

**Oral History Interview with Rochelle A. Lopez**

Wisconsin Veterans Museum Oral History Collection

I Am Not Invisible Project

Date of interview: July 1, 2019

Narrator: Rochelle A. Lopez

Interviewer: Luke D. Sprague

Length of interview: 02:00:19

**OH 02152**

## **Summary:**

In this oral history interview, Rochelle A. Lopez discusses her service as a logistics and supply specialist from 2005 to 2014 with the Wisconsin and Michigan National Guard that included two deployments to Iraq. Rochelle A. Lopez was born into a military family, and she discusses moving throughout her childhood and living in Ladysmith, Wisconsin. She started talking to recruiters when she was still in high school and signed up for the Recruitment Sustainment Program with the Wisconsin National Guard. In 2005, Lopez went to basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and was platoon guide through most of basic training. Lopez describes the living conditions including needing to take fast showers, keeping males and females from fraternizing, and training in the field. Lopez went to Fort Lee, Virginia, for her Advanced Individual Training (AIT) in logistics and supply. She describes being a “hold under” and having to wait months before training began. Lopez describes soldiers getting in trouble during this time, including fraternization between trainees and drill instructors, rampant drug use, hotel parties, and sexual assaults. During AIT, Lopez learned that her father’s unit, the 107th Engineer Battalion, was deploying to Iraq and she volunteered to join them. She describes a traumatic pre-deployment event where she witnessed a friend commit suicide. Lopez explains how the unit got ready for deployment with training and packing shipping containers. She was on the ADVON flight to Kuwait and then flew into Camp Liberty, Iraq. Shortly after she arrived in Iraq she found out she was pregnant with her son and was sent home. Shortly after her son was born, Lopez was attached to the 1st Squadron, 105th Cavalry Regiment of the Wisconsin National Guard, that was scheduled to deploy to Iraq. Lopez replaced the unit’s TAMMS clerk on short notice and explains how she prepared herself for that job. During deployment she trained to become an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) and earned clinical hours working with detainees at the prison at Camp Cropper. Lopez outlines her unit’s mission and their duties as a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) component stationed at the Victory Base Complex. She discusses communicating with people back home, receiving care packages, and on-base entertainment. Her unit returned to Wisconsin in 2010, and she discusses general problems soldiers have transitioning back to civilian life and custody issues after deployment. In 2014, her aorta collapsed on a grenade range, and she outlines her subsequent treatment, recovery, and medical discharge. Lopez describes worsening opioid addiction, struggling to maintain contact with her son, and homelessness. Eventually, Lopez learned about the psychiatric and housing resources at Zablocki VA Medical Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and sought treatment. Today she celebrates her recovery and sobriety. She describes the importance of the veteran community and the positive impacts of art therapy at the VA and the Donna Lexa Art Center.

## **Bibliographic citation:**

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## INDEX

### [00:00:00 - Introduction - Childhood and Recruitment](#)

**Keywords:** Army National Guard; Ladysmith, Wisconsin; Recruit Sustainment Program (RSP); Walter Reed Army Medical Center; military families

### [00:06:29 - Family History of Service](#)

**Keywords:** Battle of Fire Support Base Ripcord; military families

### [00:08:38 - Basic Training - Barracks and Showering](#)

**Keywords:** Fort Jackson, South Carolina

### [00:14:59 - Basic Training - Being Platoon Guide](#)

**Keywords:** Don't Ask Don't Tell; Fort Jackson, South Carolina; Hero of the Battle; Platoon Guide; fraternization

### [00:20:33 - Advanced Individual Training](#)

**Keywords:** Fort Lee, Virginia; Logistics training; bonuses; drug testing; fraternization; sexual assault

### [00:28:23 - Pre-deployment and Friend's Suicide](#)

**Keywords:** 107th Engineer Battalion; Active Duty for Special Work (ADSW); Ishpeming, Michigan; Project 22; alcoholism; drug abuse; pregnancy; suicide

### [00:34:09 - Training for Deployment](#)

**Keywords:** 107th Engineer Battalion; Advanced Party (ADVON); Fort McCoy, Wisconsin; Relief in Place (RIP); Route clearance; logistics

### [00:39:02 - Deployment to Iraq - Flying to Germany and Kuwait](#)

**Keywords:** 92Y; Armorer; C-130; Kuwait; Supply and logistics; Victory landing; Volk Field, Wisconsin

**[00:44:21 - Deployment to Iraq - Supply duties and going home](#)**

**Keywords:** Camp Liberty; pregnancy; shipping

**[00:49:02 - Pregnancy and Returning to Wisconsin National Guard](#)**

**Keywords:** Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin; Wisconsin National Guard; entertainment; pirated movies

**[00:55:14 - Preparing for Second Deployment to Iraq with 105th Cavalry Unit](#)**

**Keywords:** Camp Blanding Joint Training Center; Fort Bliss, Texas; Troop B, 1-105th Cavalry Regiment; Wisconsin National Guard; female soldiers; fraternization; military families; sexism

**[01:02:52 - 2009-2010 Deployment to Iraq - TAMMS Clerk Position](#)**

**Keywords:** Quick Reaction Force (QRF); The Army Maintenance Management System (TAMMS); Victory Base Complex; sexism; sexual assault

**[01:07:50 - 2009-2010 Deployment to Iraq - Kuwait and Camp Cropper](#)**

**Keywords:** Camp Cropper; Kuwait; detainees

**[01:16:00 - 2009-2010 Deployment to Iraq - QRF and Mortars](#)**

**Keywords:** Quick Reaction Force (QRF); Victory Base Complex; mortars

**[01:24:32 - 2009-2010 Deployment to Iraq - Communicating Home and Entertainment](#)**

**Keywords:** Soldier's Angels; Victory Base Complex; care packages; civilian perception; women soldiers

**[01:31:38 - Returning Home in 2010](#)**

**Keywords:** 105th Cavalry Regiment; College First Program; demobilization; drug abuse; suicide

**[01:37:46 - Returning Home - Custody and Health Issues](#)**

**Keywords:** custody; heart surgery; military families

**01:44:46 - Military Discharge - Addiction, Homelessness and Recovery**

**Keywords:** Domiciliary; Medical discharge; Zablocki VA Medical Center; homelessness; opioid addiction; substance abuse

**01:51:00 - Recovery and Art Therapy**

**Keywords:** Donna Lexa Art Center; VA Hospitals; Veteran Art Competition; Veteran Community; art therapy; re-adjusting to civilian life

**01:56:57 - Concluding Remarks**

## TRANSCRIPT

**SPRAGUE:** Today is July 1, 2019. This is an interview with Rochelle Lopez, who served with the United States Army, Bravo Troop, 1st Squadron, 105th Cavalry Regiment, and the 107th Engineer Battalion, in Iraq. Time of service, from September 2005 to July 2014. This interview is being conducted at the VA [Veteran's Affairs] Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The interviewer is Luke Sprague. So, Rochelle, can you tell me a little bit about where you were born?

**LOPEZ:** Yes. I was born in Washington, DC, at Walter Reed Medical Army Center. My dad was on active duty. He was a combat medic, so that's where I was

[\[00:01:00\]](#)

born. But we moved quite a bit.

**SPRAGUE:** How was that experience growing up, being the child of someone in the military?

**LOPEZ:** It always gave me a sense of pride, and I was always proud to tell everybody that my dad was in the service. My mother, who wasn't--she never even graduated high school. You know, it was different. So I was proud to be like, "Oh yeah, my dad, you know, he's a veteran, and he's in the Army. He's a combat medic." And we moved every couple of years. And I think that's why I also clung to the pride of my dad, was because it was hard moving, and people were not nice when you go from school to school. I went to four different high schools, alone. And even though after my parents got divorced, you know, and just living with one parent, we moved quite a bit. So I think that was another reason. It's the only positive thing I ever had in my life was Dad. So I think that is why I ended up joining the service.

**SPRAGUE:** How do you think your experience with moving changed your

[\[00:02:00\]](#)

outlook on life?

**LOPEZ:** I feel like it changed my outlook on life because every single person I meet, I try to treat everyone the same, and I try to treat everyone well. Just because I feel like everyone deserves a chance. And we're all different, and it takes all kinds. So there may be somebody who is more shy or reserved, I try to talk to them just as much as a person who's over there, maybe calling people names and being loud and rowdy. I feel like everyone deserves the same chance, because that's not something that I got growing up. People judged me a lot just on how I look, and not who I am. And that changed my whole perspective on life. And I used to daydream sometimes what it would be like if I had lived--was born and raised and live in one town my whole life--if I would be the same as I am now. Would I have gone through the same things? What kind of person would I be? And when I think about that, honestly, I don't think I would be as accepting and open as I am today had I not moved so much and gone through all those experiences. You know, high school girls can be quite mean. [Laughs]

[\[00:03:00\]](#)

**SPRAGUE:** So before you joined the military, where do you think you'd call your last home of record, or where you graduated from high school?

**LOPEZ:** I graduated from high school in Ladysmith, Wisconsin. And that's actually where I started talking to a recruiter. Initially a Reserve recruiter came and I was talking to him a little bit. And then I remember taking the

ASVAB [Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery] when I was a senior just to get out of class. At that point, I really wasn't even considering it. And then, you know, after that, then the recruiters contact you if your score is better. Just different things like that. And then I decided to enlist. And I kind of talked about it with my family. I don't think they believed me because I ended up--my sister lived in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin at the time. So after I graduated, I had to get away from that town. I needed more things, you know? I'm

[\[00:04:00\]](#)

not a small-town person. I'm somebody who wants lots of things going on around me and opportunities. So I went to go stay with my sister. And then I started talking to a recruiter there for the National Guard.

**SPRAGUE:** So you graduated from Ladysmith?

**LOPEZ:** Yes.

**SPRAGUE:** And you started talking to a recruiter in Chippewa Falls, if I understand you correctly, right?

**LOPEZ:** Yes. There was one that was in the Ladysmith area. I don't know where he was out of. That was the Reserve recruiter. And I stopped talking to him. And then when I got to Chippewa Falls, I started talking to a recruiter there for the National Guard, which is different than the Reserves. And that's where they have something called RSP, Recruit Sustainment Program. I did that for about a year before I even actually went to MEPS [Military Entrance Processing Station], and I went to Minneapolis in Minnesota, their MEPS, because it was actually the closest.

**SPRAGUE:** So tell me a little bit about the RSP Program.

**LOPEZ:** What it is, is anybody who is considering being in the military or wants to see what it's like or have already enlisted and are waiting to go to boot camp, because you have to have a reservation for boot camp. You can

[\[00:05:00\]](#)

go one week in a month, just like regular Reservist and Guard members do, and you do things that get you ready for basic training. So before I got to basic, I already knew how to march. Well, actually my dad taught me how to march when I was really little. So I already knew how to do that, I was ahead of the game. You know, learning things like rank system, the phonetic alphabet, how to wear a uniform, proper care of a uniform, land navigation, things like that. And they kind of taught us, like, the Army standard and what everything means, and, like, the Army values, and like the loyalty, the duty, respect, selfless service, and those kinds of things. I remember we would have a chow line, and we'd all get in line in order to eat. They would give you a flash card with the ranks on it, and you had to say what it was. And if you got it wrong, you had to go to the back of the line. Things like that. That actually really helped me, because by the time I got to basic, I already knew everything. So, as a result, I ended up being the platoon guide, they call it PG for short, two weeks into

[\[00:06:00\]](#)

basic, what everyone does is they write down six names for people they thought would be good at leadership. And my drill sergeant came to me afterward, and he's like, "I've never seen someone's name in all the basic trainings, all the classes they had come through, where a person's name was literally written on every single card." He's like, "Your name was literally written on every single card." I think it's because of RSP. They set me up for success.

**SPRAGUE:** So, backing up a little bit, your father was in the Army, correct?

**LOPEZ:** Correct.

**SPRAGUE:** But you also mentioned in your earlier interview with I Am Not Invisible Project, you had mentioned, perhaps, a multi-generational role of people prior to your father who'd also been in the service?

**LOPEZ:** Yes. As far as I know, there might even be more. I'm a fourth-generation veteran. So not only was my dad in the service, both my grandfathers were, and my great grandfather was also in the service. And then I think there

[\[00:07:00\]](#)

might be even one more. I never actually looked into it further, so maybe more. But yeah, I come from a huge family of people who have served.

**SPRAGUE:** Do you happen to remember those veterans' family names, by chance? Any of them? Maybe a couple?

**LOPEZ:** You know, my dad, Richard Lopez. My grandpa was Raoul Lopez. And then my grandfather on the other side was Walter German[?]. And then my great grandfather was Alraoul Albelardo[?] Lopez. And I actually think he was a Marine, and then my grandpa was an Airborne Ranger. And both, actually, of my grandpas were airborne. My one grandpa was in Vietnam with the Screaming Eagles. There's a book written about his experience. It's the Battle of Ripcord, like something that happened in Vietnam. I don't know if you're aware of it. And he was part of that. So it's his unit experience, and there's pictures of him in the book. There's quotes from my grandpa. When I read it, it just makes me sad. He passed away about two years ago now. Something I always wanted to do was to take the Honor Flight with either of my grandpas. I thought that

[\[00:08:00\]](#)

would be really cool, but they both have passed, so I don't get to do that now. But, yeah, I come from a huge military family. At the same time, it was kind of--so when it comes to discipline, even as a child, my dad would discipline me like I was a soldier. It was, "Sit up straight." He would get up to me and point his finger and get in my face and, "No, no, no. That's not how you do it." Taking his hand and going up like drill sergeants do. I think his dad did that to him as well. So I think that's the only thing he knew how to do.

**SPRAGUE:** Okay. Your family's reaction was?

**LOPEZ:** Well, my mom--I didn't really tell anybody that I was doing it. They knew I was interested in it, and I didn't tell them until after I'd gone to MEPS in Minnesota. And I called my mom, she cried. She didn't believe me that I was going to do it. And my dad told me he was proud of me. And I think

[\[00:09:00\]](#)

that, my dad, I think he was really worried about me and my life and where I was headed. So I think that really bonded me and my dad.

**SPRAGUE:** After doing the training before Basic Training, you then went to Basic Training. Where did you go and how did you get there?

**LOPEZ:** I went to basic training at Fort Jackson in South Carolina. What you do is, they give you a list of things you need, and you pack a bag. The military pays for you to fly down there. And, actually, that was my first time I remember being on a plane. I think when I was really little I'd flown, but this was my first time flying. I'm all by myself. It was really scary, and when you land, they put you, for a week before you get to Basic, for that week, that's when they issue you your boots and your uniforms and everything you're going to need. So it's kind of like a mini-basic training, and it kind of gets you ready for what's to come. They teach you how to stand in line in formation. You

[\[00:10:00\]](#)

wear your boots the whole time to kind of break them in, and you're told not to talk. And that was my first time ever, what they called getting smoked. So if you're not doing something--and in the beginning, it's group punishment, not individual punishment. So if one person's over there lollygagging or talking or doing anything that they're not supposed to be doing, we all get punished. So we have to get down in the push-up position, and this is where they teach you, like, you have to have your back completely straight, where everything's supposed to go. And then I'm like,



"Okay, this isn't that bad." But then after an hour of, "Flex your back, sag in the middle," it's kind of like, "What? This is what we've got to do?" That was my first kind of awakening to what it's really like. And I remember people telling me and my dad that it's ninety percent physical--or no. Ten percent physical, ninety percent mental. And I just kept thinking, "There's no way they can do this. This is not right." You know what I mean? Like in the beginning, it's a little bit scary. But I can be a little bit shy and reserved at times, and there was a bunch of new

[\[00:11:00\]](#)

people, and I've had so many bad experiences, so I was just kind of quiet and kept to myself. All the females are in a barracks, and then all the males are. And there's people talking and sharing where they're from. You're meeting all these different people, but they were actually nice, most of them. They weren't like it was my other experiences. I guess maybe because we were all in the same boat?

**SPRAGUE:** Yeah. So tell me a little bit--to interrupt you. Tell me a little bit about how that worked with the men in one barracks, the women in another barracks. Or you tell me how that worked in your unit.

**LOPEZ:** At least, like before I went to basic, or during basic?

**SPRAGUE:** During basic training.

**LOPEZ:** During basic training we would live in this huge brick building. And there's kind of like wings to it. So one company, which is usually made up for four platoons, and there's about maybe twenty to thirty people in each platoon. So all the females, no matter what platoon you're in, because there were quite a lot less than the males. There's only a few females compared to the males. So all the females, no matter what platoon you're in, were put in one

[\[00:12:00\]](#)

bay. And there's probably, I don't know, maybe sixty to eighty people sleep in a bay. And then the males, though, each platoon, there was enough males where they each got their own bay. So they would be in a bay with everybody in their platoon, where I would be in a bay with all these other females who are doing all these other things. So there wasn't the strong camaraderie like there is to the males, because it's different, you know? When we would be dismissed, we would have to all go up the same set of stairs, and then females would go to the right and males would go to the left kind of thing. And there's always somebody sitting like fire guard, they would call it. Had to have at least one person awake. And they usually had two, because then one person would clean and one person would sit at the desk for security. And they would do stuff like the doors would be locked, and a drill sergeant would come up throughout the night just randomly to check, and they would do a knock, and you would have to give them the pass code. And the code changed every night, things like that. So not just anybody can get in. You would have to know the code of the day.

**SPRAGUE:** Okay. So in terms of bathroom facilities, shower facilities,

[\[00:13:00\]](#)

how did that work?

**LOPEZ:** Even though we were all in one bay, we all shared, all us females, one bathroom. And in the beginning when we got there, I remember in the shower area, at the end of the bay there was three stalls on one side, three on the other. And all the females, at shower time, we all got in line, and you had to be naked. Now I have siblings and things like that, but I never just stood there in a line naked in front of anybody before. So that alone was really hard. You have to have all your shower stuff. The drill sergeant would fill up the six stalls and time us. We got two minutes to get everything done.

**SPRAGUE:** Was the drill sergeant male or female?

**LOPEZ:** Female. Only female drill sergeant would be allowed into the female bays. Sorry. So you're in there, and you

got two minutes to shower. But in a way, the urgency that kind of helped with my anxiety of having to stand there naked in front of sixty other women. When you're at MEPS, you have to do something called the Underwear Olympics. So I thought that that would have to

[\[00:14:00\]](#)

be the worst of it. We'd get down, you have to waddle in front of the people who are [inaudible] exams, and you have to do all these squats in your underwear. But actually being naked, that was kind of hard. And then not only that, but then having to get everything done within two minutes. And then also keep everything clean at the same time. And it got to the point where even though we had the toilets, we had stalls, at least in this building, there are buildings that didn't have any stalls at all but had the toilets. So your knee would literally be touching the person in front of you while you're using the commode.

**SPRAGUE:** So did the men also have the same situation, where they had two minutes and they were standing naked in line?

**LOPEZ:** I never asked, actually. I don't know. I don't know if they could shower at their leisure or not. I think maybe because females, maybe we have a tendency to take longer, like doing things like shaving our legs and washing our hair with shampoo and conditioner, if that's why. If there's maybe an issue in the past where they had to time it. But I never actually asked the males, not to my recollection, anyway.

**SPRAGUE:** What other things stick out in your mind at basic? Your

[\[00:15:00\]](#)

experience as a woman?

**LOPEZ:** Well, for me, my experience compared to everyone even in my platoon and everywhere else, was a little bit different, because I was the platoon guide. I was the only person that was in charge, at least for my platoon, for the entire time of basic. The other platoons, because there was four of us total, each one of their PGs had been fired from the position at some point for doing something. So, being in charge, I was always counting everybody and making sure everyone had their weapons, and doing this and that, when everyone else got to sit and, like, have that talk time and things like that. But I also was closer, then, to, like, my assistant platoon guide and the other, you know, the squad leaders and then the team leaders, because we would have lots of leadership meetings and things like that. But people listened to me, and I think that after a while they got used to it. Because one time, like the sickest I've ever been in my life was when I was in basic training. And I had to go and be in the medical

[\[00:16:00\]](#)

bay for three days. When I got back, everyone's like, "Oh, my goodness, we're so glad you're back." Nobody, "They did this," or, "They did that." It made me feel good that they appreciated my leadership. But at the same time, I had a close friend and she was from Michigan. She was really good at everything, too. Like when we did the armed combatives, she was qualified expert on her first try with her weapon. We would joke around, calling ourselves the breakfast club, because there was a group of us that were all good at what we did. Like I did the leadership thing, and she was good at excelling at all the different "Warrior" tasks and skills. And then our other good friend that we had, he was the best runner in our platoon. And so we called ourselves the breakfast club, because we also, all of us got in trouble the day before graduation. But anyway, I noticed that there would be a lot of males and females who were attracted to each other, and you could tell that. And when we would be out in the field, then

[\[00:17:00\]](#)

on FTX [field training exercise], you'd have to be mindful where they were, because you knew that they were going to try to get together somehow. And I remember our drill sergeant's like joking around and being like, "Yeah, out in the field, you're nasty. You haven't showered in two weeks and you're trying to mess around?" Things like that, because that's how I viewed it, too. I was always so worried about what everyone in my platoon was doing, and if they were

doing the right thing. So I think my experience was different than most peoples'. But at the same time I enjoyed it, and I miss it. If that makes sense. At the end of basic training, they do this thing. You get an award. It's called the Hero of the Battle. And there's one person from each platoon who gets it. And I was the one who got it for our platoon and nominated, and I received a challenge coin, that just made me feel really good, like something I've never felt in my life before. And it was just really encouraging. I think, you know, to go through something like that with all those people, and then go from there, deployments and things, it just changes who you are.

**SPRAGUE:** What was the ratio--you mentioned three platoons or four

[\[00:18:00\]](#)

platoons in your company?

**LOPEZ:** There was four platoons in our company.

**SPRAGUE:** And one of them was female and three were male? Or what was the--

**LOPEZ:** No. There were females in all four platoons, but there were only a few of us. I think maybe out of forty people, eight to ten of them were female for each platoon.

**SPRAGUE:** Okay. So when they did go out on that FTX, go into action or training, it was as an integrated platoon?

**LOPEZ:** Correct.

**SPRAGUE:** Okay. Anything else interesting about basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina that you'd like to tell me?

**LOPEZ:** Well, there were things that happened, not in my platoon, but in other platoons that I know were like hush-hush kind of things. Like there was a soldier, it was a female, and I know that she had some issues because there'd be rumors and you'd hear things, especially being a female, sharing a bay with the other platoons. I know at one point a drill sergeant threw a desk at

[\[00:19:00\]](#)

her and broke her ankle. But because she had done something else and would have gotten in big trouble, the drill sergeant and the soldier came up with this agreement, "You don't tell on me for breaking your ankle, I won't tell on you for doing this." There'd be stuff like that that would happen that probably shouldn't have and probably should have been better reported. There was people who are lesbian who'd be in the platoon, and this isn't mine--I don't mind people of other, whatever your sexual orientation may be. But there'd be one female and it was right underneath me. She would come over and join the female that was already--because I would be on the top, because we had bunk beds, I had the top bunk--and the both of them would be below me, and they'd be making noise, and I think they were messing around doing stuff. But I used to get mad at them, and I'd be like, "If you guys don't quit it, I'm going to piss this damn bed. It's going to leak down on you, just on purpose." [Laughs] Just to try to get them to stop. And not only that, but I had a responsibility to keep everybody in line as being platoon guide. Especially in the first

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couple of weeks, too, like I said, it's group punishment, it's not individual punishment. So I'm like, "I'm not getting smoked all night because you two lay"--things like that.

**SPRAGUE:** So just out of curiosity, what was the policy at that time within the military regarding those things?

**LOPEZ:** It was don't ask, don't tell, don't harass. Which eventually ended up being repealed about a couple years, maybe two years, I think, before I got out. So, which I don't agree with don't tell, don't ask, don't harass. Because I think everybody should be able to be who they are.

**SPRAGUE:** After basic training, you went to what type of--where did you go after that?

**LOPEZ:** I went to Advanced Individual Training, or AIT for short, in Fort Lee, Virginia.

**SPRAGUE:** Okay.

**LOPEZ:** I went--I was in 92 Yankee to begin with, which is logistics. So I ended up getting that MOS [Military Occupational Specialty]. You know, when I enlisted, you have to have something called the line in the paragraph for a unit. Initially, I had picked a medical MOS. I wanted to be like my

[\[00:21:00\]](#)

dad. Well, I was getting ready to go to MEPS, and the guy, my recruiter, pulled me in and said, "Look, this line and paragraph number, it isn't there. It was wrong. It doesn't exist. You need to pick a new MOS." I was furious. So I called my dad, and I'm like, "Dad, you know I'm so mad." And he was yelling at the guy, too. And the guy's like, "What MOS? Pick something." So I just picked something that had a bonus of \$10,000.00, and had a short AIT. It was only supposed to be like eight weeks. Well, because there was a bonus that they were offering, there was a flood of people coming in who were going to be the same MOS. So when I got there, I was, um--it's called the "hold under"--which means I sat there for months before I actually went to school. And when I ended up going to school, because they had so many people they had to do a day school and a night school, I went to school at night and slept during the day for AIT. So that was kind of like--it was very frustrating because we had nothing to do for those months. We would do stuff like rake the sand and clean the barracks over and

[\[00:22:00\]](#)

over and over again. And they started, in the beginning they let us have on the weekends off post overnights, where we were allowed to go and rent a hotel for the weekend. And usually one of use would rent a room, and then we'd all go and party together. Lots of things were happening. I remember there was a female I served with, and she told me this story. She had taken these pictures of herself naked, and she walked into the drill sergeant's office, closed the door, locked it, and then showed him the pictures. And I guess they would--the drill sergeant looked at it, the naked pictures of her, and they started messing around. Another soldier told me how there would be a vehicle that we had, they would pick us up if we had to go from here to there, things like that. And one of the female soldiers said she used to drive the vehicle while one of the drill sergeants and another female would mess around in the back so they wouldn't get caught, so nobody would walk in on them. Just different things like that. There was lots of drugs. There was lots of drinking. I remember it was my birthday, and we were--we had rented a hotel room, and this girl, the same one

[\[00:23:00\]](#)

who had actually said she was the one who drove the vehicle around. She was like, "Hey, I have a present for you in the bathroom." And she pulled me in and opened the door, and there was a line of cocaine sitting on the toilet. At the time, I didn't know what it was. I just knew that it was white, and I really didn't care. You know what I mean? It's kind of like fitting in and doing what the crowd does. And after having such a hard time in high school, and girls always being so mean to me, I just did it. I didn't even think about it. And that was my first time ever using hard drugs, too. There was lots of drinking, constantly. And actually one time, that specific weekend--so they changed the company commander after a while, I think because they knew all these really bad things were happening, people being harassed. The other would be, one female snuck downstairs to the male bay, and one of the males told me that they took a video of it, and they actually ran what they call a "train" on her, and they filmed it. And doing different things like that. Lots of sexual

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harassment, lots of willing and unwilling things would happen to people.

**SPRAGUE:** What did you think about the relationships between the drill sergeant\ or the instructors and the students?

**LOPEZ:** Completely inappropriate. Completely. They punished people according to if they liked you or not, if you were on their side, if you were doing the things they wanted you to do. And if you didn't, you know, you were treated not as good, and they would make it difficult for you to go on pass or this or that. You get smoked a lot more, and your life would be hell. So you didn't say anything when all this bad stuff was happening. You just had to go along with it.

**SPRAGUE:** So if your training was at night at Fort Lee, then you slept during the day. And then how did that work on the weekends if you were out going to the hotel or whatever, off with a pass or whatever. Were you then completely sleeping during the day and partying during the day?

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**LOPEZ:** Yeah. We would party at night. You know, it would be dark. I think by the time we would get to the hotel, it'd be like 8:00 p.m., which would kind of be like our mornings, you know? So then we would just party all night long. And there were so many weekends I don't even remember, to be honest with you. We would drink so much and do so many different things. I know there's some stuff that happened to a couple of the females that were there--and this is, we hadn't even started school yet, our classes--that she ended up going home because of what happened to her before we even got to AIT. I don't even know what happened to her, but people would pass out drunk, and there'd be so many other people around. I remember one time, I'd actually got in the hotel room, and there was a ton of people in there. I was gone for something, and I came back, and no one would let me in. There was probably twenty people in there. I guess it's because they had a girl on the bed and they were all, you know, just different things like that. And it's like--it's just--there's a lot of bad things that happened at AIT. In hindsight, now that I look at it, I kind of realize that.

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But at the time, it was kind of like, "You know, this is okay. This is fun. I fit in." And you know, when you're drinking and using, and that was just the culture. You just accepted it for what it is. I'm like, "Okay, this is just the Army. This is just how it is."

**SPRAGUE:** Yeah.

**LOPEZ:** And that was just in training.

**SPRAGUE:** So how--just out of curiosity, being a veteran myself--how did you get around the drug test?

**LOPEZ:** So, fortunately--okay, so they would do random drug tests. And they would do everyone at a time. I mean, like when the platoon next to us, when they would get woken up in the middle of their night, you know, "You got to go drop." They only even grabbed a few people. And then out of those few people, they only tested some of them. Every once in a while, someone would pop pot, which is, you know, failing a drug screen, and they would get a field grade or a company grade Article 15, different things like that. But fortunately, I never failed. But I did get in trouble once. We weren't supposed to go off post. I went off post anyway and drank, and I took these weird pills, I don't know what they were. So we came back to base, and we had to be to formation by, I think it

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was 8:00 or 9:00 at night. I was so drunk, and I had my civvies on, my civilian clothing. And I needed to get my uniform back on. So my friends, they brought me behind the building and there was these bushes. And they're over there trying to put my uniform on over my civilian clothes. [Laughs] And all of a sudden a drill sergeant walks around. He's just standing there, folds his arms, stares at us. Turns out there was a camera right above me, and they were watching us the whole time, laughing at us. But it was so embarrassing. So as they were bringing me forward with my half uniform on, just like my pants and, like, my beret, there was another--so all the buildings are in a row, and all the companies were lining up. So everybody saw me, do this, get this march of shame in front of everybody and bring me in. And at the time, I was something called a platoon leader. So it's like being the officer of a platoon or a company because it's student leadership, and I wore a special patch because of that. They didn't get me in trouble. I ended up having to go to the hospital for alcohol poisoning that night, because I couldn't stop vomiting. And I think that they

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felt so bad for me. I think because of the fact that I wasn't somebody who told, like ratted on what was really going on, that they just took away my student leadership, and that was it. So I was actually really lucky, because I probably could have got in big trouble.

**SPRAGUE:** Yeah. So unwind for me. You get done with AIT. Then what happens?

**LOPEZ:** So when I'm in the AIT, I find out that my dad's doing that--he had just gotten orders for Iraq, and I wanted to go. So I immediately put a transfer in to my dad's unit, which was the 107th Engineer Battalion in Ishpeming, Michigan. And I start doing something called ADSW, or Active Duty Special Work. So as I'm doing that, I'm living with another soldier right next to the armory.

**SPRAGUE:** And this is in Michigan?

**LOPEZ:** Yes. And actually, it was the day before the 4th of July. Me and two other soldiers were living there and we were all getting ready to go. You know, just a lot of stuff goes through your mind. You get nervous about

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having to deploy, and my fam was like--or my grandma, she'd be like, "What happens if you lose your foot? You're never going to be able to dance again?" And just different things like that. So your mind is kind of in this weird state. I remember we all went out drinking one night, me, the guy who owned the house, and then the other soldier, we were all deploying together. And we were all drinking at the time. I wasn't even of age to drink yet, but I had a fake ID, and we'd go to the bars. On the way back home, my friend, he was driving even though he had drank quite a bit. We're getting close to his house and instead of slowing down, he sped up. And he sped, and we ran right into his house with his car. And I'm freaking out. My friend in the front didn't have a seatbelt on, and his knee, I guess, banged the glovebox area in front of him. And I get out, and he's screaming, and I go over to the other side of the vehicle to pull him out. And I open the door and I pull him out. But as I'm doing this, I realize that Shorty is going like, "Put the car in reverse or something." So I run around and there's glass everywhere, and I'm like, "Get the fuck out of the car," I say to him. And I go back over to help Piper,

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and then I'm freaking out, and this is probably maybe 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning. Well, the neighbors heard everything, and one neighbor came out, and I didn't have a cellphone at the time or I couldn't find it, something like that, and I'm like, "Please call 911." And she does. And the ambulance shows up and the cops are there. They're like, "Where's the driver?" I'm like, "Well, I can take him to you." And I walked the police into the house, and he's not in the kitchen. And I walked through, he's not there. I'm like, "You know, maybe he's upstairs in his bedroom." So I lead the police up, and I get to the top of the stairs where his door is for his room. And when I open the door, he shoots himself. And after that, I kind of blacked out. The next thing I knew, I was outside on the grass on my knees crying. My friend, Piper, who's in the ambulance to the left of me, sees me and hears me crying, and he starts screaming like "What happened? What happened?" And I'm like having this really bad meltdown, and the police are like, "Get her out of here!" And I hop in the ambulance with my friend, and we go to the nearest hospital, and they separate us, they take him to a different room, and they pulled me into the room, and a doctor comes in. And he goes, "Did you hear about Christopher?" And I

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said, "No, what?" And for a split second I thought maybe he made it. And then like, "No, he's gone." [voice breaks] And that was really hard. That was very hard on me. You know, at night, my dad and my stepmom came to pick me and him up, my friend, from the hospital because we had all been living there together, and I didn't want to go back there. We couldn't go back there. So we went and stayed by my dad, who lives about an hour away from where that was at. And at night, I would be laying there, and I would constantly--every time I would pick up my blanket, for some reason I'd see his face underneath the blankets. And I would see people that looked like him constantly, and I'd

think it was him. You know, having to go to the funeral, I had to wear my Class As, my dress uniform, and the only other time I'd worn that was for graduation, and it was--it was really difficult. And we were still supposed to be going overseas, and now I'm dealing with all these other things. And I think a lot of people in

[\[00:32:00\]](#)

my unit were really worried about me. I had to go down to this readiness thing in Michigan, and I remember they put me with the chaplain's assistant as my roommate. And she even told me, she's like, "I'm here to come make sure you're okay. That's why we're rooming together right now." She even told me that. So I think they were kind of worried about me being able to deploy after that. That was really difficult, but I still went. You know, I still, um, deployed, but then, um, so the guy that I was in the car accident with, he was staying, my dad let him stay by us. And we were both really upset, and I ended up getting pregnant and not realizing it. So that's how I got sent home maybe eight weeks into my deployment. It was the first one that was really, really short.

**SPRAGUE:** So this event happens. You're with a chaplain's assistant. Anything else you'd like to talk about, about that?

**LOPEZ:** I think that the culture, like drinking and partying and this

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and that contributed to a lot of bad things. And I think if the Army were smart, they would offer much more addiction counseling and education about alcoholism and drug addiction and things like that. I think that they should--you know, like the whole Project 22, how many veterans commit suicide. I have so many of my brothers and sisters in arms have taken their lives. And I appreciate their care for me, but it's kind of like, where was the care for him beforehand? We were all working active duty together, we all saw each other every day. I guess just a lot of what-ifs and shoulda, woulda, coulda kind of things. Yeah, that's all I have to say. I'm going to take a drink.

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**SPRAGUE:** So the 107th Engineer Battalion, it's a National Guard unit? Or Army?

**LOPEZ:** Yes. National Guard unit.

**SPRAGUE:** Out of Michigan.

**LOPEZ:** Correct.

**SPRAGUE:** And tell me about your deployment to Iraq, how you got there, what it was like, what your first impressions were.

**LOPEZ:** Well, we were--the HHC [Headquarters and Headquarters Company] or the headquarters for this engineer battalion. And I was actually--my job when I got there was the armorer. So I kept track of all the weapons, and you know, label everything and parts and things like that. And then I would help out with the supply sergeant. Our mission was route clearance. So we trained for that mission in the beginning, because me and my dad were in the same unit. My dad was at Fort Sam Houston because he was the medic at COIC [Combined or Current Operations and Intelligence Center], or the medic in charge. He had

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to go down and do this special schooling for medics. And I was doing my training, my regular training that everybody does before they go overseas. You know, you go and you live on a fake base, and they have like actors come and pretend they're--

**SPRAGUE:** And where was that?

**LOPEZ:** Fort McCoy.

**SPRAGUE:** Fort McCoy. Okay.

**LOPEZ:** So that's actually for my first--when I got orders the first time. I did all that at Fort McCoy. And my second time I got orders, I was also in Florida, and then Fort Bliss, Texas, and Camp Doña Ana in New Mexico. So it was kind of nice to be at Fort McCoy because we were so close to everybody. And--excuse me, sorry. And I just remember it was already a difficult time for me. When there were still people in the unit who didn't even know--I called him "Shorty", or Sergeant Short--that he had passed. So people were constantly coming

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to me with questions, and it was kind of like a difficult time, anyway. And to try to go and focus on all these tasks I had they called it, like, "Warrior" [??]. I forget the name. "Warrior" [??]. Training tasks, or something like that, and you have to be checked off on using Humvees [HMMWV], like M1151s, and then we'd have to use--how to use like an M1 while rapid driving, and everybody getting licensed. And going to what they call "lanes" where you're in your vehicle and you're using blank rounds, and they have these pop-up things. And you've got to qualify, then you don't qualify, and you're weapon qualifying with your grenades, different things like that. You know, three Ds, distance, description, direction, and all that kind of stuff.

**SPRAGUE:** And this was all covered in these training at these locations?

**LOPEZ:** Yes.

**SPRAGUE:** Okay. Could you give me a really quick--you had mentioned--do you remember, do you happen to remember which order, before you deployed to Iraq, what the sequence was? Where you went?

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**LOPEZ:** Well, I know that--so, being in Michigan and working ADSW with the unit, and then we all went to Fort McCoy. And then during that time, my dad had actually gone ahead of time to Fort Sam. And then right before we were getting all ready to fly out, the whole unit came and joined together. Because if you had a specialty of this or that, you'd have to go to a different part of the country. But I was supply, so my job was just to help get everything, logistics, right. So we'd be at Fort McCoy, and we'd be like on the south post, where we were living out in these makeshift--it's like a little fake Iraq. And you do that, and after getting closer to that, we pack all the conexes. Everything that we have to bring with us has to fit into so many conexes. So I'm seeing every square inch of a conex will be taking up space. And if there is space, you have to take everything out and rearrange it again. And then you have to have Customs evaluate everything, and that's always a hassle. At least on the first tour, and then--

**SPRAGUE:** So you were involved with packing the conexes at Fort McCoy?

[\[00:38:00\]](#)

**LOPEZ:** Yes.

**SPRAGUE:** How many conexes, about? And how did they get to Iraq or wherever they were going?

**LOPEZ:** We would have, I think it was four to five conexes, because when you get overseas, you do something called a "RIP" or a Relief in Place. So everything that's there, most of it, is the stuff that you really need. Extra stuff is stuff that, like, we will distribute, or actually are things--we supply things that are there, but need more. They get shipped ahead of time. I'm pretty sure it's all on a boat, because they call it shipping. So everything is sent there before we get there. And because I work in supply, I was always ADVON [Advance Echelon], or advanced party. So I would get there before the unit did. Like, I remember Iraq, it was the three of us that got there before the whole unit, and our conexes were there. And we'd get everything ready, which is kind of nice, because I always got to pick where I wanted to sleep, like the best sleeping area, because, you know, it makes a big difference when you're overseas. And having



live like in a tent city--so first, you go to Kuwait when

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you're deploying. And you take a civilian airline, and, like, on our way over there--

**SPRAGUE:** From Fort McCoy or from--

**LOPEZ:** We flew out of Volk Field, actually both times, even though I did my pre-mob[ilization] stuff down in Fort Bliss, we still came back to Wisconsin to fly out of Volk Field.

**SPRAGUE:** Okay. Wow.

**LOPEZ:** I don't know why. And then we'd make one stop. I think it was Maine. I think we made one stop in Maine, this was all civilian aircraft. And then we stopped a layover in Germany. But because our plane hit a bird when we were flying, the windshield needed to be replaced. We actually stayed in Germany for three days in the same little airport transient thing. And they have this special bay next to where you just walk through where these bunk beds are, and they're three bed bunk beds. So you can't sit up in the bed. So it'd be like, bunk bed, bunk bed, and then bunk bed. It was really high, and to get

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on the top bunk, you had to climb a little ladder on the edge. And to get in, you're like bending down and squeezing in, and that's how we--and these tiny, little airport plane pillows that we had to use. But the nice thing was they told us we could eat and drink anything we wanted to from the gift shop. Because we didn't have any food. And they tried to kind of cater us for the meals. I remember the breakfast coming in, and the bacon. It was cured so it looked like it wasn't cooked. And I'm somebody, I like everything burnt. I want it cooked well done. I like that little crispy. I want to make sure I'm not going to get no poisoning of any sort. So I remember not being able to eat any of the meat. And we were only allowed to go outside in this little, tiny area, and at the time, I was smoking. So it was just really frustrating. But because we were allowed to drink and eat anything we wanted from the gift shops, a few of the people in my unit decided that they're going to see how many Red Bulls they could drink and how long they could stay awake. They had a pile, a huge pile, of all these empty Red Bull cans they all drank. And they're all running around crazy, like, "You got a question? You got a question? I should buy a book." Like, they're over here, what I mean? And in a way it was kind of

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like, I think, a fear drove a lot of that kind of stuff that we were doing, like getting ready to do this or that. Because from then, from Germany, we went to Kuwait. And in Kuwait, we changed from regular civilian airplane to a military airplane. I hate, hate flying. I'm terrified. And when I was in AIT, they always tried to get me to go airborne, because if you have a good PT [Physical Training] score, they want you to go airborne. My drill sergeant was always on me about it, because I got over a 300 on my PT score, so he was always trying to get me to do this and that. And I'm like, "No. I'm afraid of heights." So being in the airplane was really hard on me. So civilian airplane, that's rough, whatever. I just close my eyes. But then you get on like a C-17 or a C-130, and you're not buckled in, and you're sitting on netting. The first time I was on netting, and then flying back at home for leave and different things like that, there was a couple times where they had these chairs in the middle. But even then, we had no seatbelts or anything like that, and they do these

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things called victory takeoffs and victory landings, where the plane goes up and down, up and down, and then side to side, side to side. And literally, I took my cover off, I said I was going to vomit. I put it in here. And we're called "front loaded." That's when you take your ruck and instead of putting it on your back, you put it on your front. So that when you sit down, you could sit down. So I'm sitting here, and my ruck's like this, and my cover, I take it off, I'm going to vomit. And I have it sitting here. And the plane goes up and down so high, my cover lifts up into the air. And

I'm just freaking. I hate rollercoasters, I hate anything like that. So it was like being on a rollercoaster for ninety minutes, I think, it took us to get from Kuwait to Baghdad, to BIAP International [Baghdad International Airport].

**SPRAGUE:** Where did you fly out of Kuwait? Do you remember? Do you happen to remember? It's okay if you don't.

**LOPEZ:** No. I really don't think I remember where we were in Kuwait. I know we went to two different places. But the thing is, for my second tour, my second time I got orders to deploy, we--our initial MOS, or not MOS-- our

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initial mission was going to be detainee operations. So working in a Theater Internment Facility, AKA, prison. But when we got to Kuwait, we found out that we were now going to be doing QRF, which is Quick Reaction Force.

**SPRAGUE:** Okay. So, I'm with you. Let's finish out the deployment with the HHC, 107th Engineer Battalion.

**LOPEZ:** It was only about two months into it.

**SPRAGUE:** So curiosity, you had trained as a logistician, 92 Yankee, and then--but you're now the armorer, or you were. Bring me up to speed on how did that work out?

**LOPEZ:** So, being an armorer actually falls under the 92 Yankee MOS. It's a little bit different than, like, let's say, actually fixing the weapons. I just maintain them, check them in, issue them, make sure the serial numbers are right. I'm liable for anything that gets handed out. You know, I'm having people come in and let me verify the serial numbers. Putting CLP, the cleaner, lubricant, protectant on all the weapons. Inspecting them. Writing up

[\[00:44:00\]](#)

if any of them are broke or have this missing part or this or that. Then I would turn it into the person who would fix it. I don't remember what MOS that was. It's kind of like where you start, because I was a private. It's the lowest where you start when it comes to supply and logistics in the military.

**SPRAGUE:** Okay. While you're with the 107th, what is a normal day like for you?

**LOPEZ:** Get up early, like maybe four o'clock. Go and run a couple miles for PT, or calisthenics. We would have this sergeant, I think as a civilian or on the civilian side. She did like an aerobics class. And we would work out. And there's that one country song about [sings-words inaudible]. It's like an American soldier song. I think that's the name of it, "American Soldier." And she would play that for us every morning, and it was like, "God. Come on, man." And then we'd go back, shower and put my uniform on and show up to

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the supply room. My supply sergeant would start telling what I needed to do. "Okay, today this is what you got to go do. Go look at all these weapons. Go pack all these. These all need to be taken apart." Because, actually, do you know, when you're shipping an M16 or an M4, you actually have to--you can't store or ship them with the safety on? It actually has to be off. Stuff like that. Little things that you have to know. How to fill out all these different forms. You have the Property Book and then you've got to be able to order things. And then they're switching to a new thing where, when you're overseas, you go online and everybody orders if you need extra uniforms or this or that, so that we don't issue that anymore. And then just making sure everybody had what they needed according to an NSN [National Stock Number], which is a number that every piece equipment is given. It's really long, has like, I don't know, ten, twelve digits in it or something like that. Then everybody would have to take all their stuff and all lay it out. And I'd have to go around with the clipboard and verify I checked it. Everybody had every single piece

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of equipment that was issued to them. And I would do stuff like that every day. It was a lot of computer work. It was a lot of forms. It was a lot of verifying, like, this, this, and this. I'd have to even go around, it'd be like, "Okay, today you have to go into every single computer in the armory and verify all the serial numbers and everything that's plugged into it, and all the printers." Just lots of busy work, because I was the little man, the low--you know what I mean? The low guy at the time. But it helped, because then on my next tour--

**SPRAGUE:** With the 107th, to interrupt you again, sorry. You were located where in Iraq? Just out of curiosity.

**LOPEZ:** Baghdad. Liberty, specifically, Liberty. Camp Liberty.

**SPRAGUE:** Okay.

**LOPEZ:** And then on the second one, it was very, very close. It was Camp, well, it was Cropper, but technically, Cropper is in Striker, which is all part of what they call the Victory Base Complex. So Liberty was here, and that would be Cropper, and then Striker.

**SPRAGUE:** So--

**LOPEZ:** And really, I shouldn't even say, because the first--I got

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sent home so early, I shouldn't even count it as a deployment. Because it was such a short amount of time.

**SPRAGUE:** Tell me, did you have any close calls when you were with the 107th?

**LOPEZ:** No. No, I really didn't do anything, and most of the time, I was sitting in an older building that was like an office and just doing paperwork and running around. That really wasn't anything, you know what I mean? Like I wasn't in an MOS or that required that required me to do anything else.

**SPRAGUE:** What were the conditions like?

**LOPEZ:** Always hot, really hot. We would have like the different chow halls, and Liberty had a really big chow hall. And it was really good food. And I think that was one of the [??] things I looked forward to. And it was also

[\[00:48:00\]](#)

quick. So I don't have many memories from the first time. And then I--like finding out I was pregnant, I started vomiting and I thought it was like heat, and it wasn't. And then I went into the sick call, and they're like, "No, you're pregnant." And I freaked out. And my dad hadn't arrived yet. I was waiting for my dad to come, because he was going to be pissed, too. Plus, the guy that I ended up getting pregnant with was with me when Shorty died, deployed with us as well. And when my dad saw him, he punched him in the face. And my dad, who's a sergeant first class, doing that, he should have gotten in trouble, but because it was the whole situation, everybody understood. And I felt really bad. I felt like I embarrassed my dad and his name. He was so proud of me, that we're deploying together, and you know, there's a news station that wanted to do an interview with us, and I think I really let him down. I think I embarrassed him. And my dad is the kind of person, it's all about how you look, how you're being perceived. If you're doing good or bad. If you're doing bad, he doesn't want anything to do with you. He's not going to help you. He's just going to shove you aside, and I think that's what happened with me and my son. So

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when I got home, I got sent home, my sister came and picked me up from, was it Volk Field? It was Fort McCoy, because you have to do something, it's called "refrad" or referred from active duty. So I no longer was on active duty anymore, and I transferred because I wanted to go live by my sister. I was pregnant, I was going to have a baby, I was going to need help. I was by myself. His dad was still in Iraq. I went and moved to Chippewa Falls, where my sister

had been, and I transferred from the Michigan Army National Guard back to Wisconsin to a unit that was in Marshfield. Where was that? Somewhere near the Marshfield area. I can't even remember anymore. And we supported a field artillery unit. So I started drilling there. I remember, I was--I was maybe four or five months along when I actually--all the paperwork was done, I could start drilling. And I had to show up in civvies because I didn't have any

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maternity uniforms. And I got there, and when I was waiting in the hallway and there's some other soldiers there, and this soldier comes up, and he goes, "Can I get you a chair?" And I got really angry that I was being treated different because I was pregnant. And I said, "No. Do you want me to get you a chair?" [Laughs] And I just remember, like, I hated being pregnant. Being pregnant sucks. It takes so much out of you, at least for me. I had a really hard pregnancy, and I got kidney stones a bunch of times, and but--

**SPRAGUE:** Is there anything else with your time with the 107th in Iraq? What did you do for entertainment over there?

**LOPEZ:** Man, anything and everything, from decorating for every season, doing stupid stuff. We used to even take these little squirt water guns that people sent us, and we had these big T-balls everywhere. They were probably like ten feet tall. They were these big cement things, and we would try to write our name and get it to show up, to finish writing our name before the beginning of it evaporated. I also used to go around interviewing people. Me and my

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friend, Rice[?], who I met overseas, she's still my best friend to this day. We would take these cameras that we had and go up to different people and ask them stupid questions, like--so there's these little lizards everywhere in Iraq, and they're brown. And we asked people, "Hey, if we washed the lizards, do you think they would actually be a different color, and they're only brown because they're in the sand?" Stupid questions like that. And that was a lot of fun. We used to call it the Rice and Ro Show, because her last name was Rice, my first name was Rochelle, so it was the Rice and Ro Show. Just silly little things. One time we actually--somebody sent us water balloons, and we were by the maintenance tents where they would fix all the vehicles. We knew that they were all working, so we grabbed a whole bunch of them and filled as much of them as we could. And we went and we started attacking and water ballooning them. And one of the guys was in on it, so, and we filmed it. Just things like that. It was just, it really just made us laugh, and she really helped me get through everything.

[\[00:52:00\]](#)

I love her to death. So, yeah, just silly little things. And then they had these things, we called them--I know this is not politically correct--we called them "Haji shops" because they don't have copyright laws in Iraq. So you can go and get any movie you wanted, even if it was in theater at this little Haji shop. You can buy the entire Disney collection, every single movie Disney's ever made, for twenty bucks. And it'd be this boxed set, and there'd be like twenty disks in there for four, however many movies, per disk. You could go to--they have a little bazaar. Actually, went there and bought a guitar at this bazaar. My dad plays guitar and I've always wanted to play. So once again, I did what my dad did, and I got a guitar. I didn't play it a whole lot. It was this purple guitar. And one of my friends, she would say, "Well, I'm shipping mine back. Want me to ship yours, too?" I was like, "Yeah." And I'm like, "I'll get it from you when we get home." And I never saw it again [laughs]. Kind of sucks, but--

**SPRAGUE:** Anything else you remember from the time you were with the 107th in Iraq that you'd like to share?

[\[00:53:00\]](#)

**LOPEZ:** No.

**SPRAGUE:** And you were there approximately how long? The 107th.

**LOPEZ:** Six weeks. Not even. I don't think they even put it on my DD-214, to be honest with you. I think it's not

even--they don't count it at all. And I'm like, even though those days, they're supposed to add up cumulative, and then you get certain awards, it says I was like eight days shy of receiving this award. I'm like, "You guys, I was"--they don't count it. Even like being ADVON. I was there like a week before everyone else, but it still always says the amount of days that the unit was officially there, not how many days I was actually there. And I'm just like, okay, whatever.

**SPRAGUE:** Okay. We'll jump back ahead again. You're back in Wisconsin. You're in Marshfield, or you're in Chippewa Falls, but--

**LOPEZ:** Drilling in the Marshfield area. I don't remember the name of the town. They had a paper plant there, I remember that, because the town smelled really bad. And I was pregnant. And one of my friends actually met when I

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was living in Greenwood, was in that unit. That's mainly why I transferred to that one, because he was like, "Hey, come to my unit. I know you just got refraded, you're coming back, whatever." I was like, "Okay." So I'm drilling there and I have my son, and his father's able to come home. Around my due date, we tried to get him to come back. Now my son's father, it was kind of a thing where Shorty had just died, we're going to go to Iraq. I was just really scared and nervous, did something dumb one night. That was it. We never were--like, I didn't want to be with hm. We weren't living together kind of thing. So when he came home and I had our son, I had him two weeks early, then they had to induce me at the same time, and his dad was there for the birth. I'm glad at least he was there for that. and then he went back overseas. Then otherwise, I would be drilling on the weekends. I had my son, and I remember it was my first drill back after having my son. And I went there, and everybody drinks and

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they drink quite a bit. And I drilled the first day, then we all went out partying. And I didn't even show up for the second day, and I never got in trouble for that, and I don't really know why. I think they understood that I was going through a lot, and my son was only like six months old. I ended up getting deployed, getting orders, that unit, did then. When my son was ten months old, I went to Iraq for the second time.

**SPRAGUE:** And that unit was?

**LOPEZ:** The 1st and the 105th Bravo Troop Cavalry.

**SPRAGUE:** Okay. Tell me a little bit about that experience, about having--what happened with your son and your deployment that time.

**LOPEZ:** [equipment falls] I'm so sorry, I keep bumping it.

**SPRAGUE:** Okay. The question was, with your son, and having to deploy again with your unit, which was Bravo Troop, 1st Squadron, 105th Cavalry Regiment?

[\[00:56:00\]](#)

**LOPEZ:** Yes.

**SPRAGUE:** Okay. And tell me about that and how that went down, and your experience with that.

**LOPEZ:** I had to deploy with Bravo Troop. I was actually pulled from my home unit up in northern Wisconsin, the Marshfield area, to deploy with this Bravo Troop. They needed females for searches when they were going overseas, because the original mission was detainee operations. And in Iraq, they've got lots of strange rules and culture's like only a female can touch another female and search. You know, just things that kind of make sense for it being a Muslim country. But Bravo Troop is an all-male combat unit, and they had never, most of them, had never worked with females in their military career, ever. So going in there, the eight of us, we really had to prove ourselves. We not only had to be good soldiers, but we had to be better than good. My son, when we started training, went down to Fort

Bliss, Texas, and Camp Do?a Ana. Also, we did training in Florida, too. So when we started that, my son was--I

[\[00:57:00\]](#)

think he was ten or eleven months old. And I missed my son's first steps, and I missed him, his first birthday because I was overseas. And it was really hard. Not only that, but after having a baby, you have baby weight, and having to try to pass a PT test and lose all the weight, because then there's the males who are all judging me. "This is why women shouldn't be in the military," kind of thing. It was really difficult leaving my son. It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. And deploying, I had to, like I said, really try to prove myself. And on our four day pass that we got before we went overseas, we had somebody who was what we called a TAMMS [The Army Maintenance Management System] clerk, who tracks all the vehicles, orders all the parts for the vehicles they would be using. Plus, once we got to Kuwait, our mission got switched to QRF, Quick Reaction Force. So our four days before we leave, he falls off

[\[00:58:00\]](#)

a fourth story balcony. So they need somebody to fill that spot. They pull me, and I'm put in this job. Now, it's not my MOS, I've never done it before. I'm normally working with weapons, and they want me to start working with the vehicles. So they threw me into this MOS. So what I did was, I read every manual I could, and I did this. And I learned that job. And by the end of the deployment, my commander said, he's like, "You're about one month away from being the best clerk I've ever worked with." And that made me feel really good. I actually receive an ARCOM [Army Commendation Medal] for it. And the Army--I received two different awards overseas, and one of them is because I was put in a job, and I also started this charting of this tracking means that they actually turned in. And actually, the whole battalion started using it, this form that I created, and that actually made me feel really good. Because I knew nothing when I first started. By the end, my commander told me I was an expert. When I got home, because when I deployed I was an E4, my commander personally contacted my home unit and was like, "You need to promote her right away."

**SPRAGUE:** So backing up just a little bit, you joined Bravo Troop,

[\[00:59:00\]](#)

they've never had another woman in their unit?

**LOPEZ:** Right.

**SPRAGUE:** What were some of your experiences?

**LOPEZ:** Oh God. I remember one time we were still training to get ready to go, and we were down in Florida, Camp Blanding. And it was raining and raining and raining. We're out in the woods and there's all these little holes. They had some sort of animal that would dig these holes. And one time I was running, and we were wearing this gear where--they're called halos. So on your Kevlar, or your helmet, they had this ring, and it had this vest on it, and it has this thing called an eddy pack, and it was all really heavy. But it was, was they could see where you were so they could see, on a screen, you would be a little dot. So they could see if you were doing the right fire team formations and things like that. And I was running one time. They're like, "Lift [inaudible]" and I get up and run. I twist my knee really bad. And I--so the next day, I could barely walk. Now mind you, maybe I should just go to sick call and see if I can get maybe some ice packs, whatever. So I have to miss the first

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part of the day, and I just remember all the guys, like, "Female. She's trying to get [inaudible] off." And I was like, "Man, from here on out, I can't go to sick call no more, because I'm going to be excluded, and I'm going to be shit on." People stopped talking to me because I went to sick call kind of stuff. So man, I can't do that no more. You know what I mean? So I, even though my knee really hurt and I'm like just, you know, anything can happen. I also get really bad migraines sometimes, and having so much extra equipment. But after that, I knew I had to push through it. I'm like, "Man, this really sucks." But I did it.

**SPRAGUE:** So that was a different experience.

**LOPEZ:** Yeah.

**SPRAGUE:** In terms of that relationship, having to feel that you couldn't go to sick call because of what your peers were saying to you. Even though you had a serious injury.

**LOPEZ:** Right.

**SPRAGUE:** Twisted your ankle.

**LOPEZ:** And I remember, too, something happened. There were two different couples, I'm just going to call them couples. So instead of flying us Wisconsin, they bused our whole brigade down to Florida. It was these huge buses

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ahead of us. It was like a twenty-six hour ride it took us. Well, I sat kind of towards the back. I was just sitting there. I don't remember who I sat next to, but I remember the seat behind me, there was a male and a female. Apparently, they had messed around on the bus on the way there. I'm like, I was so--and then, at camp, I guess two other people started messing around in a porta-potty of all places. So I remember it was a little bit before we were leaving to go overseas, they started doing all these interviews and pulling people in and asking them, like, getting interrogated to find out what these people did. I remember I got interrogated, and I told the truth. I was like, "Yeah, they were behind me, yeah." I'm like, "Did I see anything? No. But they did have kind of like their blankets and coats over themselves. I really don't know." I go, "I've heard rumors." I go, "Same thing with these two. You know, I've heard rumors. Have I seen anything? No." But all of them ended up getting kicked out. And I was just like, oh. But I was also upset because that made females look bad. It made lots of guys-- it reinforced the fact that they didn't want

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females in the unit. But instead of the males taking their part of it, because they treated us like objects. I could literally walk in a chow hall and instantly, everybody started staring at me, watching every move I did. I was constantly watched. I would go clear my weapon in the firing barrel, they'd be like--they always had somebody there, standing there to make sure you do it right. They go, "Oh, you smell so good." Just things like that. And they would call deployment pretty. So if you're like a five stateside, military and overseas you're like a nine. You know what I mean? It's kind of like there's all this tension constantly. There'd be stuff that make you feel good, then there'd be a lot of stuff that just made you feel really uncomfortable. And there was a lot of that kind of thing. A lot of pressure from a lot of different people, lots of comments, lots of just guys--as Trump would put it, "Guys just being guys. Locker room talk." Kind of stuff like that you don't want to hear, you know?

**SPRAGUE:** How did that make you feel about your focus on your job and

[\[01:03:00\]](#)

what you needed to do, versus what was going on around you? Was it distracting? Was it--you tell me.

**LOPEZ:** Yeah. It was. It was extremely distracting, and I already have anxiety issues. So not only that, but then I find out four days before we leave to go overseas, I'm doing this job I've never done before. I'm like, man, that's I think what motivated me to over-learn my job and become an expert at it, because I didn't want that happening. Because I didn't want to have to do that. I wanted to do well. So one of the biggest compliments I ever got was towards the end of deployment, one of the guys was like, "Lopez, you're basically a dude to us." And that made me feel like I was finally accepted, I finally did something good. And actually, I really noticed, too--a couple months before we were getting ready to leave Iraq, a platoon joined us, an infantry platoon, all males. They didn't have any females, joined us. Now they had started coming in,

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and bring their trucks in the motor pool, where I mainly worked, it was the motor pool. And they have to come to me first, and they would tell me what's wrong, and then I filled out the form, and I'd bring it back to my mechs, my mechanics. I used to call them my mechs, because that's what it was. And they were like, "Oh yeah, you know, our nozzle for the windshield, it keeps--it's broken. It keeps not working." I'm like, "Yeah, we just replaced this two weeks ago." I would be like, "When you guys open up the hood, you have to have two people to do it. If you do it with one person, it breaks. That's why you always have to have two." And the guy didn't want to listen to me. We went back there, and they're like, "Oh yeah. This is what's happening." And he said the exact same thing I did. He's like, "Oh yeah, that's what she said." They're like, "You should listen to Ro because she could fix circles around your ass."

**SPRAGUE:** [Laughs]

**LOPEZ:** Stuff like that, you know? And there was--even the other females, some of them did well. But there was still of them that just made females look bad at stuff that would happen. There was lots of, either it was accusations of sexual harassment, and then rape and things like that that would

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happen. Some of the guys wouldn't even talk to the females at all, because they didn't want to get in any sort of trouble.

**SPRAGUE:** Did you have any experiences?

**LOPEZ:** Yes. We used to have this XO [Executive Officer], or it was an officer. And in Iraq, I had my own up-armored F-350 truck that I drove around. The windshield was like four to five inches thick, the glass. The back, there'd be a little slot where you could put your weapon out. And we actually got it from the 10th Mountain Division. There was a couple, there was three trucks, those trucks that we had that were different from the Humvees, that I drove. And because of my job, I used to have to drive those from base to--I used to have to go from Cropper to Striker to Liberty to--and I can't remember the other camp's name. But I would drive, and I'd go pick up parts and do this or that. You know what I mean? I had a lot more freedom and I did a lot more than most people did. Because they carried off[??] the people who just sat up in the entry

[\[01:06:00\]](#)

control points. They just sat there waiting for something to happen, or they'd get a mission to go outside the wire, do something, this or that. Most of the time, I was just doing they high listing stuff, and I had this platoon leader, and he'd be like, "I'll come with you." And even though he was married and just had a baby--we had these, like, online. So I worked a lot on the computer ordering stuff, and we had the internet. He would send me lots of emails and talking, and then he'd start putting cards at the end of it. Then he would ask me, "Hey, let's go over to Liberty." They got--they had these little food stands. And, "Let's go get something," this or that. And just he would, he was like, "I'm going to drive the truck." And then he would lock the doors, and then he would try to be, "Let's watch a movie together." And then things happen, and it's kind of like if you resist, or if you do something that they don't want, you have to pay for it. So you just go along and just try your best to pretend you don't notice things, or try to ignore this until the point where it's just right in front of your face. Then you just have to do what you have to do so your life isn't a living hell. And a lot of that happened to a lot

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of different people. Some of the people, they would just, they didn't care. Some people would get all calls sent to them, and like shampoo and conditioner bottles, which, Iraq was supposed to be a dry nation. And you'd hear about people getting drunk. And you'd hear like a girl and a guy messing around over there, just different things. Some of it people just did because they wanted to, but a lot of it was just, you do what you have to do in order to live, kind of thing. It was very hard, especially the end of deployment, and getting pressed up against the side of a wall and just can't do anything. Just have to accept it.

**SPRAGUE:** [Sighs] So, moving from stateside and to Iraq, you deployed



[\[01:08:00\]](#)

and flew out of Florida? When you deployed to Iraq the second time?

**LOPEZ:** It was out of Fort Bliss, I believe, that area of Texas. We were down in Texas. I think that's where we--I don't remember the name of the airport or anything like that. I just think that's where we flew out of.

**SPRAGUE:** And then you flew to Kuwait?

**LOPEZ:** We flew to, was it Germany or Ireland? I think we did Germany, if I remember correctly. And then Kuwait. And then that's where we got our mission changed. So we actually ended up staying in Kuwait for two or three weeks. I forget which one. And then we went from where we landed, we went to a different base, and I don't remember the name of that, either. And that's where--it was this huge, transient base, and there were hundreds of tents. And there were all these cots inside the tents. And it was so hot in Kuwait. It's different than Iraq, that dry heat. It was that humid heat. And I just remember being so miserable that instead of sleeping in the tent where there was no

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airflow, I went outside and I slept on the T-wall, literally, I climbed up on the T-wall and slept on that. Plus, there were rats that were going through, you know what I mean? And it was just miserable. And then even training there for our new mission, for the QRF, the sand blowing in your eyes. It's like being in an oven, and when the wind blows, it's like taking a hair dryer, and you know hair dryers are hot, and then blowing that in your face. It doesn't feel good. The wind didn't feel good. Having sand in your eyes when you wake up, and underneath your nose and in your lips. And just like--Kuwait, that was a horrible, miserable country for me. And it was just, yeah.

**SPRAGUE:** So you trained for the QRF in Kuwait?

**LOPEZ:** In Kuwait. Yup.

**SPRAGUE:** Then what happened?

**LOPEZ:** We were there for a few weeks. And I remember even the first time I got off the airplane, they put us on a bus. And I didn't know if Kuwait was considered a safe country or if this was--you know what I mean, what was going to happen. Then, "Okay, who here's a sharpshooter?" People raise

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their hand. They're like, "You need to go in front of the bus. You can go to the back of the bus." So we've got these people, and then they're like, we had curtains on the bus, so we couldn't see out and they couldn't see in. And only the people who had their weapons were supposed to be looking, could actually even pop it open a little bit. I'm like, "Man, why--this is not safe if they're having people watching either end." You know what I mean? Little did I realize, there are people, when they took their leave, went to actually Kuwait and you could vacation here. So it wasn't as bad. I was just really scared because this was my first experience of that fear we're all going to die, what's going to happen? You know what I mean? Even though there really wasn't anything to be afraid of, per se, being bused, like I said, to the other camp. But then when we had to get on to the military aircraft, that kind of--I'm afraid of flying already, and actually had been prescribed Lorazepam. And I remember--so I was on there, and I'm sick or whatever, like feeling sick to my stomach, and I'm just nervous and scared. What I did is, I took one of the Lorazepam. But when we landed, then, I'm getting out, but I'm all out of it, like completely out of it. I'm walking off. And the sergeant sees me and he's like, "Lopez, you

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need to go sit down." He's like, "Somebody get her some food." [Laughs] They were like, "What's wrong?" Because I was like, "I'm sorry, I hate airplanes. I took my anxiety medicine." So I was out of commission, I remember, because I freaked out that bad, like I just--you know, and you hear all these noises and you don't know what it is. And you're

flying all over the place, and then getting to Iraq, I was ADVON, so I was ahead of even the people in my unit. So they were still in Kuwait when I was in Iraq. And that was nice. Initially, we stayed in these tents, and then they had this old building that was renovated that we stayed in. There were three or four of them.

**SPRAGUE:** And this was where, exactly?

**LOPEZ:** Camp Cropper.

**SPRAGUE:** Okay.

**LOPEZ:** So Cropper is known because it has that TIF [Theater Internment Facility] or theater prison on it. We lived there, but we didn't work in the TIF, which actually--the sergeant was there. At home, he was my regular sergeant, so I knew him. So I'm like, "Hey, can I just have a tour of it? I just want to

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see what it is. We live on Cropper and we never get to go in there." So I got to go in there before, and you see all the detainees, and he tells stories. And there'd be--there's only one female that was allowed to work in the TIF. I'm like, "Why is that?" And I knew her, and I knew why they're letting her, because she's not of the male persuasion. So they let her in there, and she's working, that kind of thing. And no other females are even allowed in there. And--

**SPRAGUE:** Back up a minute. She's a female, but she's not a female?

**LOPEZ:** She's a lesbian. So they're like, "Okay, we're going to let her"--

**SPRAGUE:** Just to clarify.

**LOPEZ:** She was literally the only female they let work in there.

**SPRAGUE:** Okay.

**LOPEZ:** And I was asking him why, and he said they had so many issue with females, not even the soldiers but even the TCNs, the third-country nationals, having sex with the inmates or the detainees. And I would be like, "How is that even possible?" And he's like, "We call them waffle butts because they're all in these wire fences, you know? And they would put their butts up against the wire fences, and that's how they would." And I was like, "Oh my gosh.

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Like, I can't believe people would do that." He's like, "You would be surprised. We'd have people that come in who they just had sex with a dead animal. And then they had sex with a woman. And I don't know if these stories are true, but this is what I've been told. And then she would get maggots because he had sex with a dead animal and then with her, and then she'd get it in her vagina." And I'm just like--you hear all these horror stories--I'm like, "Okay, okay." But then again, I'm like, "But this is just making females looks bad." I'm one person, again, I'm rooting for everybody. But yeah, and I got to go see where Chemical Ali was at. They have this red area where that's where the high value detainees were at. And actually, I started my EMT [Emergency Medical Technician] stuff when I was in Iraq the second time. So I would do my clinical hours in the CSH [Combat Surgical Hospital], and I used to do physicals on fresh captures. They would have these guys come in with brown bags, burlap bags on their heads. And they would be in line, and we'd come and we'd do like their blood pressure. We'd take the bags off, take them like--I'd give them their immunizations, just different things like that, because I met some of the--

[\[01:14:00\]](#)

**SPRAGUE:** So these detainees, are these prisoners? Were they captured by the U.S. military?

**LOPEZ:** Yes.

**SPRAGUE:** Okay, just to clarify. Sorry to interrupt.

**LOPEZ:** Yes. They would be captured by the U.S. military and then brought in. And then I would, part of my clinical hours, they would let me do their physicals and immunizations and just do their overall checkup. Or even then, too, I would do the clinic for the detainees, do some clinic hours. They'd be in there, and they're handcuffed to a bed or zip-tied. I remember one of them, he had lesions on his arms because he had TB, tuberculosis. And I remember going in there and I'm looking around, and everyone's wearing a mask. I'm like, "Shit, I didn't grab a mask. I'm going to get TB." So I got out and put it back on, put one on, and then go in there. Just different things like that. I learned a lot.

**SPRAGUE:** So they had burlap bags over their heads?

**LOPEZ:** When they initially came in, they walked in with a burlap bag over their head. Yep. Little small one.

**SPRAGUE:** Who usually brought them in?

**LOPEZ:** Other soldiers.

[\[01:15:00\]](#)

**SPRAGUE:** Okay.

**LOPEZ:** I know that they would come in--I know how they left. How they got in there, I don't know if they did individually. But I knew that if they were being released they had something called the happy bus, where that's what took them, and we'd have to return them to the point which they were picked up. So if they were picked up on Main Street on this block, we'd have to--when they were getting released--bring them back to that exact point. But then I would hear stories, too, they would say the happy bus would come back, but there would be a bunch of empty shells. So people, they said that what they really did was go and shoot them on the desert and leave their bodies. I don't know if that's true, but you hear things like that.

**SPRAGUE:** So you were training as an EMT?

**LOPEZ:** Yes.

**SPRAGUE:** In your off time. What was your normal--for the QRF--what was your involvement with that, and what did that look like?

**LOPEZ:** For the QRF, even though I lived on Camp Cropper, I worked on Striker. I had this little conex that I worked out of right next to the mechanics. It was kind of like overseeing everything they did. And so they would go out

[\[01:16:00\]](#)

on mission or something would happen, and we'd have to take their record and set it up, because if one of the vehicles would go down, we'd have to go and retrieve them and things like that. I think I only ever went outside the wire myself like two times or something like that. Not very much. I wanted to. I'm like, "Please." Because there was one of them, his dad was actually a sergeant major in that company, or his stepdad, so he was like, "I want to go out on mission." So they let him. And then I asked them, and they're like, "No." I'm like, "That's nepotism. That's not fair." I want to go out and do stuff. But the one time I did go out, we were by like the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. In the Green Zone, we used to call it the Not So Green Zone, because when we were there it was starting to get kind of bad. And I remember there was a few of us, and we were walking back over to get back on the base. And these helicopters flew over, and this vehicle, these two four door sedans pull up, and four people got out of each one, and they put their guns on the top of the car and they pointed at us. And we started freaking out. And my sergeant was there. And I was

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like, "What do we do? Know what I mean? Should we go back?" He was like, "I maybe an E6 in a Cav unit, but I'm

just a fucking mechanic. I don't know." And we were freaking out, it was so scary having guns pointed at you. You don't know what to do. Then these helicopters started coming over, but then the IA, the Iraqi Army, came and pulled up in front of us. So we, like--it was just crazy. And then afterwards, we were talking with them, but they could only exchange our patches. Like we give them a patch and they give us a patch. And we had the interpreter there, and he was--we were talking with them and just joking around after that. It was just kind of an interesting thing. I wish I could have done more of that kind of stuff. Your adrenalin is going, you're scared. I remember thinking, "Are they going to shoot me in my head? Are they going to shoot me in my vest? Is my vest going to work? But if they do shoot me in the head, maybe I won't die." All those things in a split second. Like time slowed down kind of thing. It was crazy. It was kind of fun, though. I don't know, I kind of liked it. [Laughs]

**SPRAGUE:** So that was an Iraqi unit that was--

**LOPEZ:** Yeah.

**SPRAGUE:** That stopped you and--

**LOPEZ:** Yeah.

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**SPRAGUE:** What else was going through your head at that time?

**LOPEZ:** Just wondering if my body armor was going to work.

**SPRAGUE:** [Laughs]

**LOPEZ:** Really, that's what it was. I was like, "Oh my God, I hope they shoot me in the chest and not my head." [both laugh] You know?

**SPRAGUE:** What did you think about the distinction or the lack of distinction between what a combat role was and what a non-combatant role was?

**LOPEZ:** Well, the people who are the QRF people, there were times we're like after we'd got mortared a whole bunch, they did mission for like seventy-two hours straight. So they would go out. We had A-shifts and then a B-shift, and they would take turns, you know? During that, almost nobody got any sleep. We're all awake the whole time. Our role was to support them. So not only were we making sure their trucks were all up, but we were cooking food for them, extra stuff, because you know when they come back, may not have not have been chow hours. So we wanted them to be able to eat. And helping them change

[\[01:19:00\]](#)

out this and clean this, and just a support role. And I know it's not as glorious, and especially because I wanted to go out and do more, but I know that it takes all kinds, and they can't function without us. So I just tried to do my best and keep them encouraged. And make sure that they're hydrated and make sure that everything is running properly. You know, very envious, very jealous, because it's like you're a soldier. A lot of us, we're in the military, we want to be able to go and do stuff, and do more. But then at the same time, it's kind of like a lot of people who did ended up getting really--you know, they're not in a good place anymore. And a lot of them are dead now, from suicide, from different things. So it's just, I don't know. It's weird. It's a weird feeling.

**SPRAGUE:** Did you have any experiences with vehicles coming back from where the QRF had been, and things that had happened to the vehicles that you observed or might have happened within the vehicles?

[\[01:20:00\]](#)

**LOPEZ:** The only thing I ever saw was on the hood of a truck. There was a bullet hole going through. Other than that,

we didn't really have anything major, to be honest with you. It was during, I think it would be midway through, in 2009 when I was there, Obama even went from, okay, it's not Operation Iraqi Freedom, it's Operation--what was it? Enduring Freedom? It went from a war thing to like a peace thing. So our mission changed. So we went from capture and the [inaudible] thing to hearts and minds. So a lot of the time, it was like handing out soccer balls and getting extra pens and extra things to give to the kids, and going and talking to the elder of the town. You know what I mean? Just kind of like that. Every once in a while, something would come up, but we were really fortunate in the way that nothing really bad ever happened to our unit specifically. There were times we got mortars, and they would land on someone's wherever they were sleeping, but that was just sheer dumb luck. You know what I mean?

**SPRAGUE:** Tell me more about that, about mortars.

**LOPEZ:** So I remember the first time it ever happened, at least on

[\[01:21:00\]](#)

Cropper. We had something we called the big voice. And it was this really loud speaker, that spoke to the whole camp. And when we would start getting mortared, you'd hear this voice. It would go, "Incoming, incoming, incoming, incoming." Like that. It would repeat it. And then that's how we know that we had to get up, put our full battle rattle on, and depending on where you were, head to a bunker. Those were--we don't even call them bunkers. They're like these big cement things that you go underneath, basically bunkers, it's not underground. You know, waiting for it to clear. Those first times it happened, I was like, "Oh my God, this so, like oh." And kind of like freaked out. But the by the end of deployment, it was like, man. And you just want to roll back over in bed. It was like, "They're going to hit me. They're going to hit me." Because we had something called the failing weapons system[??] where for--so the base is in the middle, there's like this perimeter where it can sense if a round is coming in, a mortar. It will shut--the failing weapons system, it will move and fire these really special kind of whatever, ammo, that will shoot it down into

[\[01:22:00\]](#)

pieces. So what we really had to worry about is that the pieces might land on you when it was being shot out of the sky. Or if they did too many at once, and the failing system couldn't shoot it down. It would get in. And that's when you would have to worry, a full one. I remember when I was there, people died because a mortar landed literally where they were sleeping, and they didn't get up. You know what I mean? They didn't get up and start putting their--and go down to the--go seek protection. So just things like that. And I didn't personally know the person that even died when I was there. But I knew what had happened.

**SPRAGUE:** Were they in your unit?

**LOPEZ:** No. They weren't even in my unit.

**SPRAGUE:** How far was the dash from where you were sleeping to the bunker or to whatever, the overhead cover?

**LOPEZ:** It would be like a hundred yards, not even. It was really close. I remember when there was one time I was web-camming with I who my sister was, and we started getting mortared. And I was sitting there with my friend,

[\[01:23:00\]](#)

and he was a mortarman, so that was literally his job to know these things. And he heard it, and he heard the boom, where it landed, and he's like, "Oh, by this shock," blah-blah, this mortar noise, he could tell how far away it was. He was like, "That one was really close." I remember I was web-camming and my sister could see it, she could hear it. She started getting scared. I'm like, "I'm sorry, Kathy, I got to go." And like for some reason, it felt good [laughs]. I don't know, I felt like I was doing something. And then we go to close my computer and the web cam, then run over to the thing, and then her being afterwards messaging me to make sure you're okay. And you know, sometimes this stuff happens. For three days you have to go black on the call, black, no contact with anybody, or you can't do anything like if stuff like that would happen, if something needed to be reported to the families, so it doesn't get out before the family could. I remember, too, when my son's father was in Iraq. Some stuff happened with him, too, and they weren't

supposed to get back because his truck had been shot at, something happened. Someone did get hurt, but my dad broke the rules, and he sent me a message saying, "Hey, I can't tell you anything else, but I can just tell you, he's okay." Like he just did

[\[01:24:00\]](#)

that little bit, like, he wasn't supposed to do anything else, and he can't really tell, because I think somebody died that day. But little things like that, you would have to go black every once in a while and couldn't contact anybody in your family. And I remember with my son, I would try--I had a web cam, it would have to be like 1:00 a.m. in Iraq, because there's about an eight to seven hour difference, because Iraq doesn't do a time change. They don't do the whole daylight savings thing. So I'd have to get up in the middle of the night, depending on what shift I was on, to try to see my son. And that was a whole other thing.

**SPRAGUE:** Tell me a little bit more about that, about communicating with the family, like back here, what that was like.

**LOPEZ:** Well, you know when I first got there, they had these DSN [Defense Switched Network] lines where you could get these calling cards. And it was expensive, and you could call back home. But then some people had cellphones, so you can go get these cellphones. Then we found out that they didn't work very well. So mainly what we did is, they had this internet provider, a

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couple of them, and actually, using my debit card to pay for it--I think it was called the jackal or something like that--I used to get all these weird charges all the time, like fifteen cents, twenty cents. And like, man, this is what happens using an Iraqi internet service provider. You never know what was going to be charged to your account, but either use it and you get to communicate with the family or you don't. And that sucked. So I would go on a web cam with my family. I even went on this thing, it was like Soldiers Angels or something like that, some website, and I kind of described the females that were in our unit. And all of a sudden, mail poured in, and it poured in for the rest of my deployment. I went and just wrote a little thing about them, and people would be like, "Oh, the way you spoke about the other women," and this and that. I mean, I got hundreds of packages, huge thing. Harley Davidson sent me something for everybody in my unit, all these T-shirts. Mary Kay, all this really nice product. I had so much sent to me overseas that I was giving it away. I'm like, "Here take this, take this," trying to dispense it out. A news station even sent me all these stockings, and I had to take a picture and send it back to the news station. It actually got overwhelming for me, because I couldn't

[\[01:26:00\]](#)

respond to everybody. I was busy. Not only was I doing my regular work, I but I was doing my EMT stuff after that. And I kind of regret not being able to individually reply to everybody, but I did go back on the website to say, "Thank you to everybody for everything you sent. Just know that I'm extremely busy and I may not get to reply to everybody." But I would always give everyone like the contact information. I'm like, "Hey, will you guys please write back to Harley, say thank you." You know what I mean. They would do stuff like that, because I'm giving even the card to use. That was kind of interesting. It was nice and seemed never stressful.

**SPRAGUE:** What web service did you use? You mentioned doing webcasts later, not using DSN. What service did you use?

**LOPEZ:** Mainly Skype, or at the time, MSN Messenger was a big thing.

**SPRAGUE:** Okay. What do you think the relationship was like for your

[\[01:27:00\]](#)

unit and for you with the folks back home? Not on a family level, but what do you think the American people were

thinking about?

**LOPEZ:** Well, I know that a lot of the males, they had their significant others would see pictures of the females with the males, and I would get lots of weird messages from other people, other peoples' wives that I didn't know, saying this to me or that to me. And the other females did, too. We were always accused of something that wasn't true as far as I know. And I think that they were worried. I know one time even my sister, she posted this thing on Facebook. She's like, "Oh, it's so hard having a sister in Iraq." I think, too, that back home, they picture everybody like always being in immediate danger, and always being like this. And really, it wasn't like that the whole time. We had little bits and pieces where it was kind of a little scary, but nothing you didn't

[\[01:28:00\]](#)

get used to. So I think they thought we were doing a lot more than what we were, maybe. I mean, we still worked hard and it's still really long days, and there were days when it was 140, 150 degrees, and still having to wear all that gear. I lost all the baby weight in Iraq, thank God [laughs], because I would have failed my height and weight, you know, the taping and the weight, all the standards. And then also doing my clinical hours, too. I think when I got home, I never felt so proud in being able to see my son.

**SPRAGUE:** So not that many close calls or--

**LOPEZ:** No. Not really, to be honest.

**SPRAGUE:** What did you do for entertainment while you were there?

**LOPEZ:** Everything. Not only could we go and buy every single movie ever made from the Haji shops, but there's all sorts of trinkets and this and that. Like I said, I like to make videos and post them. I had a lot of fun with that, making me and my friend. And I also because I had my own truck, and I could

[\[01:29:00\]](#)

just kind of come and go as I pleased, unlike everyone else in the unit. I got to go and see all these palaces, Victory Over Iran, Victory Over Iraq, Al-Faw, I've literally been in all of them multiple times. I used to take people on tours so they could see it. I get a special badge so I could even go into the ones that were still together, because a lot of them had already been bombed and broken down. I got to see the Perfume Palace, and just different areas like that. The Ba'ath Convention Center, where Saddam was actually at when they first bombed Iraq, and where they said they had this little TV in there. And in there, the movie Pretty Woman was on. I got to see all those places with the history. And then they had this thing called the Flintstone Village, which was right next to Victory Over Iran Palace, where he, when he would kill somebody's parents, the kids, he would put them in this thing, and it was this weird little playhouse kind of, but it was huge. I should show you the pictures. They're on my old Facebook account. And you could see like these kids, and they had no idea he had just murdered their parents. And we got to go see the school,

[\[01:30:00\]](#)

and on the school, there was--it was all like on the walls, painted like military equipment and boots. It's like, "What were they teaching these kids?" And to actually see the shoes and stuff on the floor. And I got to go see what they call Saddam's Last Mural, where it's the last mural of Saddam that's standing in the country because everything else was torn down. I just got to go and see a lot of that whole area, and the history that was there. Because a lot of it was already done by the time, especially when I actually had time there. There's like these little restaurants that you could eat at. And I actually got sick when I was overseas from eating their food. I got something called H. pylori, helicobacter pylori, it's a bacteria that you pick up from eating food or water contaminated with it. And I ended up--actually thought I was having a heart attack, because at night when I lay down, I had esophageal lesions and ulcers in my stomach from eating this contaminated food. So I'd be lying down and stomach acid would come up, and it would burn. I'd have to run to sick call, thinking I was having a heart attack. Turned out it was just H.

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pylori. So then I got to take, was it two or three thousand milligrams of antibiotics twice a day for a month to get rid of it. And at night I had to take my cot, because at this time we were sleeping on cots, and prop it up with anything I could find, pieces of wood, a book, so my head would be elevated, so I wouldn't feel like I was having a heart attack. Which is weird, because when I got home, I was training a unit to go to Afghanistan. I was running a grenade range, and my aorta collapsed from the percussion from the grenades when I was doing that.

**SPRAGUE:** Let's wrap up with the 105th Cav. Anything other--anything else that you'd like to share about that before we come back to your stateside story?

**LOPEZ:** You know, I think overall it wasn't a bad unit. There are people who are always going to be not good. I think our commander was really smart, and did the best what he could. I feel proud of what I did, and I worked really hard, and tried to do everything right. There's always going to be the bad

[\[01:32:00\]](#)

stuff that comes with all of that, but sometimes I'm just thinking of it as survival. It is what it is.

**SPRAGUE:** So coming back to the United States after being deployed, what was that like?

**LOPEZ:** Weird. To see grass, see all that green. Coming home from--I don't remember where--on leave. I came home from leave, there was grass. When I came home for good, it was wintertime. But just to see all that, the color and this, and it was weird. For some reason, I always get sick. When I was home on leave, I got sick. When I got home from Iraq, I got sick. Just a difference in the germs, maybe? But it was weird and it felt--I remember I was driving with my sister and my heart dropped. I'm like, "Oh! Where's my weapon?" You know what I mean? Like I literally dropped because I thought I forgot my weapon. I'm like, "Wait, I don't have my weapon anymore. I don't need it right now." Things like that, it was weird. It also kind of frustrated me at the same time.

[\[01:33:00\]](#)

I'd be seeing a lot of civilians or just my friends talking or anybody talking, and I'd be like, "Really? You're complaining about that? Do you guys realize how good you have it? You guys realize you have fucking shoes and you have a floor to stand on? Try living in a dirt house, a dirt hut." I ended up getting really frustrated with civilians that don't understand and don't know. Like, "Really? Shut your f-ing mouth, you know?" So that was kind of hard. And then we do the de-mobe process, so even though when we came home we couldn't leave and actually go home right away. We had to stay for a few, two weeks I think it was.

**SPRAGUE:** Tell me what the de-mobe process is like, and how that went, and coming back to States, and tell me about what the Army did with you during de-mobe, and what that is.

**LOPEZ:** Basically it's when you go and you do--you can write down anything that's happened to you, anything you want to report that was caused by the service. They do like a mental health check. But the thing is, is that the more you report, the more you say, the longer they make you stay. Most of us went in there were like, "Yep, we're all fine. We're all good. Nothing

[\[01:34:00\]](#)

happened." Is that true? No, but we wanted to go home to our families. I hadn't seen my son in--you know what I mean? So most of us just went in and we call it "pencil-whipped" it, and just did whatever so we could leave. And then after that, we'd have to come back for a weekend, I think it was after a month. And I think we did it two or three more times after the initial two weeks. We come back all together, and we do a weekend checkup. They put us up in a hotel, and then we go back home. But the same thing it was, we all just said what we had to. And there are few people from that unit that ended up committing suicide and just different things like that. It was like, you know, maybe they should do these checks when we're overseas, not when we just get back.

**SPRAGUE:** So those soldiers that committed suicide, is there any pattern or anything you see there that--pattern that



underlies that? Or you tell me.

**LOPEZ:** Addiction, actually. A lot of them were either an alcoholic or

[\[01:35:00\]](#)

addicted to something. Being in recovery myself, I can see it. I recognize a lot of the signs. And it's like when you're feeling in some type of way, and it's horrible, and it's a horrible way to feel. All of sudden there's something there that makes you feel better, makes you feel not only better, but super better. Like a superhuman. You're more outgoing, you have more confidence. Nothing bothers you. You have all the energy in the world. It's like why wouldn't you want to do that if you feel like shit and you're constantly having bad memories and bad dreams and high anxiety and panic attacks? And all these things coming to you at once, and all of a sudden you have to get back into life. You have to start doing things, going to work every day and just paying your bills and all these things you haven't had to do in a while when your mind has been on something completely different. It was overwhelming, and I can see that in a lot of other people. One of them, I know, really had a lot of issues even before we went overseas. He hadn't been deployed. Because most them had already been deployed a couple times before. Some people, it was their third or fourth tour, you know what I mean? So they had so much built up already. I don't

[\[01:36:00\]](#)

think it should be allowed for somebody to deploy that many times, to be honest with you. I got the details, there's like a five year deployment wheel. I don't think they should do that. There's so many people that didn't deploy, and we used to call them the "College First pukers." People that couldn't deploy because they were in school or--

**SPRAGUE:** So they went to college first?

**LOPEZ:** Yeah. You could enlist. College First is where if you're in college and you want to complete it, but you still want the military to help you with it, you do something called College First. As long as you're enrolled in college, you can't be deployed. But you have to be enrolled, maintain a certain GPA [Grad Point Average], blah-blah-blah. We call them College First pukers [laughs], and we always ripped on them. Like when we draw at home, it's like, "Oh, you're College First pukers, what do you know?"

**SPRAGUE:** [Laughs]

**LOPEZ:** Like, "Little asshole." [Both laugh]

**SPRAGUE:** That three or four deployments, yeah. Tell me about that in terms of the effect on a soldier, and that willingness and that decision to go

[\[01:37:00\]](#)

back again.

**LOPEZ:** I think a lot of them, it was like if they weren't overseas, they weren't living, kind of thing? You would see some of them kind of light up when we're there. But some of them, at the same time, they just had this kind of stoicness about them, and they more quiet, more reserved in a way. They don't converse in the same way as everyone else kind of does. They're kind of just withdrawn. And you could see that, and you could notice it. At least I did.

**SPRAGUE:** So you get through your--go through de-mobe, you do what you have to do to get back to your families. Tell me about that and your time away from your son, and coming back together with your family stateside.

**LOPEZ:** What really happened with my son was very, very hard for me. Being overseas, his father got married while I was overseas and they

[\[01:38:00\]](#)

started having my son call her Mom, and I was Icky-mommy. Things like that. So when I got home, we had the custody thing to do. There was, at that point, we each had him for basically a year, because I think he was about eleven months when I left to go overseas. So normally what parent has had him longer? Well, at this point, we had had him an equal amount of time. So we had to go to the guardian ad litem thing. And so I'm a single mom, just come back from Iraq, and I enrolled in college. I wanted to go to get a degree. I wanted to finish my EMT stuff. I wanted to be a firefighter. So I was in school to be an EMT and firefighter. Well, I'm doing that, and I'm in school, and he's married and he was working AGR [Active Guard Reserve], and his wife, also, as a civilian worked for the DoD [Department of Defense], and they had money and had just bought a house. So a single mom who's on assistance and then them. It's like the guardian ad litem was like, "Yeah, it would be better for him to live in Michigan," and this and that. That broke me. Then I also ended up having open heart surgery, and we had a new emergency custody order because I had to be

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medevacked to Rochester, Minnesota, for my surgery. And it was all emergency. I had no idea anything was wrong with me.

**SPRAGUE:** Tell me about that, about that experience.

**LOPEZ:** I was running a grenade range. It had been like the third day that we were out there.

**SPRAGUE:** And this is back in Michigan, Minnesota?

**LOPEZ:** Wisconsin. Fort McCoy.

**SPRAGUE:** Fort McCoy. Okay.

**LOPEZ:** This whole time was kind of blurry, and there's pieces that I try to fit together because I don't remember a lot of it, but I try to do the best that I can. So I know that I passed out and I got back up, and people were speaking to me, but it was like they weren't speaking English. Like I could hear it, but I didn't understand it anymore. Turns out it was because I had a ruptured sinus of Valsalva aneurysm in between my right atrium and my aorta. Well, your right atrium takes in--takes out the oxygen depleted blood, and then the aorta pumps the oxygen in the blood. Well, there was that hole that was there, so the oxygen depleted blood was flowing into my aorta, and my body was reusing blood that had no oxygen. Essentially I was suffocating in my own body. So me not

[\[01:40:00\]](#)

being able to understand people was just because I was so hypoxic that I--no oxygen. And there was like spots and things like that, and I didn't feel right, and people were talking to me, and I didn't know what was going on. And I told my friend, I was like, "Look, something's wrong with me." She was like, "Huh?" So they brought me over to the sick call area. And the doctor was working, as a civilian, he was a cardiologist. And I do remember him saying this, and I understood him at this point, because they put oxygen on me. He's like, "I'm standing next to you and I could hear the murmur from your heart." But then they did an EKG and it didn't show anything. He's like, "This isn't right." So they brought me to one hospital who did another EKG, but they could still hear something. So an arrhythmia is just an extra noise. Turns out it was the extra noise because there was a big hole on my--I have something--most people have a tricuspid valve, I have a quadra-cuspid valve. So when the rupture, the aneurysm rupture happened, and there's that leftover part of the heart, it's called the windsock deformity, flowed down to the base of the valve, where my

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quadra-cuspid valve was. And because it was quad and not tri, it was structurally compromised. So that whole part of that valve collapsed in as well, and then there's a hole over here, part of the aorta went in like that. So they sent me to the hospital and there's my whole new record, sent to the second hospital. They do an echo on me, where it's an ultrasound of the heart. And after they did that, they medevacked me to Rochester, and I don't remember all this. My mom told me what happened. When I got there, they did a TEE, which is a transesophageal echo, when they put you

out and go through the throat to look at the heart. And when I woke up that, they were prepping me up in the O.R. And then I barely remember some stuff. I remember my dad drove just in time to get there, because before you have a surgery, they ask you like the five rights or whatever it is. Like, what procedure rare you having done? Who is your doctor? The questions, and they were asking me these things. My dad told me that I said, when they asked me what surgery I was having done, I told them I was having breast implants. I don't remember it, but that's what he said. And

[\[01:42:00\]](#)

the doctors, the surgeon was making fun of me for it too and even after. Afterwards, I actually enjoyed being at Rochester. The people, they made me feel okay. But, yeah, that was just really scary, freaking out. And people from my unit started coming because we were all together at Fort McCoy, and you know. So when I got back from overseas and I went back to my home unit, my normal commander was gone. We had a new commander. He did not like me at all. And I don't know why. I know my commander from being overseas even called the home unit, was like, "She worked really hard. She was really good. She did good data. You need to promote her." He refused to promote me. He's always had a grudge against me. And actually, too, when I went to go out with my surgery, the unit, even though I was out on the grenade range, they were supposed to be bringing me food. Nobody brought me food. I had one MRE [Meal, Ready to Eat] in three days. And I think that's another thing that I brought up after my surgery. I'm like, "Look, you do this to me." I go, "When I told you guys I needed someone to help me, I could barely talk. I didn't know what was going on." And then

[\[01:43:00\]](#)

when they were bringing me to the hospital, I go like, "You have to go and collect all your bags and all your stuff, your duffle bags." He sat in the car and was like, "Go get your stuff." And I'm like, I could barely even move. He didn't even help me. I feel like--I could have just died and he would have never cared. You know what I mean? I extremely dislike that commander, and I think that he should never be in control of a soldier. Because they said like you should never ask your subordinates to do something you would not do yourself, kind of thing. And he doesn't know anything about the Army values. But, yeah, so I ended up having bovine put in there, and they reconstructed part of my valve. But then after I had my surgery, I started passing out a lot because I have something called long QT syndrome. So having the surgery changed my heart so drastically that--so your brain sends a signal to your heart, and then in your heart, you have something called your AV node, that also sends an electrical signal. So there's two ways that your heart kind of beats, goes like this. Well, that part got messed up. And my heart starts beating kind of on its

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own, and not when it's supposed to. So there's all these different ventricles and things. So on a screen, when you see a heartbeat, it looks like all the different waves. Each of those waves actually signed a letter. Mine is called long QT syndrome because the Q point of the wave and the T point of the wave will elongate so much I will so asystole, or flatline. My heart will literally stop itself. And it won't be able to start it again. So I had to have two heart operations after my open heart surgery, where they go and they burn parts of your heart, which make the electrical signals go the right way. And actually, I am wearing a heart monitor today because I'm still having issues with my heart stuff.

**SPRAGUE:** So tell me how this affected your military career?

**LOPEZ:** I was medically discharged from the service. I was on what they call a "dead man's profile" because the only thing I could do was wear my uniform. I was going through all these custody things with my son. I couldn't work, I couldn't go back to school. My doctor told me I needed to find a new career because the number one cause for firefighters is cardiac related death, or number one death. So I had literally everything taken away from me.

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My son was living with his dad because he wasn't on state assistance and crap like that. I couldn't go to school. I was sick. I couldn't work. I had to get out of the military. Everything was gone. But I was prescribed pain pills after my surgery, and those made me feel better. So I started using Vicodin mainly, and then Percocet, and I would drink on top of that, and then I would take other things just because everything was gone, and I just wanted to feel better. I ended

up moving to Michigan because that's where my son's father was living at, and I wanted to be near him. Well, I got a job there. I was waiting for my medical discharge to go through, working at Chase. And then I found out that Chase was shutting down that whole branch. I did VA mortgages, so it wasn't like a bank where you come and take money out. We were a mortgage center. They closed down all that. So we all lost our jobs. And then my son's father sends me an email saying he's moved to Pennsylvania, or in a week, he'll be in Pennsylvania. Didn't check in with me or nothing. So we started state hopping, and

[\[01:46:00\]](#)

I was trying to go and visit my son and follow him wherever he was. And I just got deeper and deeper in debt. You know, pills. And I was eventually, "I can't do this. I need to be by family." I was by myself, my son was gone. I mean, like, I would make these really far trips to Virginia and stuff like that, wherever my son currently was. And the courts didn't enforce anything. So I moved back to Wisconsin, and then stayed with my mom for a little bit. And I stopped drinking and I stopped using for a little bit. I wanted to get right. And at this point, my son--my son's father has had two more kids with two other women. And he's proven just to be an a-hole. But for some reason, he's always fixated on just our son. His ex-wife told me that he always saw him as like the one who got away, so he kind of used my son against me. And then one day they called. Both of them said they didn't want to see me anymore. So I completely gave up. I had gotten a job here at the VA for a little bit, and then

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I started dating somebody I met here, who's also a veteran, who's also into pills. And I got so bad I ended up becoming homeless. I lost everything. I was living out of a van for a while. I remember one time he had gotten arrested, so it was just me, and it was a couple of years ago in the winter when it was like negative forty here. I had the van parked out in the parking lot. This was before the parking garages were even here. And I was alone and I was scared, and this is the only place I felt safe sleeping. And a VA police came, knocked on the door, and he was like, "You got to go. I notice the car has been here three days in a row." And I told him, like, "Where am I supposed to go? I'm a homeless vet." He goes, "I don't know, but you can't stay here." Didn't tell me about 3C, didn't tell me about the Dom, didn't tell me about anything. If I would have known that--and it wasn't until three years later that I ended up coming to the VA. the 3C, the hospital, and getting treatment--August 8th, I'll actually have two years sober. But I wasn't informed about any of that, and it made me like--after the fact, when I found out--I was so mad.

**SPRAGUE:** So explain to me quickly. What are the 3C and the other thing that you mentioned?

**LOPEZ:** So 3P-- 3C is the in-patient psychiatric ward here. So it's

[\[01:48:00\]](#)

where you could go if anybody had suicidal ideation, homicidal ideation, needs to detox from any substance, is a harm to themselves or others kind of thing. And it's a locked ward. And then they also have this place, it's on the VA grounds here in Milwaukee, it's Domiciliary 123. It's the in-patient facility for veterans. They've got multiple programs there. You can go there for an addiction program, PTSD [Post-traumatic Stress Syndrome], just any general depression, anxiety. They also have a compensated work therapy program there, CWT [Compensated Work Therapy], they have a homeless program. DCHV [Domiciliary for Homeless Veterans], that's what that one's called. They have all these things, and I wasn't informed of any of it until I got so bad where--

**SPRAGUE:** But you were found on the grounds of the VA in the parking garage.

**LOPEZ:** They told me I had to leave.

**SPRAGUE:** And they told you had to leave.

**LOPEZ:** Yup.

**SPRAGUE:** Okay. Interesting.

**LOPEZ:** Yeah. I think that's why, too, I kind of have a harsh feeling towards the VA police here, because of things like that. When you're in the Dom

[\[01:49:00\]](#)

over there, they should--we all kind of talk, us veterans, we all kind of share experiences--and I think the VA police here could use a little training in that area, to be honest with you. How to treat veterans. Don't treat us like shit, help us.

**SPRAGUE:** So obviously leaving the military was a huge change for you.

**LOPEZ:** Yeah.

**SPRAGUE:** Do you think, did that play into what happened afterwards at all?

**LOPEZ:** Yeah.

**SPRAGUE:** Talk about that a little bit and what your feelings are about that.

**LOPEZ:** You know, the service is one of the only things in my life I have to be proud of. I've always been proud to put my uniform on and say I'm a soldier. I've always worked hard, I've always done the work. That was gone, on top of my son, which is the most important thing in my life. And that's where it just all trickled down. Everything was taken away from me. Not only that, but I didn't feel safe in my regular apartment anymore. I would go and triple lock and double lock, and I'm propping chairs and putting boxes in front of my door.

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I'm taping my windows, and I put pieces of wood, but that would take sheets to put in there, because I was always afraid somebody was looking in, somebody was going to come get me. I was going to be attacked. I felt vulnerable not having somebody standing outside security or doing this, this and that, and it messed with my head a lot. I would have nightmares from different things, and I couldn't sleep at night. And I just, I just got so bad, and so intense. And I wasn't hooked up with the VA. You know what I mean, didn't come and start doing anything for a couple years after. It was just kind of like the turning point in my life, where I feel like everything changed. I felt like everything I loved was gone. And I felt like I didn't have anything to be proud of anymore.

**SPRAGUE:** Tell me what impressions did you have of--what was your general attitude towards the civilian world when you returned to it? And what

[\[01:51:00\]](#)

you were going through at the same time when you were under addiction.

**LOPEZ:** You know, I would get really frustrated with civilians. I would kind of--in my mind--and judge them. And think like, "Man, you have no idea." Their little petty things that they would get mad about, it would just irritate me, and I wouldn't want to spend time with certain people. And it kind of forced me, also, to kind of retreat into myself. Like I wasn't--you know, if we were in a group of people and people are talking, I probably wouldn't say anything. I would just listen and just think in my head, and like--it wasn't until even I started coming here to the VA, even now, this is kind of like my home. And anybody here, I know so many people, and I feel comfortable here. There's other veterans I talk to here. I can't do that anywhere else. Given the choice between a civilian hospital, a regular hospital, or a VA hospital, I would choose the VA hospital every single time. This is kind of like a safe zone for me. Regardless of everything else that's happened and stuff, the VA is not perfect,

[\[01:52:00\]](#)

and the people who come here aren't either, but neither am I, and that kind of makes me feel like I'm not being judged

and people accept me. Whereas with civilians, I feel like they don't understand me and they don't get what I'm talking about or what I mean. Even simple things like the meetings that I go to. Like I go to ones that are outside the VA, and I don't really talk, I don't really share a lot, I don't really say much. And I feel I like they're just--these people are going through these lives so ignorant and have no idea what's really going on in the world, and how bad they could really have it. But then when I come to a meeting here with other veterans, they get it, you know?

**SPRAGUE:** Yeah. You started doing art as a--

**LOPEZ:** Yes.

**SPRAGUE:** Tell me about that.

**LOPEZ:** So while I was in-patient at Dom 123, they have an art class that everybody has to go to. So I did this women's art, and I started there. And we would get these silly little assignments. I didn't really get it, I didn't understand it, and the very first one was like, draw yourself if you were a tree. And I'm like, this is f-ing ridiculous. Like why would I? You

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know what I mean? But then as I started doing it, participating in it, I realized that I would feel good after it. I would have a release. And in the beginning I didn't share anything I made. I didn't talk about anything. I just let all the other females do whatever. And then I also, after a while, I signed up for the event opener[??], too. We could just go and make anything you want. And I found, like, it opened me up. It kind of took away that anxiety. Talk about, they say mindfulness is really good for people who are struggling with mental health issues, and that's what it did. It put me exactly in that moment. I had to super concentrate on exactly what I was doing. And didn't think about anything else. I never--nothing else gave me that before. And it helped me so much to, just to open up. And then not only that, but sometimes you would make something, and something will come out of you that you didn't realize it was even there, but it was. Like dealing with certain issues. And when you make art--and then not only that, be proud of something that you've made, and have someone else recognize it as it being good. You know, I entered some of my art in the Veteran Art Competition. For the past two years I have. The

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first year, one of my pieces received a first place ribbon, and it gave me that kind of feeling again, like I'm proud of something, like the service you do, and being able to wear my uniform. And it also gave me an outlet that I haven't had in so long. And even now, I go to a weekly art group. It's through the Donna Lexa Art Center, it's about three blocks away from the Milwaukee VA. I go there every Thursday from 3:00 to 5:00, and I go and I make art, and I love it. It's what I look forward to the most. And to be honest with you, without that, I don't know if I'd have my sanity, if I'd even be here right now. Because every day is still a struggle, and I just try to go day by day. But without art--that's helped me so much. And I know it's helped so many other veterans, too. You see people going there and making things, they're talking about this, and as they're doing this stuff, they would never normally do. And it just opens your mind and expands things. It makes you think about things differently. You look at things differently. And--yeah.

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**SPRAGUE:** Okay. Is there anything else in terms of art that you've done that helps you as a veteran? Any particular thing you'd like to share? Anything more you'd like to share?

**LOPEZ:** Through Donna Lexa I make art. And there's an art therapist there. Every year because it's non-profit, they do a fundraiser. They have an art auction where they have pieces there that veterans or other people, adults with disabilities, have made, and they put together other things for sale on auction. They asked me to be the guest of honor and come and speak at it. And being in a twelve-step program, I've gone and spoken at quite a few meetings, but I've never done it officially and in that manner. And to get up and share

[\[01:56:00\]](#)

my story and then also share a piece of art that I had made, to see at the end when I got done speaking, everybody in the room stood up. And we were at this really fancy place, this place I had never been before. And everyone's clapping, and it's like I didn't know what to do. But at the same time, it was kind of like a--like art helped me realize that I can still go on and it's not going to bring me down, and I can overcome things. It was kind of like, almost like a full circle moment for me, where I could still be me and tell my truth, but not feel judged, but actually feel encouraged. If that makes any sense.

**SPRAGUE:** Yes, it does. What do you think on the whole your service in the military means to you?

**LOPEZ:** I feel proud of what I did in the service. I feel like I

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worked hard. I feel like I made friends that no one else, unless you've been in the service will understand how close you can be and what it feels like. And I got to go and experience other parts of the world and realize how good we really have it here. So even when I'm struggling, I think about--I'm having a bad day, I'll remind myself like, "I have a place to live. I've got food in my fridge. I have my mom I still talk to. I have the"--even though there's a lot of things I don't have, I try to remind myself of the things that I do have and how fortunate we really are just to even live in this country. Just being able to sit here and talk and share my story right now. There are people who can't do that. I feel grateful and there are times when I still get upset and think like, "Man, I wish life was different." I wish this or that. But had I not gone through everything, I couldn't be where I am today, and I couldn't share my story and help people that I do. So it's kind of like you have to go

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through stuff in order to learn, in order to be a good person, maybe. Not saying people who haven't gone through stuff aren't, but there's just a wisdom that comes to it. And I'm still working on it, but I feel like it's definitely helped.

**SPRAGUE:** So in telling your story, why do you think you agree to do this interview?

**LOPEZ:** Because I want people to know the truth and see how real stuff is. To know that there are things that aren't perfect about the military and things that they can change to work on, and hope that they will learn from their failures to be able to help the next person who comes to not have to go through what I've had to go through. To encourage other people to let them know that things can get better if you work hard and do the right thing, and that there always is another option. You're never at a dead end.

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**SPRAGUE:** Is there anything that I might have missed that you want to talk about in terms of your military service?

**LOPEZ:** Just after I had my open heart surgery and I was still in, but I was waiting for a medical discharge. I wasn't the soldier that I wanted to be, and I was going through a hard time. But I still had the people on my unit and people that cared come and help me, and help me get out of it. And the people who I served with, they're forever my family. They always will be. Because even though I wasn't doing well during that period, they still treated me like they did when I was working hard and able to do more things, I guess I could say. I

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think that's the only thing I didn't talk about was how much support you really can get from being in the service. So it's not all of them are looking down on you. I think that's all.

**SPRAGUE:** Okay, Rochelle. That concludes our interview for the day. Thank you for your time.

**LOPEZ:** Thank you.

Oral History Interview with Rochelle A. Lopez  
Wisconsin Veterans Museum