

## **C-SPAN INTERVIEW WITH MANUEL MENDOZA VALENCIA 2005**

CONNIE DOEBELE, C-SPAN: So, where are you from, originally?

MANUEL MENDOZA-VALENCIA, ARMY SERGEANT: Originally, I was born in Mexico where I was – lived there to about three years old. Moved here with my mom and my step dad and my sister and we've pretty much started living here since then. I was about two, three years old when I came to the states.

Ironically enough, my sister and I learned English quite quickly. So it wasn't too hard for us once we went into the school system.

DOEBELE: And what were the circumstances that your parents decided to bring you here?

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: My dad had better job offers here. He became a logger up in Mendocino County area, we live up in Anderson valley, small, small, small community. Everybody knows everybody, till to this day I still know most of the guys that come into my old job at the Redwood (ph) Drive-in and get coffee and stay there for a couple hours and just hang out there and I remember all those guys.

DOEBELE: Population?

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: Oh god, its hard to say nowadays because it has grow since the five years I've been – I left and I believe its about 2,000, 3,000, its not that very many. My graduating class was around somewhere about 47 students. So we pretty much knew everybody since kindergarten.

DOEBELE: So, where was this you hung out?

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: This was a Redwood (ph) Drive-in, I worked there for about three years. It was kind of like the slash burger joint and gas station. So, I worked there most of the summers and a couple of the during – a couple of the days during the school year. And for us, a high priced commercial area is kind of like during the summer when a lot of people come up for the vineyards, the wine testing, going up to the coast, that kind of thing, we're just a pit stop for them. I used to make pretty good money in the summer, winters it was a little iffy. But it was fun growing up there.

DOEBELE: I have seen articles written about you already, so I know this is not the first time you've been interviewed by somebody about your experiences.

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: No, not really. I think most of that came from the fact that when I got here to Walter Reed in October, when I woke up, I just happened to tell them by the way guys, my green card expired while I was in Iraq last September. They're like oh, really? So they started the process and everything and pretty much it went to the colonel and the general here at Walter Reed, and they're like, well we got to get this guy citizenship, we're not going to leave him out there, so within a couple of months, by December, they had the head guy from immigrations, I forget his name, but the came down and swore me in and my whole family was there and it was – I didn't think it was going to be that big of a deal, but I had cameras and everything on me. And later on, about a month later, I get an e-mail from some of my friends over in Iraq, they're like, hey we saw you on the AFN, I'm like, what? You saw me on AFN?

DOEBELE: Armed Forces Network?

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: Exactly. I was like, I thought it was only for the hospital channel. I'm like, OK. So, and then later on they wanted to interview me for a couple of the Hispanic channels for Univision and Telemundo and a couple of the newspaper people came up and wanted to interview me. Some of my home town newspapers and radio stations and that kind of stemmed from that too.

DOEBELE: Why hadn't you become a citizen prior to that?

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: There had been a lot of trouble with immigration at the time, just because it was changing over with a lot of the regulations since it now fell under, I believe is the national defense budget or something like that. So, there's a lot of changes in the bureaucracy, a lot of people's files go lost or misplaced. I mean I resubmitted my file a couple of times.

DOEBELE: To be a citizen.

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: To be a citizen. And then, finally, I had to send a letter signed by my colonel, my CO, saying listen, this soldier is going to Iraq, we need to suspend his paperwork until he comes back. And then, it just so happened that I came back injured and pretty much in a coma until I woke up here.

DOEBELE: Do a lot of – do very many people with green cards sign – even sign up for the military.

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: I was surprised they'd – all throughout my military life, which has been about five years now, I was stationed at Fort Irwin New York for two years, Korea for a year, and then back at Fort Irwin for a year and a half before I deployed, that I ran into a lot of people that immigrated to the states when they were little or older and they had green cards and signed up. And one of the lures is that the recruiter says it is easier for you to get your citizenship in the army, but it's actually just as bad if you were – if you aren't.

DOEBELE: Still a bureaucracy.

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: Exactly. Still a lot of paperwork and a lot of looking back through your background and everything, and I'm like, the FBI already looked into my background for security checks and all that so – I mean don't you guys talk to each other. But its kind of – they should really talk to each other a lot and there's not a lot they can help. They can only submit your paperwork and then take it from there.

DOEBELE: How old are you?

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: I just turned 24 last month.

DOEBELE: So, you've been in this country 22 years ...

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: Twenty-some odd years. Years, so – I've been here quite a while. So – I mean, I occasionally would go back home to Mexico to visit my grandparents, relatives, all through the years. And just this last – the Christmas before last, I went home and to Mexico for my last trip there before I got deployed.

DOEBELE: Your last trip ever? Or do you think you'll go back.

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: I'm going to go back, its just a question of how I'm going to – Mexico isn't so – I mean its tried and its changed a lot over the years to adapt itself for people with special needs, but its still, pretty much, you live on your own and do what you got to do and a lot of its just thinking about well, its going to be a lot harder for me to go places, see places that I've been, places that our family used to vacation at. I mean, one of the things is with my new legs, they're very sensitive to water. So, if you get them wet you might short them out or something. So, really, you've got a lot of stuff comes from the perspective like, is it raining outside, is it snowing? I mean that's a big factor here too.

DOEBELE: So, tell me about how you got injured.

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: I'm going off of what they've told me because I have totally blocked the day out. I mean, last thing I remember is going to sleep at the barracks.

DOEBELE: The night before.

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: The night before. I mean, to me it would just be – we had just finished watching a movie. I think it was Alien Versus Predator or something and I just – I was like (INAUDIBLE) going to go work out. You guys can keep using my computer to watch the DVDs and I went to sleep. The next thing I know I'm looking up in Walter Reed in ICU, the walls looking pink and seeing my mom, my dad and my uncle Freddy, and I'm like, this is not right. You guys aren't supposed to be in Iraq and I don't think they'd let you come in for any reason, so something's wrong.

And pretty much, what had happened because, I didn't find out until a month after I got out of ICU because no phones allowed, no cell phones, because it might knock out some of the sensitive instruments there. pretty much what happened was my driver and I had volunteered to do a mission, it was pretty much a – we were in 113s, A3s, which are armored personnel carriers, it's a mix between a tank and a humvee, not as much firepower, but some armor on there, not a lot, we keep telling everybody its like so we're not tanks, we cant take the damage they can. I mean – and I mean we saw a couple times, we're like oh God, they're bringing in the tank that's been fully destroyed, what the heck's going on here.

If they expect a tank to not survive that, how do they expect our vehicle to survive an attack like that. And our vehicle had sustained a lot of attacks too. I mean all of our – my whole platoon had been attacked a lot. And instance before I was – rocket – propelled grenade actually ricocheted through the driver's hatch and missed my driver and he got some shrapnel and his knee was OK, but pretty much shell shocked for a month. So we didn't let him go out for a month.

And we were like, OK, you think they might start getting the clue now. And they didn't, but I'm not the guy in charge. So, I just follow orders. As an NCR (ph) you're given orders you make sure you take them out – they get carried out and you make sure your soldiers are OK. So that time, I took a different driver and we had both volunteered for the mission and it was a simple, load the infantry up in the back, take them to a building so they can do a cordon (ph) search, which is check the whole building out for anything illegal, stuff that isn't supposed to be there and come back.

And, as we were doing that, we had dropped the inventory off in the building, we were setting up on the 360 perimeter – defensive perimeter, pretty much making sure nobody attacked them and we had to have the fire power compared to their small arms fire, like M16s and that kind of thing. And we pretty much sold – we told our LT sorry your tracts (ph) end up being late. We go ahead and took the lead and, as we took the lead, we saw a pothole in the road. Now, potholes are notorious for where an IAD is placed, any kind of explosive, so you avoid them at all costs. And so we swerved to the right. As we swerved to the right, they had placed the unexplored ordinance the right, thinking they're going to miss the pothole, might as well put it to the right.

As we did, we hit it and the explosive ordinance was so strong that it threw an armored carrier personnel up in the air three feet. And on the initial blast threw me out of the hatch as well because I was with TC, which is the track commander as well as the gunner. So, I was standing up the whole time and my driver was in his hatch.

I was thrown out of the vehicle initially and I landed face first on the ground. In the initial blast my right leg was amputated, is completely severed. And my right leg was pretty much crushed. I mean, the main artery that carries blood to your leg was destroyed. I mean I was pretty much bleeding out and once the guys got to me they turned me over and they found that I had a hole in through my armored – to my vest, and this is plated and everything, its supposed to protect you, which it did, but I still had a hole in my chest.

So, they took that off, patched me up, put a couple tourniquets on. They said I talked a little bit and I was in and out. I don't remember at all. To me it's just something I don't know if it's true or not. And, it's kind of weird too because later on I found out I had a dislocated jaw too. That it was pretty much broken and I'm like, talk with a dislocated jaw, that's pretty amazing.

And so, once I got to the medivac unit, the medivac'd me to one of the field hospitals there in Iraq where they did emergency surgery. Amputated most of my – all of my right leg actually. Closed me up. Patched me up and pretty much put me on a respirator and I had a hole in my chest that was open. They transported me along, still in Germany, I was there for about a week and then I was brought over here to Walter Reed, but I was pretty much in a coma for three weeks.

DOEBELE: Coma.

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: Yes, it was ...

DOEBELE: An induced coma for pain and ...

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: Exactly, because a couple times they would try to take me out of it, but I would wake up and try to take some of the tubing off and yank it off. So they kept me in that state for quite a while.

Finally, when I did wake up, I was off a lot of the respirators and all that kind of stuff and I could breath on my own and I woke up and that's when I saw my parents and my uncle.

DOEBELE: So what was it between the time, a month?

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: There was about – about three weeks all together. Three to four weeks all together I lost. And it is really weird, because I mean, I know that time span it's a lot and to me it just sent like – it just went like that, it was gone. I don't remember any of it. I mean, it was my first time in Europe and I don't have any recollection of it at all. I mean, I've been to Korea, I've been to Japan and I mean, I've been to Asia, my one time in Europe, I don't remember it.

So it was a little ironic, but it was something the doctors had to do to keep me alive and I fully understand that. And pretty much, when I woke up, it took about two days before my parents got up the nerve to tell me. Because they wouldn't lift me up because I was – they were still thinking I might have head rushes or something. I mean I did – been in a bed for three weeks. I'd lost about half of my muscle mass, I was very, very skinny. And when they finally lifted me up they said don't be scared of what you're going to see. And then, as they lifted me up my mom told me, sorry, you lost your legs.

And that was pretty bad. I mean, I didn't believe it at first, I was still in a state of shock and once I did see that, the sheet went completely down and all I had was a little bit of a stump, I lost it and cried for about two days. Had to get sedated a couple times it was so bad. But after a while it was like, going to have to deal with it, I'll just lean on my parents right now and see what they say. And then, about – about a week later, all together the time they've been away, Captain Sheer (ph) comes in, my physical therapist and the first thing he comes in is with Lieutenant Deplora (ph) and they're holding up some legs and they're like, so I'm a no go with your physical therapist and these are what your new legs are going to look like. So, I was like, not bad, I'm getting legs, OK.

And, I'd seen people with prosthetic legs and stuff like that, and I never thought if you lost your whole right leg you'd have a prosthetic leg, but I was very surprised they did. So that was another thing that surprised me in a good way. And I was like, OK, so you got legs, so I'll be able to walk. So, all right, let's start recovering. Let's start doing what I have to do to get better.

And it was very slow. It was at first some physical lifting your arms up, sitting up, trying to do basic things that people take for granted were very, very hard struggles for me. It took me a long time to get where I am right now.

And it's been five months now. So, its been quite an ordeal, but my doctors have said I recovered very quickly for my injuries I sustained because – I mean, my check was pretty much open for two months all together before it was closed up. And a lot of the reason had to do with I had a lot of shrapnel injuries and a lot of scar tissue that I still have to this day and its going to take years and years of recovery just to have it

somewhat healed up and I mean, I have a pretty good scar going down my abdomen and everything and it's a pretty good battle scar. And so I – its pretty cool I survived this much. It must take a lot to kill me right now.

I've looked at it that way, just tried to look at all the positives. And yes, I lost my legs, I'm getting new ones, but it will still be hard and then slowly I started to meet other people like me that had lost legs and started going to the third floor physical therapy room when I was good enough to go and started working out with everybody else, doing what I had to do, coming here to OT, just working on basic stuff and finally just saying, as long as it takes, I'm going to do it. I mean, it might be a couple years, but I'm going to do it. And ...

DOEBELE: Are there other patients here who do not have that kind of willingness to get better, or find themselves – who are in the same circumstance you are.

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: I've noticed that, but sometimes it – and a lot of it has to do with just the extent of your injuries and how much you take it. I mean, I've met a couple people in the ICU, I occasionally go back to visit some of those nursing staff on all the floors I've been and occasionally they'll ask me if I'd talk to some people and I do. I try to be – go in there and try to say, hey listen, I was in the same boat you are, it's going to get better. And trust me, it may seem hard right now but it's going to get easier. It's going to be a lot of work but its going to get easier and your life isn't going to be the same, that's for sure, but you still have it. I mean, you can't take that for granted. I mean, you had the opportunity to have your limbs for a good portion of your life, now you've got to live with not having one or another for a while.

DOEBELE: After all of the things that you have to do everyday in terms of your own life and in all your own therapy, why go and talk to these people?

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: It helps yourself. It helps yourself too because then it really puts it in perspective for you too because you're like, I've been there, I know how hard it is and you're like, I've actually done a lot for myself right now. I mean, I've had a lot of help and I've come a long way, but there's still a lot – a lot more I got to do and a lot longer that I've got to go. So, it really puts it in perspective when you have your bad days. I mean a lot of us have had really bad days sometimes. I mean, you're on so many medications when you come in. I mean, just medication to keep you calm and pain and just constant pain all the time.

You're always hurting, even with the meds, the stronger they are, only last for so long because your body adapts to it and after a while, wants it like a craving. So when your doctor starts saying you're good enough and we need to start taking you off a lot – some of these meds. You body goes in some state of shock too and you start having some of these crack addict kind of withdrawals too. People that – like heroin addicts and drug addicts that have their withdrawals you start going through that sometimes.

So they'll – I had one instance where I was – for a whole week I was cold shakes, sweating all the time, couldn't eat all that well, having constant nausea. And it was just coming off medication and its – its hard, but you have to come off of it because you can't stay on it forever. I mean, the more you stay on it, the longer you're going to be dependant on it and the more you're going to want more and stronger drugs. So you have to come off of it, not just for yourself but for your body to feel better. I mean, you can only stay so long in that dazed kind of mind confusion.

So once you do come off of them and you start feeling better, your mind starts to process things better, its not so drugged up anymore and you start thinking – and that's when you start having your bad days again too because you're like why did this happen, how did it happen, why did it happen, you're just like really questioning everything. Like, I'm a good person, why did it happen to me. I mean I never did anything extremely wrong or evil and you just try to live your life right. And you're like why did it happen. I mean – I'm Catholic, so I have a good understanding of why some things happen and my parents brought me up with a good sense of right or wrong and it's just like there's probably a better reason that this happened to me.

And I think about that sometimes, because in my lieutenant's strike that would have taken the lead and hit the IED ahead of me, I had a – my driver in there, another one of my soldiers in there as well as two other, and I think about it, they might have not survived it. How would I have felt if I'd have lost them?

So, it's really, you got to take it into perspective and see how you would have acted and maybe there's a reason for it. And you just got to think of it like that. Because if you try to put so much thought into some things they just kind of stay there forever thinking and thinking and sometimes you just need to go do it. Which is a lot of reasons why a lot of us just don't like to talk sometimes. And so it's like, I don't want to talk about that right now. It's a bad day.

DOEBELE: Do you ever blame your government?

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: Of all the people that I should blame, and I should be angry at, I don't really blame anybody because I'm the one that said, I should take the lead, I'm the one that put myself in this situation. So, it wasn't really like anybody told me to do it – anybody told me to go do this, I had to or anything. I mean, I even volunteered for the mission. So, I mean, it was pretty much all in my control, in a sense. And so it was really like I could blame people, I could blame God, but why waste my energy and time doing that when I could be using that forgetting about some stuff that I need to, talking to my therapist, or just working out and releasing some of the anger and anguish I have built up.

DOEBELE: What kind of emotional support do you get here?

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: You get some really good emotional support. You get constant counseling from – there's group counseling there every Thursday and Tuesdays, there's group that – they call it the luncheon. Pretty much you go in there and you – a whole bunch amputees and Iraqi survivors that talk to you and you talk to each other and place other stories and it helps to put it into some more of a perspective too because you're not out there by yourself. And then, just the American people have been great. I mean, it's not like Vietnam where people were coming back and getting spit at and they weren't having many people – not much of a support.

I mean I've had constant people keep – keep coming in and looking at – in on me. My rear commander, he constantly calls me to tell me how you doing, how's every, OK, you need anything? I mean Captain Barker's been great. Bower (ph) the driver that was in the (INAUDIBLE) same incident with me, he was lucky enough that he only sustained a couple third degree burns on his legs and had to get some skin grafts but he's doing a lot better. We lean on each other emotionally because we were both in this life altering situation. And my family and this American Legion, the VA, I mean volunteers here and a lot of retired veterans too, I mean that are amputees that have gone through the same things you're going, and they come in to help to talk and just, its like – they've been through it a lot longer than I have, so it helps out. This ...

DOEBELE: You get any stars coming here?

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: I don't know it's – I've had a lot of people – famous people come in to – I mean a lot of people want to help out. I mean I've met President Bush, Force Com Commander, my general, General Swam (ph) who's a commander back from Fort Irwin. I mean, the joint chief of staff, Donald Rumsfeld. I mean – I met the vice president's wife. So I've met all these people and its kind of weird, too because you're like I would have never probably met them in any other situation.

So, its kind of cool sometimes, you're like, got to put it in, OK, I've met these people, so its somewhat cool, its somewhat interesting and then its like, I'm kind of living in Washington for a while, in D.C., so you're like, I would have never thought of coming here any other time to live here, maybe taken a family trip just to see the monuments and now I've gotten close up views of the monuments no body else gets, tours of the pentagon that nobody else gets so, its interesting too in a sense.

You've got to look at it – you got to look at a lot of the positives too, I mean, if you just keep looking at the negatives, you're always going to be questioning yourself, your judgment and everything and you just really got to see it through. I mean it's – going out there and just coming in every day, doing your physical

therapy, doing your appointments, getting your x-rays, talking to your doctors, just everything that has to be done. And then, taking it every day as it goes.

I mean, there are days where you're like the pentagon trip is coming up again, want to go again. And then like, yes, sure I'll go and then that day you feel sick or something and you're like I really don't want to go so you stay in and just take care of yourself. Got to have those days where you just really take care of yourself and see how it goes.

DOEBELE: So, what's going to happen now?

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: They've asked me if I wanted to stay in, if there was a possibility, and I'm active army, so I mean this has been my job and my career for five years. And I'm like, no, its time for me to come out. Its time for me to go back to college, finish out my career. Time to go back home and – I mean I've missed out a lot too. I missed out on a lot of my little brother and sister getting raised. I haven't been there. I've been the brother that's been away. The cool brother, but been away. I haven't been there for all of their recitals, concerts or taking them to the movies or dinner and stuff like that. Stuff that the big brother and sisters are supposed to do. So, I really do have to go back home and take care of them for a while too.

I mean my sister's taking care of them great too, I mean my mom and my dad are great, but I need to be there with them for a while and just be back home for a while, really.

DOEBELE: What do you think you're going to study?

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: I'm going to be a crime scene investigator.

DOEBELE: Crime scene investigator?

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: Yes ...

DOEBELE: Why?

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: I mean, I like working for the government. I mean, I like doing something that no body else does. I mean it was pretty cool just like every time I come into the gate saying, hey I got a military ID, I can come in. and its – its kind of a cool feeling too because I mean, not a lot of people out there do the jobs that they like, they do the jobs because it will make them money, it will get them out of places and I've done that. I've gone around the world a couple times, I've been to different countries, lived around the – I mean I lived in New York and I'm from California. So, I mean its time to go back home and do something I want to do.

I mean, I was a business major and then I met some friends that I made that were crime scene investigators, that was their job in the army, civilian – civilians attached to the government working – doing that. And I was like, you guys are pretty cool. And then I was in Korea and CSI started up being a show and everything, I'm like, seems even cooler now, so why not do it. Even if it is just a lab type job, I'll be a professional and it will be something I can be proud of and something my parents and my family will be proud of that I'm doing.

I'm disabled now, but that shouldn't stop me from doing what I want to do. You know what I mean?

DOEBELE: You going to have a family? Get married?

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: Probably. As it comes along. Saying there's someone out there for everyone, I always believed that so I'll find her out there someday. I mean, sooner or later.

DOEBELE: Thank you.

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: Thank you.

DOEBELE: Appreciate it. Nice to meet you.

MENDOZA-VALENCIA: Nice to meet you.

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