

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ARMANDO G. LOPEZ
69th Engineer Brigade, US Army
2012

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Lopez, Armando G., (1948–2013). Oral History Interview, 2012.

Approximate length: 44 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Summary:

In this oral history interview, Armando G. Lopez discusses his service in the United States Army from 1969 to 1971. He served with the 69th Engineer Battalion during the Vietnam War, and received a commendation for his work with the Delta Military Assistance Command.

Lopez was born in Mexico and immigrated to the United States with his family at the age of six. He describes his status as a legal permanent resident of the United States, but not a citizen. He grew up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he attended Escuela Vieau, St. Patrick School, Holy Trinity Catholic School, and Boys Technical High School (now known as Bradley Tech).

He went on to enroll in college and was one credit short of a full-time load when his draft notice arrived in the mail in March of 1969. Lopez recalls being told by his family that as a Mexican citizen he should not have to go to war, but Lopez decided to go regardless. He completed his basic training at Fort Campbell in Kentucky, then moved on to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, for his advanced individual training with the Army engineers.

Lopez originally believed he was not going to be sent overseas. He explains that when his original unit was sent to Thailand, he was bypassed for a passport because he was not a citizen. He was sent to Fort Carson, Colorado, where he was married in December of 1969. However, upon returning from his wedding, he was told he was on a levy to Vietnam. In February, he shipped out to Oakland, California, then on to Vietnam by aircraft.

He landed at Bien Hoa, and from there he was sent to Long Binh Post, then briefly to Cam Ranh Bay and down to Vung Tau. Here, he was assigned to guard barges and keep the pier secure. His group did this by throwing fragmentation hand grenades into the water to kill or deter enemy frogmen. Lopez notes he saw his first casualty at this time, when a hooch used for communication checks was booby-trapped by the Viet Cong (VC). A sergeant tripped the trap and was blown up. Lopez remembers running to the scene and seeing the sergeant's body parts splattered everywhere; he particularly recalls opening the door to the blown-up hooch and coming face to face with a rib cage.

After this incident, Lopez was sent into the Mekong Delta, where he was assigned to guard the perimeter of a base. He describes seeing a lot of action, including one experience where he saw grass moving, but was denied permission to shoot three times, and later that night the perimeter was ambushed by VC and the base was mortared. He continues to blame himself for obeying orders rather than following his instincts.

Lopez goes on to explain how General Cushman asked for volunteers to go with the 25th Infantry Division, accompanying advisory teams. He volunteered to go and spent two or three months on this

mission. It was while doing this work that he met his good friend Gonzalez, a helicopter door gunner with the 191st Army Air Support.

Lopez recounts some of the unique experiences he had as a Mexican soldier who was fluent in the Spanish language. He describes working as an ad hoc interpreter for a group of doctors from Spain, and meeting other Hispanic soldiers from different parts of the US while stationed at Chau Doc. One of these was a medic named Gara who helped him treat the jungle rot in his legs.

He so enjoyed his time accompanying the 25th Infantry Division that he requested to return, but this request was denied and he remained on base with the 69th Engineers, working as a perimeter guard. He explains that during this time, his friend Gonzalez's unit was stationed next to them, and on the first of January of 1971, Gonzalez was shot down and badly injured. Lopez became overwhelmed by his grief, and ended up being relieved of guard duty. Because his tour was nearly over, he was sent to Long Binh Post to do paperwork until he left. He describes being presented in front of his unit and acknowledged for his service with the 25th Infantry Division, in a letter from General Cushman himself.

He reflects further on his experiences in Vietnam, explaining why he declined to take any leave and recalling heavy fighting and casualties. He also recalls some good times, including celebrating the 16th of September holiday with other Hispanic soldiers, singing Mexican *corridos* and playing guitar, and his newfound friendships.

Lopez describes coming home to the United States, landing in Oakland and dealing with protestors at the airfield. He recalls taking a flight from San Francisco to Chicago-O'Hare, then a bus to Milwaukee, where his wife, mother, and sisters met him at the station. He concludes by talking about the nightmares and blackouts that plagued him, and his difficulty adjusting to life after his service.

Biographical Sketch:

Armando G. Lopez was born in Mexico and immigrated to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, at age six. He was drafted into the United States Army in 1969 and served in Vietnam with the 69th Engineer Battalion. He returned home to Milwaukee in 1971, and spent four years in the Army Reserves. He passed away in Illinois in 2013.

Archivist's notes:

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. It is strongly suggested that researchers directly engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript.

Interviewed by George F. Banda, 2012.

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, 2020.

Reviewed by Morgan Roelke, 2020.

Abstract written by Rebeca C. Jefferson, 2020.

OH1890.Lopez access

[Beginning of OH1890.Lopez_tape1_A_access]

- Banda: I'm interviewing Armando Lopez in Park Forest, Illinois. And I'm in his home. So, Armando, tell me a little bit about yourself before you went into the service.
- Lopez: Well, before I went into the service, I had dreams of being a chemical engineer. I was going to college. And I was also a musician and playing with bands every weekend. And just before I went in the service, those were my intentions of completing BS [Bachelor of Science] [??].
- Banda: Now, were you an American citizen at the time?
- Lopez: No, I wasn't.
- Banda: You were a Mexican—
- Lopez: I was a Mexican citizen, yes.
- Banda: All right. And you got drafted?
- Lopez: I got drafted, yes.
- Banda: Okay. So they were drafting noncitizens.
- Lopez: Yes, they were. Yes. While I was in Vietnam, I met other Hispanics that were—
- Banda: Mexicans?
- Lopez: —Mexican citizens, yeah. And some were killed, yes.
- Banda: So where did you take your basic training? And you were in the Army?
- Lopez: Yes, I was in the Army, and I took my basic training at Fort Campbell, Kentucky.
- Banda: And what year was that?
- Lopez: Nineteen sixty-nine, in March.
- Banda: Okay. And that was basic training. And then from there, where did you go?
- Lopez: I went to AIT [Advanced Infantry Training], and I was at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, Fort Lost in the Woods. [Both laugh]
- Banda: So what kind of training did you have there for AIT?

Lopez: Mostly individual training, and with the engineers, running a quarry crusher. What this did was make gravel. It would take rocks and crush them. And then I got training for that, and I got also training for generators.

Banda: Okay. So how did you wind up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, before you went into the service? I mean, from Mexico, your family came all the way to Milwaukee?

Lopez: Right. Our family brought me from Mexico at the age of six years old. And we came here legally, but all I had was just my residential card. And, yeah, I was between six and seven years old, six and a half, yeah.

Banda: And you went to school here in Milwaukee, then?

Lopez: Yes. I went to Vieau School for kindergarten, and then I went to St. Patrick's School up until the fourth year, and then I went to Holy Trinity School. After that, I went to Boys Technical High School for high school.

Banda: Now, when you got drafted, did that come in the mail? Is that what a draft notice—or was that like your number was picked, back then? They were—

Lopez: No, it just came in the mail. Somehow, somehow, when I was going to college, I was—I don't know if it was a half or a quarter a credit short of full load—and they sent me a letter. I don't know how they got a hold of the credits and that, but they sent me a letter right away that I was drafted. And I left Milwaukee on March 13, 1969.

Banda: And right to Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

Lopez: Right to Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

Banda: So when you were in Fort Leonard Wood, is that when you got your notice to go to Vietnam?

Lopez: No. My whole company was going to Thailand, and I remember them getting their passports and everything. And they bypassed me, and they sent me from there to Fort Carson, Colorado. And me, I was thinking that I wasn't going to be sent overseas.

[00:05:09]

Banda: Ah. So how long did you stay there in Colorado?

Lopez: I stayed in Colorado till around January or the first part of February. And then I was, I got married in December, and when I came home from the wedding, which was January first, they told me that I was in a levy to Vietnam, and I thought they

were joking. [Both laugh] And then I went in to ask the first sergeant to verify it, and he showed me some records with my name on it, that I was headed on a levy for Vietnam. So they sent me home for thirty days, and then after that, I went to Oakland, California. From there, they shipped us out to Vietnam.

Banda: Did you go on a ship—

Lopez: No, no.

Banda: —or on aircraft?

Lopez: Aircraft. We went on an aircraft.

Banda: So where did you land when you got to Vietnam?

Lopez: You know, the airport was Bien Hoa and Long Binh. After Bien Hoa, they took us to Long Binh. After we were in Long Binh, we went to Cam Ranh Bay for about three days, and then they shipped me down to Vung Tau.

Banda: Vung Tau. And once you got there, what was your assignment in Vung Tau?

Lopez: In Vung Tau, they didn't have a quarry. They had a quarry someplace else. They crushed the rock, and they would bring it in barges. So our job was to secure the pier where the barges would come in, and to also watch the ships that were there. We had to pull guard.

Banda: Guard duty there right by the pier?

Lopez: Right by the pier, yes.

Banda: And you mentioned you had to throw some frags [fragmentation grenades].

Lopez: Yes. We had to throw, once, either twenty or thirty minutes apart, we had to throw a frag—

Banda: Hand grenade, right?

Lopez: —hand grenades, yes, in order to avoid any frogmen coming in and trying to blow up the ships. That was guard duty. And of course, we had our M16s, but the grenades were the main thing that we used, you know, so the enemy would not get close by the ships.

Banda: Now, you did that for three days, and then what happened? They sent you somewhere else?

Lopez: Well, yeah. After that—it was about a week or two, or maybe a little more than that. Maybe about a month.

Banda: All right. That period, is that when the sergeant was killed?

Lopez: Yes.

Banda: What happened there?

Lopez: We had this—it was an R&R [rest and relaxation] place, but the VC [Viet Cong] started to creep in.

Banda: Infiltrate.

Lopez: Infiltrate. And, you know, right off of the pier, you could see what they called VC Island. They knew the VC were there. We knew that. But then eventually, they started to come in and to booby trap. And what they did is, they booby trapped this hooch, where they used to use it for commo check, communications, and they booby trapped it. And when the sergeant—I don't know. I couldn't tell you, because I wasn't there, but it's when it happened. It just blew up. And I was close by, and I ran over there. And, well, he was blown up. The whole body was splattered everywhere. The only thing that was left of him was a leg, and when I opened the door, his ribcage jumped at me.

[00:10:10]

Banda: My God.

Lopez: Yeah.

Banda: So that's one of those things you never forget.

Lopez: You'll never forget that. And that was my first experience, and supposedly, it was supposed to be one of the safest place in Vietnam. And about two weeks after that happened, that incident in Vung Tau, they immediately got us on a plane, and they sent us to the Mekong Delta, down further south. And that was another experience.

Banda: So that's another experience. What did you mean by that? What happened there?

Lopez: Well, then there was really action, a lot of action. My first—it was in May, my first time in perimeter guard. I had the night vision scope, and I noticed that something was moving out there in the grass, tall grass. And I looked over on the side, to either side, and everything was still. But right in front of me, the grass was moving. And I called my company, the CO [commanding officer], and I asked permission to shoot. And he said, "Permission denied." And again, I saw it. I

called back again, the CO, and let him know what I was seeing, and he says, "Permission denied." He denied me three times. And when you're on perimeter guard, you have—you know, it varies, but we were on two hours, and then we slept three hours, and two hours, and we took turns. And so it was my time to sleep, and while I was asleep, I was awakened by—I had never seen the Cobra helicopter. Never witnessed it. And it came and was sweeping the area right in front of me, because evidently, there were VC trying to infiltrate us.

And this Cobra came, and I had—it scared the daylights out of me, because it sounded like a big roar, you know, as it began to spit out those bullets. And I got up all scared. And I was on the tower, and the guys below me started yelling, "Lopez, jump! Jump, Lopez! Lopez, we're getting hit! Jump!" And so I had my M79 and my M16, and I just grabbed them, and I jumped. I don't know how many feet it was, twelve feet or somewhere around there. I can't remember. But I jumped, and then I got next to the guys that had more experience than me, and the Cobra, they had called it in for support. And what it was, it was six VC that were trying to infiltrate in front of me, and while that was happening, it was just something to keep us off guard. They started to mortar us, and they got us pretty bad. They got the base really bad. And we had a section where we had the Army air support, and we had part of the Air Force, and we had part of engineers all around. And in the morning, when everything was over, I went over to the area where they had bombarded with mortars, and all I just saw was flesh and metal shrapnel all over the area. Blood everywhere.

[00:15:26]

And I always wondered, if I would have shot, if things would have been different. And that's one of the things that bugs me, is because I should have disobeyed orders, I should have shot. I don't know, but I'm thinking that we would have had, maybe, a different result. I don't know, but it still bugs me up to this day. And, of course, there was a lot of casualties, and the thing that bothers me is, it was under my watch. Under—you know, I was—on perimeter guard. Yeah. So that's one of the situations, among many that we did have.

I want to say that our base, right across the street was the POWs [prisoners of war], the VC POWs. And a lot of the times, they would try to get out, and so many nights, we had to sit there, and we were told, "Anything that comes over there, you shoot it." And we would just wait for them to try to get over the barbed wire, because they wanted to escape. So we had the VC that we had to worry about. We had to worry about those that were POWs next to us. And sometimes we didn't even sleep that good, you know?

Banda: Right.

Lopez: It was just go, go, go, go, go, go. There was no rest.

Banda: Yeah. So were you assigned there permanently, or did you go anywhere else?

Lopez: You know, I was selected—with me and this sergeant. Walker was his last name, but I can't remember the other guy's name from the Red 1. Walker was from the 1st Cav, and I was from the 169 Engineers. And they offered us to go in, and the areas where nobody wanted to go, and where they had advisors that hardly had any contact with anybody other than the village where they were trying to advise. And I took it on. I can't remember if it was for two or three months. I think it was three months. But every day, we would visit two or three camp areas, different villages. And in that, there were orphanages that the US was helping out, orphanages for the Laotian, orphanages for—of course, they were mixed together—Cambodian, and for the Vietnamese, also. And we encouraged those advisors, and, you know, after we were done—we were under the 25th Infantry, which was under General Cushman [Lt. Gen. John H. Cushman].

Banda: So what exactly was your job there? What did you do, exactly?

Lopez: Mostly encouragement, encouraging them, talking with them, singing a song with them, anything to encourage them. And at various times, when we would visit these villages, we were under fire. We had a lot of challenges. There were areas that we had to go by boat, and in one of the areas, they attacked it. All night long, we were attacked. I had a friend by the last name of Gonzalez. He was in the 191st Army Air Support. He was the gunner on a helicopter. And they came for—you know, to help us out, to get us out, because they were really hurting us pretty bad. And they came in, and they cleared the way for us, so we could get back. And every place that we would go to, it was, you know.

[00:20:52]

And other places, we confronted sniper fire, and before our helicopter would land, there were search parties down below to find out where the snipers were. They could never find them. But they were shooting, and I was trying to get us down. And, you know, that was very challenging, because we really didn't have that much fire support. Most of the time, it was just a helicopter and us three guys, landing in areas where, you know, we were getting hit pretty bad.

Banda: Okay, now, you speak Spanish fluently.

Lopez: Yes.

Banda: Did you ever get a chance to use your Spanish when you were—

Lopez: I sure did. In one of the parts of the Mekong Delta, there was a group of Spanish doctors that were sent by Spain to help the people out. Now, they spoke Spanish and French. They did not speak English, [laughs] and they were—how do you say—they tried to communicate with the advisors, the American advisors, but they couldn't, because they did not speak English. So when I got there, I was able to

interpret in Spanish to the English. And the Vietnamese understood Spanish. They knew French, too, though. They could communicate—not all of them—but I could communicate in English to them. And so they were so happy, they made a feast for me. They made a party. They brought food and everything. These were all Spanish doctors, and they were so happy that I had dropped by. And that was only for three days, but it was a wonderful experience to know that you can help somebody out, and even the Spanish language, you know, you could use it. I knew it fluently, you know.

Banda: Of all places, in Vietnam.

Lopez: In Vietnam. And I had some Vietnamese that sang some songs in Spanish, and a guitar. Yeah. They said, “Oh, I know. Mexico, Mexico.” And they would sing. Yeah. A guitar—and play guitar. Isn’t that something?

Banda: That’s incredible.

Lopez: It is. It’s incredible. But it’s things that I experienced. And when I was down there, I stopped in Chau Doc. There was a Hawaiian that played ukulele. He played jazz. He was a very skillful ukulele player. And in there was a—in the Special Forces, two Hispanics. There were more Hispanics, but I can remember just two of them. One was Gara, and the other one was Ramirez. Now, Gara was the medic. He was E-7? E-6, E-7. He was an E-7. And he saw that I had, oh, what seemed like all raw. In my legs, I had the beginning of the jungle rot all over my legs, from the rice paddies. And he asked me, “What are you putting on it?” I said, “Well, they gave me this stuff, these injections, and this ointment. It’s supposed to be antibiotics.” And he says, “Throw them away.”

[00:25:07]

Banda: Really?

Lopez: Yeah. And he gave me some injections, and it helped me out. But I couldn’t walk because of the rawness of the skin, you know?

Banda: Yeah.

Lopez: And the rawness, and the blood. But we just kept going. There was no—when you’re out in the field, you just got to keep going. You got to keep moving. And Ramirez, I remember him because—Special Forces—he always wanted to go and reconnaissance at night. And during the day, he would pace back and forth, because he wanted to see blood. And he was already into that. He was in that mood, and that mode, of killing. And so at night, you know, that was his day. That was his time. And they would go out and seek the enemy. They sought for the enemy. Yeah.

Banda: Wow.

Lopez: Yeah. That was Ramirez, and Gara was the medic. And there were other Hispanics there at the Special Forces camp. Yeah.

Banda: How long—

Lopez: In Chau Doc county. It was right next to Cambodia. Right next to Cambodia, yeah.

Banda: So how long were you there, then? Just a few days, and then you moved on?

Lopez: Right. We were there maybe—I want to say maybe about a week.

Banda: Okay.

Lopez: A week there, and then we moved on to other areas.

Banda: Yeah. And you did this for how long?

Lopez: Three months. Three months.

Banda: Now, after the three months is over, then what happens?

Lopez: Well, I was sent back to my—

Banda: Back to your unit?

Lopez: —to my unit, yeah, which was the 169 Engineers. And again, they requested for me to go with them. They enjoyed my fellowship with—you know, how I conducted myself, and they wanted me to go back. And my first sergeant denied it. He says, “No, we need you.” And so what they did is, they really didn’t have any job for me there, so they had me pull perimeter guard every night.

Banda: Oh, God.

Lopez: Yeah, every night was perimeter guard for me. And until the first of the year, we had an incident where Gonzalez got hit.

Banda: He was the door gunner, right?

Lopez: Right. In a helicopter. See, the 191st was right next to our hooch. We were right next to them, you know, right next to each other, even though we weren’t in the same company. He was with the Army Support Group, and we were 169th Engineers, we were right there. And then on the first, he got shot up in his arms, and I snapped. And I told the CO, “This time, I’m not asking any permission from

you.” I said, “Anything that comes in front of me, it’s mine.” And so when he heard that, he came over to my station, and he asked me to step down. And I says, “Uh-uh. I’m not stepping down. If I get down right now,” I said, “you’re going to give me a court martial.” You know? And he says, “No, Lopez. Believe me. I’m not. We found out what happened. We understand. Please come down.”

Banda: You were up on that tower again?

Lopez: I was in the tower again. Yeah. And then he says, “Please come down.” And, “We’re relieving you of those duties.” He said, “We found out. You know, it’s almost going to be time for you to go home, so we’re going to just let you stay and clear the area, you know, with the paperwork and all that.” And so they brought a Jeep, took me down, and took me back to the base, and told me to just relax. And so the next day, all I had to do was start clearing the area. You know, when you clear it before you leave.

[00:30:14]

Banda: Yeah.

Lopez: And so that’s what I did. And I left—well, actually, three, four days before the fourteenth—around the eleventh, tenth or eleventh, I left to Long Binh.

Banda: What month was this?

Lopez: This was in January.

Banda: Okay.

Lopez: And while I was there, and I went to see my friend Gonzalez. They were going to ship him over to Japan to work on his arm. It was bad. It stunk. I think they probably amputated his arm. But while I was there, I met somebody who was in the high school, at Boys Tech, from Milwaukee.

Banda: [Laughs] Small world.

Lopez: Yeah. He had—

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[00:00:00]

Lopez: Yeah, it’s—I went to see Gonzalez. Somebody yells out, “Hey, I know you. I know you.” I said, “You know me?” He was laying on a cot. And I says, “You do?” He says, “Yeah.” He says, “Are you from Milwaukee?” I says, “Yeah. Yeah,

I was.” “Did you go to Boys Tech?” I says, “Yeah.” He says, “Yeah, I remember. You were in gymnastics.” I says, “Yeah. I was in gymnastics. And you?” I says. He says, “I was in the swimming team.” And I said, “Isn’t that something?” He says, “Man, what happened to you?” He says, “I’ve got jungle rot.” And his leg was deformed, you know, eaten away.

And I got back to my home base, and I had tried to get my E-5 stripe, but the sergeant, platoon sergeant that I had didn’t like me, and he didn’t like the fact that I had left, also, the company and had gone with the 25th Infantry. And when I came back, you know, when I went back, he was funny with me, anyways. He didn’t like me. He wasn’t going to give me my E-5 stripe. And I didn’t care anymore. I was going home. [Banda laughs]

But at the very end, you know, they had us in formation, and they had me go up in front. And the sergeant that didn’t like me had to read this letter. And I know it must have eaten him up, because General Cushman from the 25th Infantry sent a letter that I was supposed to be presented in front of everybody to acknowledge me, and for the good work, and challenging, and so—I’ll show you the letter. [laughs] But it’s—he signed it General Cushman. And, um, to me, that was the best thing, you know, that even though this sergeant didn’t want to give me my stripe, there was somebody else in a different company, much higher than him, that saw the qualities that I had.

Banda: Excellent.

Lopez: Yeah. So, you know, I didn’t care. I was coming home. [Both laugh]

Banda: Good for you. Now, did you get a chance to go on R and R while you were there at all?

Lopez: No, I didn’t, George.

Banda: My gosh.

Lopez: Actually, the company was going to send me to Hawaii, and I refused, and the reason I refused was because it was too close to home. If I would go, they might not see me back there again. [Both laugh] I don’t know, you know? I just—but I’d rather stay there, finish my time, and just come home. I never had an R and R, no.

Banda: My goodness. My goodness.

Lopez: And everybody else did. Some went to Australia. Some went to Thailand. Some went to Japan, Okinawa, and I stayed there. Yeah.

Banda: Wow. Okay. Now, looking back, what, sort of, do you remember about Vietnam? What are the—what were the memorable moments, do you remember, good or bad? Was it that sergeant being blown up [inaudible]?

Lopez: I think so. Yes.

Banda: It was the first time you ever saw—

Lopez: Right. It was the first—

Banda: —combat—

Lopez: —casualty, yes. It's the first time we'd seen that. And it prepared me for when I went to the Mekong Delta, and there, I saw more, you know, people with casualties, blood, flesh, shrapnel. We would get hit. I want to say that the last month, I don't know for what reason it was happening. We were getting hit every night. Every night we were getting hit.

Banda: And you're talking about mortar rounds?

Lopez: Mortar rounds, yeah. Because they liked to do that.

[00:04:57]

And what happened, also, was that, um, from what I understand, Ho Chi Minh Trail had been cut off. So you had the North Vietnamese Army. They came around, couldn't go back up, so they came by us. We had our Company C just a little outside our base. They killed everyone except for one sergeant. They killed everyone. They wiped them out. They killed them all.

Banda: My goodness.

Lopez: Yeah. And this was in January.

Banda: This was 197—

Lopez: Wait a minute. Was it July or January? It was around that area, that time. I can't remember it now.

Banda: What year? Nineteen seventy?

Lopez: Nineteen seventy. Yeah. Nineteen seventy.

Banda: And what about a good moment? Was that with the doctors?

Lopez: With the doctors. I would say the doctors. And I have a few—when I was in the base, since it was different companies, we would get together, and the mess hall sergeant, his name was Ramirez, too. He was from El Paso, Texas. We got together, and as a celebration, we celebrated the sixteenth of September. [Banda laughs] That was a good moment, because I had a guitar.

Banda: Right, and you're a musician.

Lopez: A musician. We started singing old songs, you know, corridos. And my mama had sent me tortillas and frijoles [laughs] in a package, and it got to us, and we just had a good celebration, because I was in and out of the base more than they were. You know? I was in different areas. So when I was there in September, they were really happy, because I was there, and we could sing and make noise. You know?

Banda: Yeah.

Lopez: And remind them a little bit about home.

Banda: Yeah, right.

Lopez: And there was guys that were from California, from El Paso, Texas, from San Antonio. You know? And I was from Milwaukee. [Both laugh]

Banda: Sounds like a great—that was a good time.

Lopez: It was a good time, yeah, because, you know, you get to see a lot of negative, but there were also those good moments.

Banda: And those moments you do cherish—

Lopez: Oh, yes.

Banda: —because they were far and few in between.

Lopez: Right. You know, I got a picture of us guys on the first of January, 1971. This is at one a.m. in the morning, and at five a.m. in the morning, Gonzalez got hit. But he's there. I got a picture, a big picture of him, of us guys. I'll show it to you.

Banda: Please do.

Lopez: Yeah.

Banda: I look forward to it.

Lopez: Yeah.

Banda: Now when you finally came back home after serving in Vietnam, where did you come back? At Fort Lewis [inaudible]?

Lopez: Uh, Oakland.

Banda: Oakland?

Lopez: Through Oakland, yes.

Banda: Okay. Now, how did that process go? I mean, you're, like—

Lopez: It was busy. It was go, go, go, go. We didn't sleep. And getting out, well, you know. We had a lot of protesters for those that were in Vietnam. And all I wanted to do was come home. And, uh, I remember them overcharging me for the cab to take us to the airport from Oakland to San Francisco- Is it? Is that where the airport was? Yeah. And then we came. I came to O'Hare Field. From there, I took a bus to Milwaukee, because there was no planes going to Milwaukee. So I had to take a Greyhound bus from Chicago to Milwaukee. Yeah.

Banda: So how was that homecoming, you know, when you walked in the door? Did [inaudible]?

Lopez: Oh, man. Yeah. It hit me.

[00:10:00]

It hit me. My mother, my sister, and my wife were waiting for me right there at the Greyhound bus station. When I got there, I mean, I broke down.

Banda: Oh, yeah.

Lopez: Yeah, I broke down.

Banda: Finally made it home.

Lopez: I finally made it home, man. [Banda laughs] I kissed the ground when I got to Oakland, man. [Both laugh] I did. I kissed it, man. I got down and I kissed the ground.

Banda: You can't believe it when you finally get to the States—

Lopez: That's right. [inaudible]

Banda: —and you get off that plane, and you're on American soil.

Lopez: Yeah. You know? You don't—you don't know what freedom is until you lose it. [Laughs] You know? War is terrible. There was many other things that I experienced in Vietnam that I—you know, I'm not at freedom to speak about, you know. But there was a lot of things that happened, that they still have me in shock. It—you know?

Banda: Sure.

Lopez: Yeah. Up to today. But I was real happy to get home, man. I—but my greatest problem was, I didn't know what was happening to me. I couldn't adjust to civilian life anymore. I didn't know what normal was anymore. I wanted to be normal, but I—I—I didn't know what normal was anymore. I went back to college, and I used to black out in the classroom, and [pauses] you know, I went through some really hard times.

Banda: Hard times.

Lopez: Yeah. Real hard times adjusting.

Banda: Yeah. You're right. Many of us that came back knew—didn't know what normal was in the anymore. What's that?

Lopez: Yeah.

Banda: What's being normal after experiencing something like that?

Lopez: Right, right.

Banda: But here we are, all these years later.

Lopez: Yeah, here we are.

Banda: And it still affects—

Lopez: Still kicking. Not high, but still kicking.

Banda: Still kicking. [Both laugh] Well, thank you, Armando. I appreciate your helping us and sharing your story with us. It was good to hear, man. I'm glad that you shared it.

Lopez: Thank you for listening to me.

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[End of Interview]