

JOSUE LOPEZ  
BRANCH: U.S. ARMY

# He had no desire to serve

## *Basic training for Santa Rosa man included racist trolling and war meant dying alone*

By **KERRY BENEFIELD**  
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Josue Lopez, 76, remembers it happened on the first morning of being “in-country.”

His infantry unit was on its first “sortie” into the jungle around Dau Tieng in southern Vietnam.

His unit was making its way through thick vegetation and sight lines were limited.

“All of a sudden we heard this gigantic blast,” he said.

“We all fell to the ground and we started crawling toward the sound,” he said. “We found that (a fellow soldier) had triggered one of the grenades strapped to his own chest. It’s strapped to him ... you’ve only got a few seconds to get it off.”

Lopez guessed the first grenade ignited more.

“I don’t know if one grenade is strong enough to do this,” he said.

“But his body was completely unrecognizable. There were shreds everywhere ...”

Guys in his unit got sick. Others cried.

Lopez raised his hand.

He knew the guy. He had ridden with him on the bus, the one that took him to U.S. Army registration in Oakland.

It wasn’t a friendship, per se, but Lopez felt a duty to that soldier.

“They asked for volunteers to go pick him up,” he said. “I felt some sense of brotherhood, some sense of connection toward him, so I volunteered.

“They gave us body bags,” he said. “We collected no more than half of his remains.”

It was Lopez’s first sortie (an attack made by troops coming out of a defensive position) and his second day in-country. He was 21 years old.

### Not wanting to be in the military

It wasn’t supposed to be this way for Lopez.

A National Merit Scholar in high school in San Diego, Lopez spent his freshman year of college at UC San Diego.

But he felt lost and unsupported there. Like high school, he said, his was one of the only — or very few — brown faces in his classes.

He left school. He worked. He traveled. He rode a cargo ship to Europe. He came home. He had his heart broken.

The Vietnam War did not play a central role in how Lopez was navigating that period of his life.

That is, until he moved from Southern California to Santa Rosa.

Lopez had just turned 21 and was newly married.

He was working full-time as a psychiatric technician at Sonoma State Home, a job whose challenges with difficult patients and their complicated needs intrigued him, when he decided to return to school.

“It was a hot time in Vietnam at that point,” he said. “I had not paid attention to registration. I was out there floating free. And again, I was not wanting to be part of this really weird enterprise we called ‘military service.’”

But when he met with a junior college counselor to craft his course load in the fall of 1968, he was told he was required to register for the draft.

“But, he told me I wouldn’t get drafted if I took a full course load,” Lopez said.

So he did.

But working full-time at the hospital and taking a full load became too much. Lopez dropped a three-unit class, which put him below the minimum number of units needed to avoid the draft.

“Within a week of telling the (junior college) that I was dropping, I had a notice in the mail, ‘Greetings, you have been inducted into the (U.S.) Army,’” he said.

### Coming to terms with war

“It felt like I had been kidnapped, stolen away from what I thought was going to be my life,” he said.

Lopez thought about refusing. He thought about running — to Canada. Perhaps he’d go to Mexico where he was born. He looked into what was required to become a conscientious objector.

But in the end, three weeks after receiving his draft notice, Lopez boarded a 5:30 a.m. bus from Santa Rosa to Oakland.

“I didn’t feel like there was an option,” he said. “I thought the only way out is through.”

In Oakland, his head was shaved. He was issued what he called ill-fitting fatigues and heavy boots.

Then he was sent to eight weeks of



KENT PORTER / PRESS DEMOCRAT

**Vietnam veteran Josue Lopez pauses Oct. 13 in Santa Rosa. “It is really no wonder that so many guys came back basket cases,” he said. “We saw some pretty horrible things and we lived under the clear impression that we were going to die. And not just die, but die painfully and alone.”**

basic training in Washington.

He remembers those weeks as a mixed bag. The war seemed oddly distant. But guys were tense and hiding it behind bravado.

“I developed a bit of an attitude,” he said. “I got into physical scuffles.”

There was name calling and racist trolling.

“It reflected the kind of insecurity we had, calling each other cowards, saying I couldn’t be an American soldier because I’m Mexican,” he said.

Black guys were particularly, and rightfully, angry, he recalled.

“This racist society sending them here and here. We are training to be killers,” he said.

Fear permeated everything.

Lopez was assigned to the light infantry where he was tasked with carrying a grenade launcher.

“I started thinking again, really hard, about running away because I didn’t want to be out there killing people,” he said. “I didn’t see the sense of going after people who hadn’t done anything to me, other young men who I didn’t know whose life I was going to end without any reason.”

But Lopez stayed on.

“I came to terms with it,” he said. “I became really curious with it too. What does it feel like to be in battle? What characteristics does it take? What kind of man are you, Josue? Do you have enough strength? Do you have the will to survive? Can you actually point a weapon at somebody and fire and kill them?”

After basic training, Lopez was sent to the coastal city of Da Nang in Vietnam.

“Da Nang was an airport, essentially,” he said. “It was very Third World, very low grade. It was taken over by the military and spruced up enough to allow military planes to land.”

From Da Nang he was sent to Dau

Tieng, a region in the southern end of Vietnam, just north of Ho Chi Minh City, more commonly known now as Saigon.

That was where his fellow soldier triggered his own grenade belt.

### 13 out of 50 soldiers survived

Nearing the end of his one-year deployment, Lopez was sent with a new unit to Cambodia, under the direction of a new captain.

He was walking through thick jungle, at the back end of their oval-like formation, when his group began to sense trouble.

“We recognize that we are marching along a path that has been established already. The dirt is pounded down,” he said. “Someone points off to the side and there is a latrine hole. Now and then I catch sight of a wire up in the trees, a communication wire probably.”

As one of the more experienced soldiers in the group, and the one with the grenade launcher, Lopez was at the farthest rear position. It was exposed. It felt dangerous.

“Those of us who are experienced are shaking our heads because our so-called captain is up front demanding we move on,” he said. “And a bunch of us are saying, ‘This is occupied.’”

Then Lopez laid eyes on a North Vietnamese soldier to one side of him. No more than 10 yards away, he said.

They both fired their weapons, but Lopez was using a grenade launcher. He didn’t hit the soldier directly, but no matter. He was sure he’d killed him.

Gunfire immediately erupted everywhere, Lopez said. He used his helmet to dig a shallow trench and rolled into it.

To his right, Lopez spied a soldier in his unit who had dropped to one knee. He was yelling while shooting wildly,

Lopez recalled.

It didn’t make sense. And it didn’t take long, Lopez remembered.

“Some explosion happens on the other side of him and his body comes looking like, what do those kids do? Cartwheels? He’s cartwheeling through the air without a head,” he said.

Lopez recalled spending the night not moving and barely breathing. He heard people moving in the trees around him, but still he didn’t move.

“Literally, nobody tries to get up to look. There is fire coming in,” he said. “We are pinned down for the entire night.”

Today, he believes those noises he heard when things were quiet were North Vietnamese soldiers removing bodies through the jungle as they pulled out.

“Now they were going to be facing a much bigger force of Americans so they weren’t going to stick around,” he said.

By morning, Lopez heard new noises. American voices.

Finally he allowed himself to stand up and look around.

“Standing up? It was scarier than s\*\*t,” he said.

When Lopez stood, the horror became clear.

Of the 50 or so soldiers he had been marching with hours before, 13 had survived, he said.

“It is really no wonder that so many guys came back basket cases,” he said. “We saw some pretty horrible things and we lived under the clear impression that we were going to die. And not just die, but die painfully and alone.”

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