



Gunny Sergeant Joe C. Noriega, Jr. USMC (Retired)

Born in San Jose, California in 1948, the Noriega relocated to El Centro in 1960. Joe's father purchased a ranch on Dannenberg Road, and operated a farm and established Noriega Trucking, a family owned business. Growing up on the farm, Joe learned farming and began driving 18- wheeler trucks at the age of 16.

In June 1971, Joe was hauling tomatoes in San Jose when he received his Draft notice. He took his physical exam at the Oakland induction center. It was during one of those examination stations, that "A Marine Corps Captain showed up, and started hollering out numbers, and pulling people out from the lines." One of those people, was Joe.

Following Boot Camp and Infantry training school, Joe was shipped to Okinawa, Japan for further jungle training. Thereafter ships were loaded, and Joe headed for Vietnam. While conducting patrols in-country, Joe's duties rotated from one patrol to another. These tasks included Point Man, Right Flank Security, Tail-end Charlie, Left Flank Security, and Tunnel Rat.

During the Vietnam War, the "tunnel rat" became an unofficial specialty for U.S. Army Infantryman who cleared and destroyed enemy tunnel complexes. To remain undetected, the Viet Cong had created an extensive underground system of tunnels and tunnel complexes. These complexes could include hospitals, training areas, storage facilities, and barracks. These facilities, coupled with sophisticated ventilation systems, allowed Viet Cong guerillas to remain hidden underground for months at a time.

The tunnel rats were given the task of destroying the tunnels, gathering intelligence within them, and killing or capturing their occupants. Tunnels were often booby trapped with hand grenades, anti-personnel mines, and other methods to kill or maim U.S. troops.

Joe was discharged from the Marine Corps in 1975 as a Sgt. He re-enlisted to the Corps in 1978, and was stationed in Camp Pendleton with the 5th Marine Division, a ground combat division. It was from there that Joe went on to the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines Division (2/9) on Camp Pendleton at Jack Rabbit Hill. From the 2/9 Joe went to Marine Fighter Squadron VMF 633. Not liking the Air Wing, S-4, he requested to be placed back in a line company and was assigned to 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines (3/3) Kilo Company.

In 1993, while training with the Kenyan 1st Rifle Battalion in Africa, Joe's battalion received orders to proceed to Beirut, Lebanon. On the way, his ship crossed through the Suez Canal. Said Joe, "It took the ship two days to cross the 93-mile canal stretch."

While in Beirut, making a supply run in a 1/2 ton, 4x4 infantry vehicle, commonly known as a "Mule", a terrorist bombed the Beirut Marine Barracks. Joe and the mule he was driving were "almost turned over by the blast." That blast killed 243 Marines and Sailors.

Joe's last assigned deployments were Kuwait and Desert Storms. The land campaign lasted 100 hours, and the troops called it the "Nintendo War." Following these campaigns, Joe retired from the Marine Corps in March 1993 at the rank of Gunny Sergeant. Joe has been deployed around the world including Spain, Israel, Portugal, Italy, France, Diego Garcia, Patrols in Liberia (Peacekeepers), Morocco, Japan, Taiwan, and 13 afloats aboard amphibious ships with the U.S. Navy.

Following his retirement, Joe has authored nine books to date. His writing is one method he uses as a means of coping with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Joe will be speaking about his experiences as a Tunnel Rat. Meet the author, and hear his first-hand experiences.