullet had my name on it. But somewhere along the line it got lost and became history and it just disappeared. It's a shame.

Trying to think – there's a whole bunch of things I've been thinking about, but it's one of these, you know. We had a lot of good times, lot of bad times, lost a lot of good friends.

MC: INT: Do you think that we should've been in Vietnam?

The way the propaganda was at the time we didn't mind too much, we were over there to free all these oppressed people. But later on when we came back and heard the real story we were kind of annoyed about it because basically this war had been going on 20-30 years before we got there – it'd been going on since before World War II. They'd been fighting for their liberation from the French or whatever, they moved out then the Japanese moved in. then the Japanese moved out and France tried to move back in and it was like 'hey, where've you been the last 4-5 years?' but then they pull out and it's the next oppressor, you know we had no idea what it was all about. We just figure we were going over there bad guys against the good guys, and ah we're caught in the middle.

INT: What were the relations between the American troops and the Vietnamese people, in your experience?

MC: We had pretty good relations with them but we never really trusted them. We never really turned our backs on them. We had a couple people that would come in and be like bobbers, that sort of thing. We never had the little hooch cleaners that you probably hear about that would come and clean up, we didn't go for that. But we had a bar that would come in once in a while and they had to be watched constantly. We actually caught one of them pacing off with one of the defenses we made. Probably getting ready to call in a water attack the next night or something, you never know.

INT: How about race relations within American units?

MC: There was absolutely no problem. We're all over there for one job, and one job only – to survive, to come back tomorrow and go back home. It was none of this blacks against the whites. Later on there was quite a bit of this and there was a lot of drugs and stuff going on – we saw very very little of that. Very little. Everybody got along, we're all soldiers, we know that. The way it should've been – but sometimes people make issues of things, unfortunately.

INT: What about, ah, you said you had no illnesses or injuries, you didn't, ah you never got trench foot?

MC: Well I did end up having some dental surgery done over there, it was pretty bad. They told me they saved me about 3 or 4 teeth. I said, 'why bother?' you know. They sent me down to Denai, spent time out of the field, which was cool, had all the teeth taken out. There was also this thing, if you've talked to Vietnam veterans before you've heard of this thing called the beetle nut smile. They had this highly citrus fruit they used over there, little, I guess maybe the size of a plum, that the farmers used to pick off the trees and eat. Very high acidic value. It would rot the teeth right out of their heads and once in a while you'd come across one of these people and they'd give you one of these. *toothless smile* With the black gum so I caught a lot of ribbing about that. Then I got the dentures and the only other problem I had was something doctors called wrist rot. It was actually called Rice Paddy Wrist Rot. I used to wear a watch on my left hand like most people do that are right handed. I ended up getting a fungus all around the wrist, something with the watchband. So until that cleared up I switched it up to the right hand and I

still run out of right hand. What else are you going to call it? I do get a little flashback once in a while, I guess they used to call it post-traumatic stress disorder or whatever. They probably have a different name for it now. I've talked to a couple of people involved with the National Guard, I've talked with a couple of people, doctors, technicians and stuff, and they strangely attributed it to the fact that we're basically over there fighting for life for breakfast, and sitting at home for dinner. Have that instant, 'I'm here, now I'm here' sort of thing. You know. Whereas the other wars, Vietnam, not Vietnam, I'm sorry, ah World War II, Korea, they came home on troop ships. They had a time to detoxify their system from all this violence that they been through while they were over there. We didn't have that. We didn't have any counselors – you put your uniform back on and you went home. Nice to know yah. But they attribute that to that instantaneous society thing.

INT: What happened when you went home? What was the reaction?

MC: Well, they knew I was coming home, obviously, you know the parents and stuff. We went to a couple of peaceniks, sort of hippies, draft dodgers types out of California who came in through Fort Hood, California at the airport, but that was about it. I do have a humorous story, on the other side of that. Obviously none of my clothes fit anymore, cause I'd been away for like two years now; everything's out of style, you know, the colors, you know, you just didn't – weren't worn anymore. The pants didn't fit the shirts didn't fit, so I ended up going down to my local avenue, which was like 5th Avenue, Brooklyn, to buy clothes. So I came home on a Sunday, and went down to buy the clothes on Monday. The base camp before I left with the 101st, they had an airport, almost considered like an air raid siren. When the enemy started firing, mortars over there brought to the base, I mean being attacked, they'd let the siren go off and everyone would run for the bunkers or you'd lay flat, wherever you were. Obviously you're less of a target laying flat than when you're standing up, shrapnel won't do as much damage. Not paying attention to the time, it's 12 o'clock, there's a fire station right across the street. 12 o'clock, back in the 60's, they'd let off the air raid siren let everybody know it's time for lunch. I hit the ground, tried to roll under this guy's car. Everybody's looking at me like 'the hell is wrong with you?' I had to get up, dust myself off, felt about this big, you know, but you know – it's the same thing again, one minute you're fighting for your life at breakfast and you're home with the family having dinner. There's no chance for your body to, you know, familiarize yourself with the real world.

INT: How do you think your military service affected, changed your life? Did it at all in any way?

MC: A little bit. Probably hardened me a little more to other people's situations, in Vietnam you'd see bodies, people dying. Probably hardened me as far as funerals, that sort of thing, more than if I didn't go. Maybe a little more worldly, cause I've traveled, I've been halfway around the world now. Didn't see anything, but, you know, as far as that goes I get along with just about anybody now. So I don't know if I would've had the same attitude towards people now than if I hadn't gone over to Vietnam. Oh, mixed in with all the other ethnic persuasions shall we say with the Poleacks and the blacks, the Jews and the Orientals and everything else. I can tolerate anybody, you know, unless you do me wrong, but that's human nature. You know.

INT: Why did you join the Nation Guard?

MC: Okay, 1960- no I'm sorry, 1983 I joined the National Guard about 19 years in, as we speak

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INT: Why did you decide to join especially that long after...?

MC: Well that long after I was figuring they had a lot of doctor's and lawyer's sons, and judges sons and stuff like this in the guard back then, to avoid going over into Vietnam. They were getting out, and it was a time that I felt that, 'hey we saw a lot of people go into the service that didn't really know what combat was'. 15 years is a big time, a big time frame. So I went in to try to teach these people, to bring them up to speed, to say this is what you have to do to survive. Forget what they tell you in school, this is what really works. And it's still working today. I'm still teaching people today, and I love it.

INT: Do you belong to any veteran's organizations?

MC: Just the one right now, the 1st of the 50th association stationed out of, where are they now, I think they're down in Pennsylvania. We have our little reunions like every year and a half, two years with them.

INT: Do you attend any reunions?

MC: I been to one in Washington about two years ago. I didn't make it out, I couldn't make it out to they had one a little mini reunion this year out in Ohio. But I will make the next one down in Fort Benning, Georgia, next year. I believe its April.

INT: Have you seeked contact with any of the people?

MC: Maybe one or two.

INT: Maybe.

MC: Maybe. It's difficult – they only started the association two or three years ago and you forget names and faces and stuff like this. Some of them have come to natural causes and stuff like this since then because I was a young kid but not everybody was all young at that age. Had some old people, and, you know. Probably less healthier than me – you know have farm accidents, and car accidents, and stuff like this, they take their tolls, you know. Couple people that I remember we stayed in contact with. But we're scattered to the wind, we came from all over the United States, just like any other, you know, World War II, Korea, just mixed everybody together.

INT: Do you think there's not that closeness because of everyone just rotating in and out constantly?

MC: Most probably. Also the fact that like three months before we came back they basically broke the unit up. Some of them stayed there and some went over with me, some went further south, and you know, they just dissipated us. We were just fighting for survival and then the last three months, ah, just 'see yah'. You know, that sort of thing.

INT: What unit are you with in the National Guard and what rank do you have?

MC: Now I'm a sergeant first class, with the 230th single battalion. Our headquarters is in Tennessee right now, but the single flag is coming back to New York next year. We can't wait.

Right now the single flag is down in - right now there is no single in New York just the two odd companies. And we're really chomping at the bit, we can't, we just can't wait for the flag to come back. Guy's been waiting seven years for this. That's why I just re-enlisted, for round three.

INT: Okay, well thank you very much.

MC: Okay. Well, I do have a couple pictures.

INT: Oh, did you have some pictures you'd like to show us?

MC: Then and now.

INT: That's a nice shot. Kay, got that one. Okay then and - oh, worked quite a bit on this one. Okay.

MC: Lowly E4 back then.

INT: I'd like to mention, to ask were you married when you went over or did you marry after?

MC: No. I married after. A good four years after.

INT: Okay. Thank you very much. Let me get that.

MC: I don't know if you can get it all in. I got a double sided thing.

INT: Okay, I'm getting a bit of reflection - okay there, I got it. Okay, that's your serial number, social security number.

MC: And those are the units we serve with.

INT: Kay, that's nice.

MC: Thirty four years.

INT: And it still lights.

MC: Where you going to find something nowadays like that? Thirty four years old, taught in college for the first time. You don't know how much I appreciate this guys. Thank you.

INT: Thank you.