

**INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL ORESKOVIC**  
**2008**

CONNIE DOEBELE, HOST, C-SPAN: So, Michael, it's been three years since we last talked. What happened to you? How long did you stay at Walter Reed?

MICHAEL ORESKOVIC: I stayed at Walter Reed a total of 13 months. I retired on the 5th of November of '05.

DOEBELE: So, by the time that you left Walter Reed, you had been there over a year?

ORES KOVIC: Yes, I have.

DOEBELE: And why so long?

ORES KOVIC: Just, it's kind of standard procedure for recovery. And I had to pass all their tests in the physical therapy lab, and all that stuff like that.

DOEBELE: So, what did you do every day there?

ORES KOVIC: Well, they made us get back in uniform and, you know, start showing up in formation. Some of the soldiers were going missing or not showing up for their appointments. So, they brought the military aspect back into it.

And I was a squad leader, a little above my pay grade. But ...

DOEBELE: What did that mean that you had to do.

ORES KOVIC: I had to keep track of about six to 12 other wounded soldiers, make sure that they were going to their appointments, that they were doing what they were supposed to.

DOEBELE: And what about your own recovery. What did you do with that?

ORES KOVIC: Every day I went to physical therapy and did some rehabilitation, used to work on different kinds of prosthetics, and learn to function in everyday life.

DOEBELE: Where did you live?

ORES KOVIC: I lived on Walter Reed, at the Malone House.

DOEBELE: Now, in the aftermath of that, or during that time, there's been this debate over Walter Reed and what was going on there, and whether the men and women who were living there were getting adequate treatment.

What did you think when you heard that?

ORES KOVIC: I was a little – I wasn't really shocked, because I could understand what was going on. The care there, medical care, is excellent. Administratively, it was severely lacking.

And that's easy to understand when, if you have like a corporation like an Army base, and you have CEOs and vice presidents coming and going every few months, because that's basically what it is. A lot of – the whole place is pretty much stacked with wounded veterans, wounded officers and uncommissioned officers. And they're coming and going at different times.

And whoever's in charge has their way of doing things. And when they leave, someone else has their way of doing things. And things get shifted around and soldiers get, you know, lost in the cracks.

DOEBELE: So, what happened in November, then, of 2005?

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: Where did you go?

ORESKOVIC: I came straight home. It was actually my dad's birthday. So, I came home, and stayed at home for like a month or two. And then I started to work with the VA, getting my claim filed and getting my benefits, and transferring all my paperwork and stuff back here to Oregon.

DOEBELE: What was it like coming home?

ORESKOVIC: It was OK. I'd been home a couple times previous, you know, to visit for a couple of weeks. But this was the first time in about three-and-a-half years that I'd actually been home for good, or for an extended period of time that would be longer than a week.

DOEBELE: How did people react to you?

ORESKOVIC: Well, for the most part people, you know – my family members loved having me back, you know. And it was really good. Got a lot of people coming up saying “thank you,” and stuff like that. And a lot of questions. You know, it's usually how it goes.

So, overall, it's been mostly a positive experience.

DOEBELE: How did you handle the questions?

ORESKOVIC: OK. I mean, it's – I try to be as polite as possible, but there are times where it's like they don't – people don't even really understand what they're asking, you know. We don't get the questions like the Vietnam veterans did, you know – how many people did you kill, or anything like that.

We got questions like, well, how long – you know, “How was it over there?”

And it's like, “Well, how was 2004 for your?”

You know, how do you expect me to explain an entire year of my life in 30 seconds? And I don't think that people understand what they're asking sometimes.

DOEBELE: How do they react to your missing arm?

ORESKOVIC: For the most part, nowadays, you know, it's kind of normal. There's a lot of other veterans around the Eugene-Springfield area where I live that are kind of missing limbs, whether it be their leg or their arm. For the most part, people don't stare directly, but they kind of, you know, glance as the walk back.

And kids are like, “Oh, what happened?”

And, you know, so I get most of the comments from them.

DOEBELE: From kids.

ORESKOVIC: Yes. And I play with them, too. I tell them this is what happens when you don't eat your vegetables. Your arms just fall off.

DOEBELE: Tell me ...

ORESKOVIC: I have a bad sense of humor sometimes.

(LAUGHTER)

DOEBELE: Your parents ...

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: ... how did they get used to having you back again?

ORESKOVIC: Well, my dad stayed with me at Walter Reed for about six months. So, I was in really bad shape. I sustained two concussions while I was in Iraq, so I had short-term memory loss. I still do. It makes it difficult in school.

But he stayed with me, because I couldn't remember doctors' names, appointments, stuff like that. And so, he'd help me out and remind me a little bit and help me, you know, get all my claims filed.

Because originally, the Army and the VA had me down as non-service connected for having my arm missing. So ...

DOEBELE: How did that – well, how did that happen?

ORESKOVIC: I'd like to know that, too. But luckily we got it fixed, and ...

DOEBELE: Was that just one of those administrative problems?

ORESKOVIC: Yes. It's one of those administrative things.

DOEBELE: And when your father was there, he lived with – in the same house that you did?

ORESKOVIC: It's actually kind of like a hotel, a converted hotel room that they have on base. So, there's two beds in a hotel room. And he stayed in one and I stayed in the other. And he flew back home to help take care of my mom, who's still very sick, and my sister, and stuff like that.

DOEBELE: I remember talking about your mom being ill. What has happened to her in the last ...

ORESKOVIC: She's now regressed a little bit more than she was. She has a hard time even leaving the house, and, you know, making it to appointments. A lot of depression has set in, because of her fibromyalgia and multiple sclerosis.

DOEBELE: Do you think what happened to you had any impact on either the depression or her general, overall health?

ORESKOVIC: I think so. Because she was really, you know – she was in that state when I lost my arm originally, and it was very hard for her to actually travel. She feels like she wasn't able to take care of her son and, you know, the whole motherly instinct.

She feels like she kind of failed in some regards, no matter how many times I tell her that, you know, it was OK, and I was fine. You know, she's taken it really hard. I think she's taken it the hardest out of everybody.

DOEBELE: How old is she?

ORESKOVIC: She's about 54.

I'm sure she'll love me telling that.

(LAUGHTER)

DOEBELE: So, you came home and lived with your parents for a while, and then ...

ORESKOVIC: About a year, yes.

DOEBELE: About a year.

ORESKOVIC: It took about a year to get all my paperwork transferred from Washington, D.C., here to Oregon.

Because I had all of my exams and everything done through the Army, the VA wanted to send me through the wringer with all of their exams and appointments, which I had to drive all the way down to Roseburg to do, the majority of them. That's about an hour south of here.

DOEBELE: Well, let's talk about that, because people may not understand the two systems.

You were at Walter Reed, but what you – the doctors and everything you had there ...

ORESKOVIC: They're Army.

DOEBELE: They're Army. I mean, active ...

ORESKOVIC: Active Army, yes.

DOEBELE: So, what happens to you when you retire from the military?

ORESKOVIC: When I retired, they filled out a bunch of paperwork signing me out, and I was no longer military property, so I can grow my goatee and everything.

And they give you a plane ticket. And you pack your stuff up and you go home. And they give you a bunch of contact numbers and a big, huge, you know, file folder for the contact information, and say the first thing to do is call the VA representative when you got home.

I actually talked to a VA representative while I was still at Walter Reed. I started getting a lot of my stuff done three months before I left.

DOEBELE: So, there was some kind of transition process.

ORESKOVIC: Yes, there is.

DOEBELE: But a year is a long time.

ORESKOVIC: Yes. It was a very long time. It was very hard living with my parents, you know, for about a year. Going back to my old bedroom and, you know – it wasn't the easiest thing.

And then having appointments that were scattered out, you know, throughout the months. You know, having to drive all the way down there and do them, and drive all the way back. And not being able to go to school, because things aren't finished processing.

And so, it was very difficult at times.

DOEBELE: So, by not finish processing, does that – what do you mean by that? Does that mean you weren't getting money, or what?

ORESKOVIC: I was getting my – I was getting a little bit of the money for my rating. I had about a 70 to an 80 percent disability rating, just from the loss of my arm.

But I sustained injuries to my knees and my back, and, you know, the head trauma and the traumatic brain injuries, you know, and shrapnel in my face and my eye that were not accounted for in my VA claim.

And in order for those to be put into your claim, you have to be seen by one of their doctors, so they can say, "Yes, he is having these problems. This is as a result of his time in the military and time in combat."

DOEBELE: That doesn't sound like a year.

ORESKOVIC: You'd think so. But you also have to understand, there's only two main hospitals in Oregon – one in Portland and one in Roseburg – and there's over 200,000 veterans in Oregon.

And even though Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom veterans have priority, there's still a lot of us and, you know, there's only so many doctors.

DOEBELE: There was a time in which they were talking about allowing veterans to be able to see their private doctors, as opposed to always having to drive to a VA hospital or VA installation.

ORESKOVIC: Yes, that would be nice. It would definitely save on gas and make things a little bit easier, because I'm not the only one who's having problems conveying, you know, problems to somebody you just met, compared to a doctor that's, you know, seen it and heard it numerous times, and will help you out a little bit easier.

DOEBELE: So, at what point in time were you able then to move away, out of your family's house?

ORESKOVIC: Well, it took me a while. I was originally just going to get an apartment as soon as I came home, but Lane County, Oregon, area has a way of saying you have to have a previous rental history in order for you to get an apartment. And I've only lived with my parents or in barracks, in the Army. So, no rental history.

It didn't matter that I had my, you know, disabled, you know, money coming in and that I could pay for it, and I had \$50,000 sitting in my account. And I'd show them the account and say, "Hey, I could pay for a whole year right now."

"No, sorry. We need rental history."

So, I said, "OK. Fine. I'll go buy a house instead." So, that's what I'm looking for.

DOEBELE: So, this county is not the same county as Eugene, where it was ...

ORESKOVIC: No, this is still Lane County.

DOEBELE: It's still Lane County.

ORESKOVIC: Yes, it is.

DOEBELE: But because you were living with your parents, it didn't count.

ORESKOVIC: No, it still counted. It's just that the houses down here in Creswell are a lot cheaper than the ones in the Eugene-Springfield area.

DOEBELE: So, talk about that. How did you find this town?

ORESKOVIC: I went through Home Finders, you know, a corporation. They help find homes. I heard about it through visiting the VA clinic here in Eugene, which I go to pretty regularly, you know, for counseling.

And that's where my primary care physician is at. And, you know, I talk to my counselor, and, you know, people that keep track to see how we're doing and help us out – you know, advocates.

And they were saying, "Hey, well, you know, we use Home Finders to help veterans find houses – you know, make it a little easier on you."

So, I went through them. And a guy e-mailed me pretty much every-other day, houses that were in the area and kind of what I was looking for, and came across this one after about two months. And made an offer and, luckily, they accepted.

DOEBELE: And was there any other reason besides price that you chose this area?

ORESKOVIC: No. It's pretty much price. I've always wanted to live back in Eugene. I've loved it. I've been all over the country, you know, numerous places. And I love being here in the Eugene-Springfield-Creswell area.

DOEBELE: Because, just – so people understand, Creswell is probably how far from Springfield?

ORESKOVIC: It's about, I'd probably say 10 minutes south of Springfield.

DOEBELE: OK. And then from Springfield into Eugene?

ORESKOVIC: It's on the other side of the freeway.

DOEBELE: Oh, OK.

ORESKOVIC: The other side of I-5. So ...

DOEBELE: And then ...

ORESKOVIC: ... it's an overpass away.

DOEBELE: And then Eugene to Portland is what?

ORESKOVIC: Two hours, yes.

DOEBELE: OK. And how far are you from the ocean, from here?

ORESKOVIC: About 45 minutes to an hour, depending on what route you take.

DOEBELE: And then, the mountains?

ORESKOVIC: Forty-five minutes to an hour. So, pretty close anywhere you go.

DOEBELE: You told me in March of 2005, that being a soldier was all that you had ever wanted to do.

ORESKOVIC: Yes, it was.

DOEBELE: How do you deal with that now?

ORESKOVIC: Very difficult. That was another thing that took about a year to come to terms with, realizing that I wouldn't be able to do that anymore, and trying to figure out, what am I going to do now?

And after things were done with the VA, and my claim was in, you know, I applied for vocational rehabilitation. And they said, we're going to send you to school. OK.

It was like, "But before we send you to school, we need you to have an occupation that you want to do first."

So, and I said, "How am I supposed to do that? I don't know what I want to do."

It was like, well, you know, they suggested pick up a newspaper and go through the want ads and see what piques your interest.

And the only thing that I could think of would be a history teacher for middle school students, because I've always loved history more than anything. And I figure that's the only thing I could possibly be interested in doing.

And I went in for an interview, talked to the vocational rehabilitation people and the board, and said, "Hey, I really want to do this. I think I'd be really good at it."

And they accepted me. So, the VA's paying for me to get my master's in education through the University of Oregon to become a middle school teacher.

Of course, my aunt thinks I'm crazy.

DOEBELE: Why?

ORESKOVIC: Because she teaches high school biology and chemistry. And she thinks middle school students are the devil. And every other teacher that I've talked to thinks I'm crazy, and that I should get combat pay just for even considering it.

DOEBELE: Let's go back a little bit, so that I can understand.

You came and you moved here. Where do you go to school?

ORESKOVIC: Right now I go to Lane Community College.

DOEBELE: Which is where?

ORESKOVIC: Which is about eight minutes north of here. So, it's between Creswell and Eugene-Springfield area.

DOEBELE: And far are you away from getting your master's?

ORESKOVIC: Probably I have another three more years, three-and-a-half more years to go. I just finished my second year.

DOEBELE: What kind of classes are you taking?

ORESKOVIC: Primarily just the general requirements right now. I think I'm only a few credits away from my associates' degree.

DOEBELE: So, when you walk into a history class, do you do any kind of – are you taking anything that involves current issues, or basic historical issues that involve military history? Because you said you'd always been very interested in ...

ORESKOVIC: Yes. It was kind of interesting. My first few classes were on ancient Greco-Roman military history, and stuff like that.

And it was – you know, I had some nice discussions with one of my professors, and kind of a one-on-one thing in the middle of class sometimes, which was interesting. But for the most part, we tried to keep it in the past.

Once in a while, you know, similarities about current events would come up, and we'd talk about them for a little bit. But for the most part, it was just what was happening then.

DOEBELE: Was there some disagreement?

ORESKOVIC: A little bit, you know. But they kind of will divert to me, which is actually nice. I heard it hasn't happened a lot. You know, some professors have been known to say, "No, that's not how it is over there."

"Well, I was there for a year. I think I would know." You know, that sort of thing. But they've always been very good to me, and I haven't had any – you know, too many bad reactions.

DOEBELE: So, besides – well, first of all, what kind of help do you get at the VA besides actual medical help?

ORESKOVIC: Full medical, full dental, because I am 100 percent disabled. I know it's kind of a weird thing, but it's a rating for all my injuries that have added up. And I get dental through them.

And I also see a counselor when I need one. There's always one available, you know, if I'm having a hard time. And pretty much it.

That and, you know, an advocate for any type of problem that I may have. You know, like, hey, my check didn't come this month. What happened? They ...

DOEBELE: Has that happened?

ORESKOVIC: It hasn't happened to me, but I know it's happened to a couple of veterans.

DOEBELE: So, let me ask, just ask you what you're comfortable talking about, in terms of the counseling.

What kind of things do you get help for?

ORESKOVIC: Mostly reintegration, you know. None of us really had a – I never had a problem when I was at Walter Reed with post-traumatic stress until I left. And I think it was because I was still in a military atmosphere, where everybody could understand, we could talk to each other.

But then I came home and had nobody to talk to. Mom and dad, you know, they think of me as their little boy, and I'm not always comfortable telling them about the war stories and things that went on over there.

And so, it was nice to actually have someone to talk to. And they kind of pressured me and, you know – not my parents, you know, the VA counselors. I wouldn't say pressured as, you know, gently persuaded and kept being very persistent about it, about saying, "Hey, why don't you come in? We'll sit down and talk."

And I was like, you know, one time I just got fed up and said, "OK, fine. I'm coming in." And started talking.

And then I found out that there's actually a support group for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. And we meet once a week on Wednesdays at 4:00 at the Eugene clinic.

And we sit around for an hour-and-a-half and talk about reintegration and the problems that we may have, and how to work through them, and dealing with anger and frustration, and how – being back in the United States. Also with family and relationship focus.

DOEBELE: Has it helped?

ORESKOVIC: Oh, yes. It's helped a lot. It wasn't always successful. Been through a few relationships since being home, but I am happily engaged now. And I seem to be doing pretty well. At least that's what they say. But I'm always more harder on myself than anything.

And a lot more to work on. I still have problems.

DOEBELE: Did the – were the unsuccessful relationships have to do with your time in the military? Or ...

ORESKOVIC: I think so. A little bit of control of, you know, having things done a certain way, or not being able to – you know, I forget things a lot. I just can't remember. And saying, you know, "I'm sorry. I wish I could remember, but I've had my head blown up, you know. Can I get a little understanding?"

"Oh, you're just using that as an excuse."

So, that was kind of difficult at times. And so, mostly problems like that.

DOEBELE: You talked about being frustrated at times when you were at Walter Reed, frustrated mostly by not having an arm.

How did you make that transition? Are you still frustrated?

ORESKOVIC: Once in a while, I find myself frustrated about not being able to do stuff. But I've gotten kind of used to not having it. And I'm pretty, you know, for the most part, fully functional with the exception of not being able to lift huge boxes up on top shelves, or anything like that.

But my frustrations now mostly have to do with people, you know, that I don't always agree with, or getting cut off. Road rage is a problem for veterans. And we call it stupid people, you know, people who do stupid things, leave shopping carts in the middle of parking lots instead of putting them in the rack.

You know, that military mindset of, OK, civilians are not doing it the way we would in the military. And it gets a little frustrating at times.

DOEBELE: Do you think your expectations are too high?

ORESKOVIC: Yes. I know they're high. And I know that a lot of these are my problems and have nothing to do with people out in society. They have a right to live their lives the way they want to, and I completely agree with that.

I just have a hard time with it sometimes. And that's something that I, you know, see a counselor, and we do group therapy and work towards integrating ourselves back into society, instead of them integrating into us.

DOEBELE: As you sit with your colleagues on those Wednesday afternoons, what are the biggest problems that come up outside of relationship issues?

ORESKOVIC: Outside of relationships, are people pestering you? We don't always like being told thank you. Sometimes it's a little hard for us to take.

DOEBELE: They thank you for your service?

ORESKOVIC: Yes. You know, some of us, you know, didn't really want to go to Iraq, and had to go. And not everybody's proud of what had to be done over there. It was a war zone and it was kind of difficult to talk about.

And thank you for going to war is kind of a hard thing for some veterans to swallow.

DOEBELE: Do the majority of the men – are they all men ...

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: ... sitting around there agree or disagree with going into Iraq?

ORESKOVIC: I'd probably say the majority of them kind of agree, but it's more like a 75-25 thing.

DOEBELE: And you were very supportive, or very gung-ho about being there. Has your whole idea ...

ORESKOVIC: Oh, yes. Yes, it has changed.

DOEBELE: You didn't even get the question asked.

ORESKOVIC: No, no.

DOEBELE: You knew where I was going.

ORESKOVIC: Yes, I know exactly where you're going.

You know, being a little bit more educated on what has been going on, I believe, you know – I like peace as much as everybody else, but it's not really the world we live in. And Americans just are not ready to deal with an actual war.

We had that in the beginning, and partway through my tour it turned into a police action. And then it got drawn out, and it's gotten worse and worse.

And after being back home and seeing the way the media has portrayed it, and then talking to my friends that are still over there in Iraq, you know, I'm frustrated that they're not being allowed to do their jobs the way they were trained. And they have so much stuff expected of them, and being lied about going over there.

And the lack of backbone by both parties in terms of bringing soldiers home.

I'm a firm believer in not only term limits, but I think we should wipe the slate clean and start off with new representation on both sides of the Senate and Congress, because I think they've turned this into a quagmire of crap. And I don't think any of them is going to put their own jobs on the line to bring soldiers home, which I think is, you know, time to happen.

DOEBELE: It is time to happen?

ORESKOVIC: Yes, I believe so. It's not going anywhere, and it's just getting worse. And ...

DOEBELE: Would that mean, though, a loss? Would be it lost Iraq? And does that matter?

ORESKOVIC: For my friends, I don't think it matters. You know, nobody cares. We went over there for each other, you know. We all had kind of ideas that we were kind of fed. And some of us still believe in those ideas.

And we did help. I'm not going to lie. We helped a lot of people over there.

But now, it's – you know, it's a lot different now than it was when I was over there.

DOEBELE: What are they telling – what are your friends telling you that are over there?

ORESKOVIC: It's just the same old stuff. They go out. They try to help. They get attacked. It's not as positive as it was before.

And now it's turned into a civil war, and you can't fight a civil war when two people are trying to kill themselves. And people don't have an understanding that these people have been at war for thousands of years. And it's not going to end any time soon.

And we're definitely not going to stop it. The only way to really stop something like that is genocide, and nobody's willing to do such a thing. And I don't think it's the right thing to do, either.

DOEBELE: You told me that, in 2005, that you thought that possibly the Iraqis were wanting too much from us.

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: Do you still feel that way?

ORESKOVIC: From what I've been told, yes, that they want things still handed to them. I've talked to some of my friends that are still over there, and they've said that, you know, it was just the way it was when we were over there the last time, is that want things pretty much done for them. They don't really want to do it.

I think evidence that has very clearly shown that their military is still not up and running after, what, five years of being there now? And it's – I don't see it getting any better any time soon.

DOEBELE: What do you mean, get up and running?

ORESKOVIC: They're not very functional. You know, they don't – they say in the news that Iraqis took the lead in certain patrols or certain operations. But in honesty, you know, that doesn't happen. We're still the ones doing the majority of the work over there.

DOEBELE: You were very critical of the media when we talked in 2005 also.

ORESKOVIC: It hasn't gotten any better.

DOEBELE: So, if you were able to talk to – to say what you wanted to the media about this war, what would you say to them?

ORESKOVIC: Try focusing on other things besides body counts.

DOEBELE: Like what?

ORESKOVIC: Find out how many schools were actually built, how many small villages are up and running with water and power, you know. How many people have been saved in some of the Kurdish areas from what was happening to them before?

A lot more infrastructure than “five soldiers died today in a roadside bomb.” Yes, we get that. I'm not saying don't cover it and you shouldn't cover it. Of course, you should cover it.

But let's get both sides and all angles of it than what's just going on in Baghdad.

DOEBELE: Your buddies that you're talking about who are over there, are they in your unit? Or ...

ORESKOVIC: Some of them are. Some of them are in other units.

DOEBELE: So, tell me about the ones that were in your unit, that came back here and then went back.

ORESKOVIC: Yes, after about a year they were rotated back to Iraq.

DOEBELE: And how often do you get to talk to them?

ORESKOVIC: Very frequently.

DOEBELE: How?

ORESKOVIC: Mostly through MySpace or occasionally through e-mails, you know. I'll talk to one of them at a time for a couple of minutes or so on e-mail, and then they have to go.

DOEBELE: What do you think – what do you try to tell them, not in terms of the war. But do you have something that you try to get across to them every time you talk to them?

ORESKOVIC: Don't worry about anything else except your own safety. I'm at the point now where I don't really care what goes on in Iraq. I just want them to come home. I want them to be safe, do whatever it takes to get home.

DOEBELE: Now, I remember you saying that you lost your squad leader ...

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: ... in the same bomb – in the same ...

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: ... accident that you – accident. (INAUDIBLE).

ORESKOVIC: It wasn't really an accident. More like an incident.

DOEBELE: No, (INAUDIBLE). Incident?

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: I'm not sure exactly what to call it.

Have there been others that you've lost since ...

ORESKOVIC: No. Actually, surprisingly, there haven't been, so far. You know, God willing, that they'll still be safe.

DOEBELE: You guys were doing Stryker ...

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: ... you were in the Stryker, that they're still doing that?

ORESKOVIC: Oh, yes. Yes. There's a lot more units that are Stryker operational now.

DOEBELE: I remember you talking about how much you were trained in that area.

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: Will there ever be any use for that training ...

ORESKOVIC: Oh, in the civilian world?

DOEBELE: ... all that training in your life?

ORESKOVIC: Not so much. There's no real job, you know, in civilian life for a person who is a reconnaissance team leader or a gunner, you know, or a dismount member. Unless you're working in the police in a SWAT unit, or something like that, there's really no use for it. So, I had to let that go.

And a way that I kind of use some of the things that I've learned is, I've joined the Lane County search and rescue program. So, I work with them, and I get calls out, and I go help and volunteer to go find people when they're lost.

So, it's a way for me to use my wilderness and land navigation and survival skills, you know, that are taught in the military, to help out in my community.

DOEBELE: Have you had situations like that?

ORESKOVIC: Oh, yes. Yes. I called out, actually, Sunday evening. Monday was finals. I had two finals at 8:00 a.m., one at 8:00 and one at 10:00. And I got a call at 11:30 at night for a motorcyclist that was missing, about an hour outside Oakridge, an hour out here over by the Oakridge area.

And left there at 11:30. And I didn't get back till like 3:30, 4:00 in the morning. Slept for a couple of hours and went and did my final exams.

He was safe.

DOEBELE: You found him.

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: You also talked about that you didn't know at the time whether you were going to leave the military. You hadn't made up your mind.

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: Obviously, you did make up your mind. Tell me about that transition? How did you make that decision?

ORESKOVIC: Sitting down with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, having dinner with them at the Pentagon, and saying, I want to go back to my unit, him saying, it's probably not going to happen. You know, losing your arm, it's very hard. You'd be probably considered more of a liability, you know.

So, they said, "We want to keep you in the Army." But as for going back to a combat line unit, that was pretty much almost out of the question.

I've heard of a few guys trying it, going back, but those were mostly guys that have lost legs. You use your hands more than you lose your legs, you know, for work – in that line of work, anyway.

And I didn't feel like sitting behind a desk. I figure, if I'm going to sit behind a desk, I might as well get out and make 10 times as much, and have my weekends and have vacation time, and dress how I want.

DOEBELE: So, actually, being in the military was not the key for you. Just being in military ...

ORESKOVIC: It was. But there was a very – I noticed a very big difference, and the difference between combat arms in the military and the rest of it. There's a kind of camaraderie and discipline and honor and loyalty that isn't really shared outside of combat arms, outside of the infantry or, you know, the cavalry or the artillery or in reconnaissance. It's a lot different.

DOEBELE: So, besides the guys who you talk to in Iraq, what about the ones that have come back and have stayed in the United States? What kind of contact do you have?

ORESKOVIC: Oh, I still talk to them pretty regularly, you know. Maybe a couple times a month, you know, I'll go up and visit them or they'll come down here and visit me, you know, have barbecues, stuff like that.

DOEBELE: And where do you go?

ORESKOVIC: Either up to the Fort Lewis area, the Tacoma, Washington, area, where some of them still live. And I have a friend that lives in Lebanon, which is about 45 minutes north of Eugene.

DOEBELE: And what kind of problems are they having?

ORESKOVIC: I'm actually lucky, believe it or not. Because my injury was so severe, there's a lot of people that are willing to help me. And because I was infantry, there's a lot of, I guess you would say "evidence" of me being injured in Iraq, or having post-traumatic stress.

You know, I'm infantry. Therefore, I got a Purple Heart. Everybody gets a Purple Heart if you're wounded.

Or we have our combat infantry badge that we're presented for going into combat. A lot of other combat MOSes don't really have those, so it's kind of hard to prove that they were in combat.

And a lot of them have had a hard time. Their claims have been denied saying, "Oh, you weren't in combat. You have no way of proving it."

“Well, I was there. Here’s my affidavit. I have these problems.” And it’s been a long process for some of them.

DOEBELE: And how do they prove that?

ORESKOVIC: They try with statements, sworn statements by people that they were there with. And they just keep, you know, refiling. They try to bring in pictures, if they can, or video footage, or stuff like that.

But it’s kind of hard, you know, to prove, especially if you weren’t actually wounded in combat, if you did not get a Purple Heart or you don’t have a CIB – a combat infantry badge – or a combat medical badge to prove that you were in combat.

DOEBELE: So, actually, losing your arm made it easier for you to ...

ORESKOVIC: A little bit, yes.

DOEBELE: ... to get your benefits?

ORESKOVIC: Because there’s a physical sign that I was in combat.

DOEBELE: If you’re comfortable, how much money do you get from the federal government every month?

ORESKOVIC: Enough, to the point where I can live comfortably, you know, for the most part, and do the things that I would like to do in my free time.

I mean, I’m not rich by any standard. But my bills are paid on time, and I’m able to go on like hiking trips or go camping during the summer, and go to the coast on the weekends.

And gas prices haven’t made that much easier. It’s actually been a little harder to do those sort of things. But, you know.

DOEBELE: It’s tax-free.

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: And do you get cost-of-living increase?

ORESKOVIC: I don’t get a – I’m not quite sure on that. I know that the VA pays for me to go to school through Chapter 31. And I’m sure you’ll be able to find out more information on it.

But they give you \$500 pretty much to live on if you’re single, and a little bit more if you’re married. That’s to cover gas and food. That’s for a full-time student. That’s 12 credits or more. It breaks down into lesser amounts if you take less credits.

And they pay for school supplies, and everything like that. And that gets added onto ...

DOEBELE: In addition to the \$500 a month?

ORESKOVIC: No, that’s the \$500 – that goes on in addition to what I make through my pension.

DOEBELE: I see.

ORESKOVIC: Through my disability rating.

DOEBELE: And are there any other benefits from the federal government that you've gotten indirectly or directly that have been directly because of you being in the military?

ORESKOVIC: Not so much. You know, I have a free park pass, and stuff like that, you know, to the national parks. And a hunting license doesn't cost anything for me. I don't have to pay anything for license plates. So, stuff like that.

DOEBELE: And so, you have a disabled ...

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: ... veteran license plate?

ORESKOVIC: Yes, I do.

DOEBELE: And what – is that just like a handicapped sticker?

ORESKOVIC: No. You need to go through your doctor and go through the DMV in order to get a handicapped sticker. Just because you have a plate does not mean you can park in a handicapped space. You actually have to have the little placard that hangs in the window – which I do have.

DOEBELE: So, why have the – why have the license plate?

ORESKOVIC: Just to show people that I was a veteran. And that way, I don't have to pay for a license plate every couple of years. I don't have to pay for the sticker. It's a one-time thing.

DOEBELE: If anybody looks at the back of your vehicle, it's going to be pretty hard for them not to know that you're ...

ORESKOVIC: Yes, I have my unit name and my Purple Heart on the back of my window.

DOEBELE: Your degree of pride about that, can you talk about it?

ORESKOVIC: Yes. I'm very proud of what I did and who I served with. And if I could go back and do it again, I would.

I loved every minute of it. It sucked at times. But looking back on it, I have fond memories of the hard times that we went through. And I met some really cool and interesting people, and I had a great time.

Which is hard to say, being in a war zone, but there were things that happened there outside of combat that are great, and that will stay with you.

DOEBELE: Like what?

ORESKOVIC: You know, pranks that we'd pull on each other, or sitting down and watching a movie, you know, that's from the black market. Stuff like that.

DOEBELE: Just the camaraderie that ...

ORESKOVIC: Yes, camaraderie, you know, things that happen when people are put into stressful situations. And, you know, they bond together.

DOEBELE: Are you able to have that same kind of bond with the guys that you meet with every Wednesday?

ORESKOVIC: Yes, actually, I am. That's probably why – we're more like brothers to each other.

There's a group of us, of about four or five of us that – you know, they're all married – I'm getting there – that, you know, we have barbecues and we have dinners at each other's house. And we consider each other brothers more than we do just friends. We've gotten to know each other over the last few years.

DOEBELE: Besides helping you find this house, is there any kind of benefits that you got in terms of being able to pay for it?

ORESKOVIC: Bush passed a dismemberment bill. I think that's what it was called. I don't exactly remember. You know, \$50,000 for losing my arm that I helped use to put a down payment on it, on the house.

DOEBELE: So, it wasn't directly, but ...

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: ... you got that money.

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: And that's something that ...

ORESKOVIC: On a VA home loan, you know, 30-year fixed, you know, home loan that I get through them.

DOEBELE: And what? That makes it a lower interest rate, or what?

ORESKOVIC: Yes, I think it's like 6.25 for me.

DOEBELE: But you can get – or you used to be able to get interest rates even lower than that ...

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: ... just as civilians. But is it backed by something? I mean, do they give you special benefits if you can't make your payments, or anything like that?

ORESKOVIC: I'm not so sure about that. I just, you know, I've been able to make all my payments. And considering, because the housing market's a little bit lower here now, I'll probably end up refinancing. But we'll just see.

I'm only going to do it, if it's 30-year fixed. I'm not doing those adjusted ones that go up and down every couple of years. That's too risky.

DOEBELE: Tell me about your girlfriend.

ORESKOVIC: My fiancée?

DOEBELE: Your – yes.

ORESKOVIC: Yes. I met her a little while ago. She's actually one of my roommate's really good friends. We actually met in school. We took a self-defense class together.

I needed a P.E. credit to round out my 12 credits, and I didn't feel like taking another academic course. And I figured self-defense would be an easy course to get through, because of all my military training.

And we met there and started hanging out, and, you know, fell in love, and we're getting married.

DOEBELE: When?

ORESKOVIC: Either first part of October or the last part of September. We're still working on that.

DOEBELE: Now, you may not be surprised that your father said to me, "I wish he would have waited till his education is finished."

ORESKOVIC: Yes, he's very – my parents have always been very protective of me. And they want me to make sure I get my education out of the way and, you know, settled in. But they also realize that I don't make bad decisions, and I'm pretty levelheaded, you know, that I make things work when I want them to.

DOEBELE: Are they more protective of you now than before you got injured?

ORESKOVIC: My mom is, definitely. My mom still sees me as her, you know, four- or five-year-old son, which can be very hard at times. If I'm going out of town she says, "Well, call when you get there."

I'm like, "Mom, I fought a year in Iraq and I do search and rescue. I'm pretty sure I can handle driving to Portland."

So, it gets kind of hard sometimes. But for the most part, you know, yes, they're a little bit more protective of me now, since I've been home.

They almost lost their son, which I can understand.

DOEBELE: We also met a couple of friends of yours, who's – Jake is a vet.

ORESKOVIC: Yes, he is.

DOEBELE: And (INAUDIBLE) you here.

Who is he? And what's happened to him?

ORESKOVIC: His name is Jake Cortright. He was a veteran that I met at the little group that we – you know. And that's how I met him. It was through the group.

And one day he's like, "Hey. You want to go hunting sometime?"

I was like, "Sure. I haven't been back since I got." And we just started hanging out. And he's turned into my best friend.

But he's had a hard time. He was in Iraq through the first push, so he was there for the invasion, the 1st Armored Division. And he has yet to get a claim from the VA

He's been denied probably over a dozen times, because he can't prove that he was in combat, because he was in an armored division. There are no badges, and he was never directly wounded. But, you know, he's seen a lot and he's done a lot over there.

And because paperwork doesn't travel with you when you're in a firefight, it was hard to prove that. So, it's been very difficult for him.

DOEBELE: That's been difficult for him?

ORESKOVIC: Yes. He's – you know, he's been told by the VA that, "Hey, your stuff has come in," where he's had to quit his job in order to take in some of the benefits, you know.

And it ended up being a wrong person's file that was read to him, not his. He lives here with me, you know, while his wife works, and, you know, he gets help and keeps trying to push forward. But nothing has happened in the last three or four years for him.

And it's been very difficult and hard on him personally. He doesn't care about the money. It's just his country is not recognizing him for his service.

DOEBELE: And you decided to open up your house to him. Why?

ORESKOVIC: Well, he's like a brother to me. I can't say no to somebody that I care about. And, you know, I love him and he loves me. And I've seen him go through a lot of hard times. And I have the ability to help him right now, so that's what I'm doing.

DOEBELE: You know, you told me in 2005, that sometimes you felt like some of your buddies in the service, you were actually closer to than your family sometimes.

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: Do you still feel that way?

ORESKOVIC: A little bit, yes. I haven't talked to them as much or hung out with them as much as I've hung out with some of the guys here, because they live so far away. And I could tell through talking with some of them, that it has been kind of hard on them what has happened to me.

You know, a lot of them didn't take it very well with what happened to me. And I can tell that sometimes, you know, talking to me and hanging out with me kind of brings up some of those bad memories of what's happened. You know, they see that I don't have an arm. It's kind of an instant flashback, you know, a kind of smell that brings you back to a bad moment in your life. You know, it's kind of a trigger for them.

DOEBELE: Has that happened to you? In other instances where ...

ORESKOVIC: Yes. Yes, I've driven down the coast and saw an exact replica of the truck that blew me up. And it makes my heart stop.

And none of us like fireworks. We all get out of town for the 4th of July and go camping out in the wilderness somewhere, because they sound exactly like mortars and, you know, Ides and car bombs going off.

DOEBELE: What about television, movies?

ORESKOVIC: It's – I do a little bit better than some of the other guys.

Obviously, watching war movies, especially ones that are very accurate in their depiction of violence, is a little bit hard. So I tend to just stick with comedies more often, or just adventure movies or romantic comedies, stuff like that.

DOEBELE: One of the things we also talked about was about your pain.

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: The pain that you had. And then you mentioned – I think the word you used was "excruciating" at times.

ORESKOVIC: Yes. Yes.

DOEBELE: Do you have pain now?

ORESKOVIC: Oh, yes. Right now. Yes.

DOEBELE: And what kind of pain are you having?

ORESKOVIC: It's mostly phantom pain in my residual limb, on my left-hand side, you know.

DOEBELE: And what is phantom pain?

ORESKOVIC: It's basically the nerves in your arm are trying to send back signals to your brain. They send little pain senses back to your brain as any way of trying to connect back to what is missing. The brain is trying to send signals back down your arm. It's like, "OK, why am I not getting any response from the left hand?" You know, and do whatever it takes to get it to respond.

And so, basically, my hand feels like it's asleep and tingly, and, you know, or full of pressure. So ...

DOEBELE: But that's the way it felt three-and-a-half years go.

ORESKOVIC: Yep. Still does. Hasn't gone away.

DOEBELE: Is it going to go away?

ORESKOVIC: It depends on the veteran. I've heard from Vietnam veterans that it goes away within 30 days, some 30 years. So, it depends. There's really nothing you can do about it.

I try to move it around and massage it, and stuff like that. But it's always been with me. And obviously, landing on it or sneezing real hard, you know, hurts. Any type of drastic contraction in the muscles in that area aggravate it a little bit.

DOEBELE: Does it hurt more or less when you're wearing your prosthesis?

ORESKOVIC: More. Which is probably why I don't wear one much. I mostly just wear one for hunting or shooting or fishing or kayaking. You know, stuff like that.

DOEBELE: Is it – were you surprised when you started not wearing it as much? I mean, did you think that that ...

ORESKOVIC: I couldn't stand wearing one to begin with.

DOEBELE: Why?

ORESKOVIC: They were very uncomfortable. You know, it's very kind of claustrophobic. I'm not really a claustrophobic person, but having a harness strapped across your chest and having a bunch of weight hanging off, you know, something that's very sensitive is not very comfortable.

And why would I want to? It doesn't do anything close to what I used to do with my left arm. So, I get along better without it.

It used to upset some of the people at the rehab place.

DOEBELE: Why?

ORESKOVIC: Because I could show them how to do things one-handed that they're trying to tell me how to do with the prosthetic. I was like, well, it takes me less time to do this with laundry one-handed than it does to drape it over the prosthetic. Let's fold it again and, you know, put it away that way.

DOEBELE: You had this like, myoelectric arm ...

ORESKOVIC: Yes, they suck.

DOEBELE: ... that you were (INAUDIBLE).

ORESKOVIC: They're horrible.

DOEBELE: Why?

ORESKOVIC: Eighty-thousand dollar paperweight. Haven't used the thing since I got home.

DOEBELE: Where is it now?

ORESKOVIC: In the closet. I bring it out to like show people, maybe play with the kids on Halloween, like the wrist rotate. Because it looks exactly like my right hand, you know, that prosthetic. People from Hollywood come in and spent five hours painting it and made it look an exact replica of my hand.

DOEBELE: Is this the same arm that you had when we met you?

ORESKOVIC: Yes. Don't wear it. It's not very functional.

Can't get it wet. Can't bang it around. There's not a lot of range of movement. It just looks real.

And it's very strenuous. It's very heavy. It puts a lot of weight, and it's uncomfortable. And after you sweat, after a time of having your arm in a silicone socket, it's not very functional, either. Too much moisture for the electrodes to work.

DOEBELE: Would you propose that the government not give people prosthetics?

ORESKOVIC: No, I say get them prosthetics. Make them better.

You know, leg prosthesis has come a long way, almost to the point where it's almost like better than some of the human legs. The technology is there for them.

The technology for arm prosthetics has not been as advanced and has not come along. And it is, you know, very lacking, and they need to do a better job of it.

DOEBELE: Is that being done, do you know?

ORESKOVIC: Oh, yes. I've had offers to go down to U.C. Irvine and help design prosthetic arms and new ways of – you know, they're putting microchips inside your arm, and then fiber optics, and that sort of thing. But the technology is still a long way off.

DOEBELE: Did you go?

ORESKOVIC: I tried it out for a little bit, but financially, I couldn't afford to do something like that.

DOEBELE: So, they weren't going to pay for you to go down.

ORESKOVIC: Not really. Maybe eventually, but not right away. And I just couldn't do that.

DOEBELE: I want to go back to your dinner with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. How did that happen?

ORESKOVIC: It was a – everybody who's served (ph) (INAUDIBLE) at Walter Reed gets to go through like a – I guess you could say kind of a procession or a parade at the Pentagon, where everybody that works at the Pentagon goes to the outer ring of the Pentagon.

They line up both hallways, and you walk all the way around it. Or if you're in a wheelchair, you know, you get pushed all the way around. And kind of like a standing ovation sort of thing, you know, shaking your hand and saying thank you.

And then you go and you have lunch or dinner with the high-ranking generals that are there, and the joint chiefs. And I think the only one that was there at the time was General Clark. And Wesley Clark wasn't there, but everyone else was.

And they ...

DOEBELE: I'm sorry. Go ahead.

ORESKOVIC: And they would walk around the tables and sit down and eat with you for a little bit, and then walk down and go around in (ph) other places, and (ph) all (ph) the other veterans.

DOEBELE: Who impressed you most?

ORESKOVIC: Well, they're generals. I mean, I wouldn't say they're too impressive. I mean, they're just people, you know. I'm a very hard person to impress.

But, you know, it was kind of odd. I was a corporal at the time, and I'm sitting there, you know, with a four-star general. It was pretty cool. And at the same time, he's just a guy.

And I was doing everything that I'm supposed to do, stand at attention and do all that stuff. And he's telling me, "Oh, relax. Just sit down and eat. Don't get up for me." And, you know, "you don't salute me anymore" sort of thing.

Which was kind of nice. But at the same time, I was still, like, you know, trying to keep my military discipline bearing.

DOEBELE: What about other visitors to Walter Reed during the time – between the time that we met you and the time you left?

ORESKOVIC: Oh, you know, I met President Bush. Rumsfeld came in and sat down when I was at the hospital and said, "Hey, what do you want to talk about?"

DOEBELE: What did you say to him?

ORESKOVIC: I don't know. I was kind of a little shocked. He just kind of walked straight in and sat down, put his feet up and like, "What do you want to talk about?"

I was like, "I don't know. It's like I'm a little shocked you're here."

And so, mostly small talk, you know, stuff like that. And I met a couple of celebrities, you know, Adam Sandler and Rob Schneider came over. And they were probably the coolest people that I met while I was there.

And of course, the guys from Orange County Choppers (ph) brought all their motorcycles to Walter Reed. And you get to sit on them and talk to them, and stuff like that. And so, that was pretty interesting.

DOEBELE: What did President Bush talk to you about?

ORESKOVIC: He just wanted to see how I was doing, if there's anything I can do. And he was, you know ...

DOEBELE: Did you have any message for him?

ORESKOVIC: At the time, not really. I was a little surprised, you know, that he came in. And I was still kind of heavily medicated, so I don't even remember much of what went on. He just came in for like two minutes.

And there were four of us in the room. And it was more like a photo op sort of thing. And, you know, met him, shook his hand, took a photo. And he said, "Thank you very much," and left.

DOEBELE: What do you think of him?

ORESKOVIC: I think he could do a better job than what he's been doing.

DOEBELE: In terms of Iraq?

ORESKOVIC: In terms of everything.

DOEBELE: I'm sitting here thinking that we've spent all this time talking about Iraq. Do you sometimes feel that's all people want to talk about?

ORESKOVIC: I don't think it gets talked about enough in the right circumstances. I think the only thing that people talk about when they talk about Iraq is how many Americans are dying, and that's about it.

I think that's a small piece of the pie. And I think a lot of things are pushed under the rug that need to be kind of uncovered.

I'm a full believer in disclosure of everything, you know. Maybe that's because I'm in college now and I'm, you know, I've had my eyes opened up a little bit.

I was pretty open-minded to begin with. But, you know, for the most part there's a lot of B.S. going around when it comes to Iraq and Afghanistan. You know?

DOEBELE: You mentioned being on the painkillers. Do you still have to take painkillers?

ORESKOVIC: Not so much. I tried to get off them, you know, when I was at Walter Reed, you know, not to take them, and try to – you know, just take Motrin or ibuprofen when I have pain, when it flares up a little bit. I get migraines once in a while, but for the most part, I don't take any painkillers.

DOEBELE: Some of your colleagues have had problems with alcohol and drug abuse.

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: I mean, that's pretty evident.

Have you seen that?

ORESKOVIC: Yes. I actually – you know, actually, on the 7th of July will actually be one year sober for me. You know, tried marijuana a couple of times. Not going to lie about it. I went to Amsterdam to do it, though, so I was legal. The only reason I wanted to do it was because I could ask a cop for a light.

You know, did that. And I did some drinking at Walter Reed when I was there. I don't like alcohol, never liked the taste. But I didn't really want to deal with my issues, and I know that I had a problem when I was depressed of just wanting to escape.

And it was always free and available. So, you know, I did that for a while, till I decided I wasn't like what was going on, and didn't like how I was acting, and I made some bad choices. And took steps to fix the problem.

DOEBELE: OK. Because I remember you saying that you didn't drink ...

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: ... when we talked last time.

ORESKOVIC: I didn't. Kind of started a little bit after.

DOEBELE: And do you have a support group for that?

ORESKOVIC: I used to go to AA for a little bit, but, you know, it wasn't exactly for me. And I was pretty strong-willed about quitting. And it's easy to quit something you don't like to begin with.

So, you know, mostly just my support group through the veterans, through the VA is all I've ever really needed. And, you know, I do just fine without it. Haven't had any problems.

DOEBELE: What about your buddies, some of your other buddies?

ORESKOVIC: A couple of them have, you know, have had problems, and stuff like that. And they work on it as best they can.

I'm not going to go into too much detail about it, because that's their own personal life.

DOEBELE: So, is there ever a time in which you don't think about not having an arm?

ORESKOVIC: Not really. It's kind of always there, especially when you feel it all the time.

I've gotten used to not having it around, you know. I don't sit and go, "Oh, man. I wish I had another arm," you know. So, I'm mostly – for the most part, I – you know, 90 percent of the day I'll get through without even thinking about it much.

DOEBELE: Then you obviously, you met your fiancée with only one arm.

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: How – and others ...

ORESKOVIC: Everybody wants to know if it's going to – if it's kind of weird, or whatever?

DOEBELE: Well, we've had people that we've interviewed who – and even going back as far as the Vietnam War, who would come home and say how – that, you know, sometimes it's really difficult. Or they'd come back and there's a divorce fairly soon. They remarry.

And these are – I'm talking about people who have lost limbs ...

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: ... specifically. It's tough.

ORESKOVIC: Yes. You know, I'm not going to lie. I've had low self-esteem about losing an arm. And I've sat there like, who would ever want to be with me, you know, I only have one arm.

But we met and connected on a really deep level, and it was never an issue for her.

DOEBELE: You also said that you loved to target shoot ...

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: ... when you told us. So, what's this? You mentioned it earlier. Do you still ...

ORESKOVIC: Yes. I go to a long-range rifle range. And it's kind of like meditation for me, to relax, control my breathing, focus on something outside of whatever stresses, whether that be school or family stuff, or whatever is going on, and just relax.

DOEBELE: So, what do you want to do? What's your goals?

ORESKOVIC: My goal right now is to continue doing stuff for search and rescue. You know, working on the wedding right now, so getting that done. And, you know, starting my life with Corinne (ph). That's my fiancée's name. And finish my education and become a middle school teacher.

It's kind of my – I don't really have a lot of long-term goals. I don't want to focus too much on what's going to happen in the future. It's (ph) do (ph) what (ph), you know, is just going on right now and enjoying life the way it is, the best I can.

DOEBELE: When you walk – do you think when you walk into a classroom that you're going to have a message for people? And what middle school – what are we talking about, 15, 14?

ORESKOVIC: Basically between fifth grade and eighth grade.

DOEBELE: Oh, fifth and eighth. OK.

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: So, even younger.

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: What kind of message are you going to give them?

ORESKOVIC: I want them to – I'm not going to give them really any message about Iraq, or anything like that, or about being a veteran. You know, I'm just – teach them about being responsible. Get them to like school and history.

Because high school students have already made up their mind whether they want to go to college or just get out. Elementary students are a little, you know, too young for that. Middle school, I think, is where you need to get their attention, and get them to like stuff like that.

DOEBELE: So, what kind of military history are you reading now?

ORESKOVIC: None, really. You know, I don't read any – it's hard for me to read books. You know, I had to learn to read – not that I couldn't read, but I had a hard time to focus reading when I got back from Iraq, you know, from the injuries and stuff like that.

And I don't read at all for fun when I'm reading textbooks. I hate being told to do stuff. I still do. I hate being told to do my homework. I hate being told, you know, read this chapter. And so, I force myself to do those things.

So, it doesn't really leave a lot of time for fun reading. That's mostly done in between terms.

DOEBELE: Because you had talked about the fact that you had read so much military history.

ORESKOVIC: Yes.

DOEBELE: And that was mostly before, then, you went to Iraq.

ORESKOVIC: Yes. I've read a lot more – I've tried to move away a little bit from the military history genre. I started reading other things on – you know, I guess that, like, when you come close to dying, your eyes kind of open up to other things that are going on in the world. You're not so focused.

And so, I started – I always had a problem with organized religion, you know. Being born and raised Catholic didn't always sit well with me. I very much agree with George Carlin. You know, I was Catholic until I hit the age of reason.

Kind of, you know, offends people at times. But, hey, you know. You choose what you want to do, and I don't have a problem with that. It's just not for me. So, more of a spiritual person.

I've talked to a lot of Vietnam vets that said, you know, Zen Buddhism really helped them out. And not that I'm one, but, you know, I've read a few of their books, and that's kind of the direction that I've kind of been.

You know, stuff that interests me now, like people climbing Everest, you know, books on that. Or books on survival – anything that can help me be a better search and rescue volunteer. And stuff that I'm learning in school – you know, forest biology and things like that.

DOEBELE: You know, it's impossible to tell, but do you ever think about what your life would have been like ...

ORESKOVIC: Oh, yes.

DOEBELE: ... if this had not happened to ...

ORESKOVIC: Oh, yes. I'd be in Iraq right now. I'd probably go back for my third or fourth tour, you know. If not in a regular unit, then somewhere else, you know, in the military.

But I guarantee that I would have been there.

DOEBELE: You never ...

ORESKOVIC: I probably ...

DOEBELE: ... never have been, would be a school teacher?

ORESKOVIC: No, I never would have been a school teacher, never would have met my fiancée. You know, never would have met my best friends. So, in a way, I'm kind of happy that I lost my arm, because I never would have had the life that I have now, which isn't too bad. You know, I like it for the most part.

DOEBELE: Thanks.

ORESKOVIC: Thank you.