‘It was a great experience’

Mitchell recounts his years of service

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Villages of Farragut resident Brad Mitchell looked back on his time in the military in reflection of Veterans Day.

“I think it taught me a lot of discipline … and I have to make decisions and move on,” he said. “It was a great experience and I wouldn’t change it.”

Mitchell served in the U.S. Army from August 1965 through July 1970, followed by a year of Army Reserves.

“I was drafted,” he recalled. “I was living in Westport, Connecticut, with my family. I just turned 21.

“I had moved there with my family after a year of college,” Mitchell said. “I decided to take a break. Then my number ended up being called.”

He was sent to Fort Dix in New Jersey for about 10 weeks of basic training. Then in November 1965, he was sent to U.S. Intelligence School in Fort Holabird in Maryland.

“I spent from November 1965 to July 1967 in the Army Intelligence School,” Mitchell said. “Then, I had to make a decision on whether I was going to re-enlist, make a career out of the Army or get out in six or eight months.”

Also, he had gotten married in September 1966 to Shirley, with whom he is still married.

“So, they offered me an assignment with the military advisory command in Bangkok, Thailand,” Mitchell said.

“I remember the trip over very well because I was a specialist fifth class at the time,” he said. “I had just made rank, so I could take my wife on a company tour. That was kind of cool.

“At the Travis Air Force Base outside of Sacramento, we got on the plane,” Mitchell said. “They normally put the enlisted people back in the coach section; but since my wife was with me, they put us in first class [on] a brand new Douglas DC-8 wing flight — one of the early four-engine jets.

“We had to land on Wake Island to refuel, and it was in the middle of a monsoon rainstorm,” he recalled and laughed. “I could see through the clouds this little speck down there, and I thought, ‘We’re going to land on that?’ Sure enough, we did.”

They then flew to Clark Air Base in the Philippines and then to Bangkok.

“It took a better part of 36 hours flying time,” Mitchell said. “And it was during my birthday, Aug. 1.”

They spent two years in Thailand, where he was with the classified control center, handling classified messages in and out of Vietnam and other places.

“We had an exercise in Thailand,” Mitchell recalled. “I participated in that military exercise with Australians, which was kind of cool.”

After two years, Mitchell returned to the United States and was assigned to the Defense Intelligence Agency in Washington for his final year.

“I had decided, while we were in Bangkok, that I was going to get out after my service time was up and use the GI Bill to go back to college, so that’s what I did,” he said.

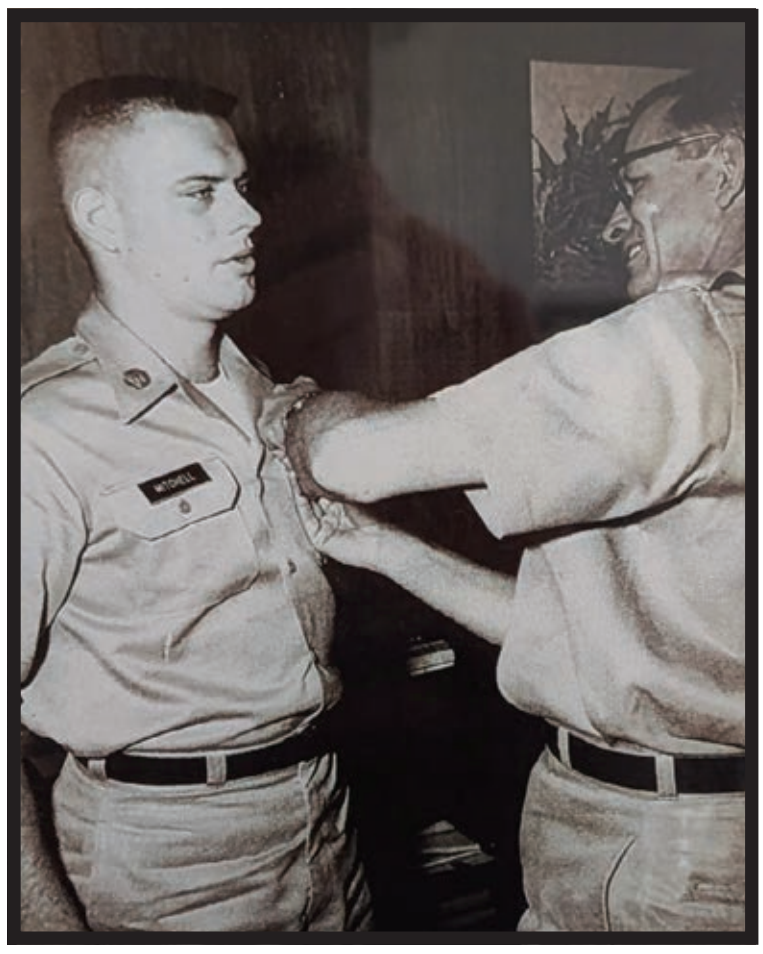
Mitchell enrolled in Geneva College in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, where he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in business administration then went to work for Union Carbide in Cartersville, Georgia.

He worked for Union Carbide for 31 years.

“My final assignment was a joint venture with Kuwait Oil Company,” Mitchell said. “We were living in Kuwait for three years. While we were there, Union Carbide got bought out by Dow Chemical … so I retired.”

They moved to Lenoir City in 2000 then moved in the Villages Dec. 18, 2019, “the day after they opened the place,” he recalled.





Above photo by Tammy Cheek / Left photo submitted

Above: Brad Mitchell, Villages of Farragut resident, looks back on his life as a teaching experience. He shows a photo of a general presenting him with a commendation medal.

Left: Brad Mitchell, who served from 1965 to 1971, is shown in this photograph receiving a commendation medal from Gen. Hal McCown in 1965.





Cooper passing lessons to the next generation

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Top and left photos submitted / Above photo by Jake Nichols
Craig Cooper has worked as an NJROTC instructor at Farragut High School since 2022.

For Craig Cooper, any Farragut home football game brings a moment of pride and reflection.

When members of his Naval Junior Reserves Officers Training Corps (NJROTC) unit march to the star logo at midfield, turn toward the crowd and present arms for the playing of the National Anthem, Cooper thinks back to the time it took for each step to be memorized.

"It's not me; it's the kids," he said. "They're the ones that put in the effort. I just give them the guidance to get there. And once they do, they are on their own. I'll tweak here and there, but when it comes down to it, they do all the work."

From seniors to eighth-graders, the ceremony and its intricacies are taught by students — exactly the way Cooper envisioned when he took over the program in 2022.

That leadership is just one of the core principles he brings as Farragut's NJROTC instructor after more than two decades in the military.

A Wartburg native, Cooper joined the U.S. Marine Corps in 1993. In locations across the globe, he excelled as a motor transport operator, mechanic and instructor.

After 21 years of service, Cooper retired in 2014 with his desired role of gunnery sergeant.

"Basically being a Marine, just doing what they trained me to do," he noted, adding that he traveled across the world on multiple occasions.

"In the time I was there, I traveled to numerous places," Cooper reflected. "Been in and out of combat situations numerous times, traveled around the world at least once or twice. When something comes up on TV, my kids and my wife will ask me if I've been there, and usually the answer is yes."

Of his favorite memories, Cooper shared one in particular.

"Probably the best time I ever had was with MARSOC, the Marines' Special Operations Command," he said. "I got to do a lot more than just my job. I was out with the teams doing things in Afghanistan, seeing another side of things. And the camaraderie among other Marines is the biggest thing. It doesn't matter who you're with or where you are; you always make friends with brothers and sisters and that never goes away."

Those relationships — especially ones developed with people who died in the line of duty — come to mind for Cooper every Veteran's Day.

"There's guys that didn't come home, guys I don't see any more because of PTSD and other issues," he said. "Those are the people I think about, and the old people that brought the traditions and core values to when I joined. Now I'm the guy carrying them to the ones who will join next."

Some of those people are Farragut graduates who have been taught by Cooper in his time at FHS.

But whether those interactions have come at Farragut or in Cooper's previous role as a security officer at Powell High School, the impact on his own life has been paramount.

"I absolutely love it," he said. "There's no better place to be after being retired to influence and help and guide some of these kids that need it. It's an absolute blast."

So while those pregame ceremonies are nice, Cooper said his greatest joy comes from seeing what students accomplish after they walk across the stage at graduation.

"My success as an ROTC instructor comes from the kids' success when they graduate," he said. "There's a lot of them in college, in military and in the work force — and if they are happy, I'm happy. That's the best feeling in the world, knowing that kid made it where they wanted to go."

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U.S. Army brought Owensbys together

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The U.S. Army brought Robbie and Brenda Owensby together, and they have been together for 53 years.

"It's been wonderful," Brenda said. "We're both honored to have served our country. We've been real happy."

The two met in December 1972 in Fort Benning, Georgia. Robbie was a staff sergeant and non-commissioned officer in charge of the Welcome Center, where new people reported, and she was a second lieutenant, just coming out of 18 weeks of Women's Army Corps officer basic training.

"Fort Benning was my first assignment," she recalled, adding she was a financial home management officer there but later became an Army emergency relief officer.

Technically, Brenda outranked Robbie, although she, then 22, was 12 years younger.

"I was very naïve," she recalled. "I thought he was handsome. He always commanded a room … I didn't understand why but I would have butterflies when he walked in."

"When she walked in, I decided she was going to be with me," Robbie recalled.

"We met in December and our first date was in April," Brenda, 76, said. "One reason we don't have a lot of pictures together [is] because I wasn't convinced that it was OK to date him because I was an officer and he was an NCO.

"But, eventually he bought an officer's guide and read the whole thing to show me that no where did it say we couldn't date," she said. "After that first date, we only dated each other.

"We got married the following October," Brenda said.

While always professional while in uniform, the Army later transferred Robbie away from Brenda.

For Robbie, who turned 88 on Veterans Day, the military life started when he enlisted in the Marine Corps, serving from 1956 to 1960, all the while a military police officer in Norfolk, Virginia.

He left the Marine Corps because there were no opportunities for promotions; but once out, he decided to enlist in the Army in 1961. He retired in 1977.

"There were two reasons [for joining the Army]," Robbie said. "One, I hated civilian life and, two, there were people being killed in Vietnam. I was able to go."

He served in Vietnam for four years. On one occasion in 1971, he injured his spine when his team's Jeep ran into an irrigation ditch.

"I think we all went out of the jeep," he said.

He did not have pain at that time but later, while he was stationed in Germany, he was running and passed out during the run. After visits to the doctors, they discovered he had separated two vertebrae.

He had never asked for a purple heart but later he received a Bronze Star for valor.

While fighting at the Mekong Delta, "quite a few people got shot up," he recalled. "For some reason, I got a Bronze Star."

"You wouldn't leave the injured people there," Brenda said. "He just kept shooting and firing and providing cover."

Brenda served in the Army from 1971 to 1995, starting out as a Women's Army Corps lieutenant.

"I always wanted to join the Army," she said. "My father was in the Army for 30 years. I wanted to go to West Point Academy but West Point was not open to women and ROTC was not open to women.

"So, my dad found a program that the Army had for women," Brenda said. "It was good because my dad really wanted me to go in as an officer.

"I was in the first class at the University of Tennessee to commission women," she said.

"Back then, they had the Women's Army Corps," Brenda said. "I was an honor graduate."



Above photo by Tammy Cheek / Below photo submitted



Above: Robbie and Brenda Owensby, who met and married in the U.S. Army in the 1973, have been together for 53 years.

Right: Second Lt. Brenda Owensby gives the oath of office to Staff Sgt. Robbie Owensby when he re-enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1974.

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Baio sought challenge in Marine Corps

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Kick & Fit owner/instructor Paulie Baio always had challenges in mind so he enlisted in the U.S. Marines.

"I joined the Marine Corps straight out of high school, 18 years old," he said. "I graduated high school May 25, 2000, and left [for the Marines] July 5.

"Out of all the branches, I wanted a challenge," Baio recalled. "I wanted to go and be the toughest, [to get] the hardest training, and I wanted to be the best."

The Sanford, Florida, native, went into the military because "there was nothing else for me.

"I had already gotten into physical fitness before I joined the military," Baio said. "I was already a personal trainer and decided I wanted to do military, and Marine Corps was the only reasonable option for me."

And, the Marines Corps was everything he hoped and more.

"I loved every day of it," Baio said. "Very rewarding. Very challenging."

As a young marine, he started out as a diesel mechanic, got promoted fairly quickly and was a sergeant within three years. Then, he was nominated by leadership staff to be a drill instructor, for which he served on Paris Island for four years.

"I would like to think that I showed great leadership skills," Baio said. "I would handle all the responsibilities that were expected of me and more, great physical fitness, all around all of the things they were looking for a marine drill instructor."

At that time, he held the titles of drill instructor, senior drill instructor, martial arts instructor and chief drill instructor. He served 15 years in the Marines then medically retired due to an injury he sustained in his spine.

"Just something in my back gave out," Baio said. "A disc had completely collapsed, so I had to have emergency surgery on my spine. After that, the recovery never got me back to the level that I should be at for deployment. It forced me to have to retire early."

When he got out, the veteran found odds-and-ends jobs, which included personal training, but "none of that really satisfied me."

Baio came to Knoxville in 2019, doing personal training and kick boxing coaching until he decided to open his own business.

In January 2023, he left from working for someone else to open Kick & Fit Club in July 2023. He returned to his roots from the Marine Corps, where he taught hand-to-hand combat, close-combat instruction and Marine Corps martial arts program.

"I earned all the way up to the level of second-degree black belt in the military," Baio said. "I wanted to continue that when I got out.

"I brought a bunch of the techniques and the things I learned from those different fighting styles and just introduced it as cardio kick boxing," he said.

"What inspired me to start Kick & Fit Club was my passion for fitness, my desire to help others and my belief that physical fitness can truly change lives," Baio said. "I didn't want to just open another gym; I wanted to create a place where people could become better versions of themselves.

"A place where people of all ages, backgrounds and fitness levels could walk through the doors and immediately feel welcomed," he said. "Somewhere they wouldn't feel judged, intimidated or pressured to compete with anyone other than the person they were yesterday."

Along with his military experience, Baio also brings with him years involved in competitive bodybuilding, coaching and personal training.

"I learned firsthand that fitness is about so much more than physical strength," Baio said. "It's about discipline, confidence, mental toughness and believing in yourself even when things get difficult."





Photos submitted

Above: Paulie Baio enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps straight out of high school graduation on May 25, 2000.

Left: After Paulie Baio retired from the U.S. Marine Corps, he founded Kick & Fit gym in Turkey Creek in Knoxville. There, he brings his military training to his clients.



THANK YOU TO OUR VETERANS







Veterans Salute Race

From patriotic outfits to American flags and peppy dogs, there was plenty to see as Farragut runners turned out for the Veterans Salute 5K, 10K and Fun Run Saturday, Nov. 7, at the Farragut Community Center on Jamestowne Blvd.



This red Mazda convertible, driven by Henry Marambio, paced the runners on Saturday morning.



Ali Martin and her dog, Rocky, remained focused as they completed the race.



Christy Jones and her children showed off their Veterans Day shirts before the races Saturday morning.



Jason Tucker, left, Rachel Morgan and Khari Fletcher-Moore showed their support for friends who took part in the race.



Runners stood with their hands over their hearts during the National Anthem on Saturday.



Army veteran Paul Szustakowski took second in the 10K open as part of the Veterans Salute races.



Matt Warren, top right, and his children Andy Warren (left), Madison Warren and Benjamin Warren cheered on their wife and mom, Amanda Warren, during Saturday's festivities.



Michele Brackett was decked out in red and blue to show her patriotic pride.



Runners got off to a fast start in the first race Saturday morning, and Colton Sharp (left, orange shirt) brought a patriotic gusto with the American flag he carried throughout the event.



Sophia Thomason cracked a smile as she crossed the finish line.

Photos by Jake Nichols



We salute those who have served our country.

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Abram A.	Vernon G.	Larry P.
John B.	Harold H.	James P.
Bob C.	Eric H.	Bob R.
Chip D.	Paul H.	Edward S.
Jack D.	Carl M.	Dale St. J.
Bill G.	Weldon M.	Bob W.
	Brad M.	





Missing Man Table

SMALL TABLE SET FOR ONE - symbolizing the fact that some are missing from our ranks.

WHITE TABLECLOTH - symbolizes the purity of their intentions to respond to their country's call to arms.

BLACK NAPKIN - represents the sorrow of captivity.

A SINGLE RED ROSE IN A VASE - signifies the blood shed to ensure America's freedom.

THE YELLOW RIBBON AROUND THE VASE - represents a demand for proper accounting of those that are not among us today.

A LEMON SLICE ON THE PLATE - to show a captive soldier's bitter fate

GRAINS OF SALT ON THE PLATE - reminds us of the countless fallen tears of families as they wait.

AN INVERTED GLASS - because they cannot toast with us.

AN EMPTY CHAIR - because they are not here.

A WHITE CANDLE - for the hope that all our missing will return someday.

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