

ERASMO VALLES
2005

CONNIE DOEBELE, C-SPAN: Where did you get the name Erasmo?

ERASMO VALLES: That's my father's name.

DOEBELE: Does it mean something?

VALLES: Not really, not that I know of. It's a Hispanic name. My dad, that's what his name was and he passed it along to me and that's where I got it.

DOEBELE: Where are you from?

VALLES: New Mexico, Hobbs, in the southeast corner of the state.

DOEBELE: What's it like there?

VALLES: It's nice. It's an oilfield type town base, that's the industry there. It's been growing a little bit but only about 30,000 people give or take and it's real quiet; a nice place to live; a nice place to grow up.

DOEBELE: How many years did you live there?

VALLES: All of my life pretty much. I was born in El Paso. I spent probably up until high school there, and then went to the Marine Corps.

DOEBELE: Straight to the Marine Corps out of high school.

VALLES: Yes, ma'am.

DOEBELE: And how old are you now?

VALLES: I'm 29.

DOEBELE: So you have been in the Marines for some time?

VALLES: Yes, ma'am. I was enlisted for four years. Got out, went to college, and then went into the officer program, afterwards.

DOEBELE: You're a first lieutenant, what does that mean?

VALLES: I'm a platoon commander for an infantry platoon. And pretty much in charge of moving the Marines into whatever we've got to go into.

DOEBELE: Tell me about your unit.

VALLES: My unit is two-seven second battalion seventh marines, stationed at 29 Palms, California.

DOEBELE: And what do you do?

VALLES: There, I train my men to go into combat situations, to supervise them, make sure that they're doing – their welfare is OK. That they pretty much do what they're supposed to and get them ready to go into, of course, back to Iraq or to wherever we've got to go.

DOEBELE: So your job is infantry only.

VALLES: Yes, ma'am.

DOEBELE: Meaning – what kind of combat are we talking about?

VALLES: We're talking about front line. We are pretty much the ones who go in first. We actually go on in and do combat, you know. I don't really know how to explain it that way. But, you know, we're – of course, the Marines, or the army, the infantry units, usually are the ones that will do the fighting and that's our job. We train to do that.

DOEBELE: So going to Iraq, did you have to change your philosophy?

VALLES: A little. A little.

DOEBELE: How?

VALLES: Because it wasn't like before. When the war is going on, you know, you have your objectives is to take the hill or do this. And in this situation it's totally different. We are there for more humane reasons. So, of course, we have the enemy, the insurgents coming in at us, but we also have to deal with the people who are non-combatants who we have to make sure they're OK, their welfare. Make sure it's more of a PR type thing. We've got to, you know, make sure they understand we're there to help them, not to cause them any trouble or harm.

And, of course, on the other foot, we have to, you know, seek out and find – and get rid of the insurgents, so that way it's a safer place for them and for us too.

DOEBELE: How did you get hurt?

VALLES: I was in a patrol, a mobile patrol. My Humvee ran over an anti tank mine. It hit on the passenger side underneath the wheel, which caused the Humvee to go up and threw my marines out and I was the only one pinned in. But the explosion – the blast – the force pushed the engine block and the wheel all of that into my lap crushing my legs and my feet, bilateral fractures on both legs, a compound fracture in my right – sorry my left, and a broken wrist. No spinal injuries, no head injuries, which was very lucky. All of my marines were thrown out so I had a corpsman who received shrapnel to the left shoulder, and he was back to the unit within five days. And I was the only one that was seriously injured that had to be Medivac'd out of there.

DOEBELE: And so you still had both legs when you left there.

VALLES: Yes, ma'am. I sure did.

DOEBELE: What happened?

VALLES: We – well, the first thing I saw were the Marines and sailors they got to me and pretty much saved my life. They got me ready for an ambulance that took me to our firm base which air lifted me to Baghdad. There, they kept my legs. They fought to keep them. They inserted nails into the legs. External – they're metal rods that go from the knee down to the ankle, and then pretty much closed the wounds and got me stable back to send back to the States.

From Baghdad I went to Landstuhl, Germany, where I spent another week there getting ready to come back to the States and did some surgeries there. Then back to Bethesda Naval Medical Center. From there to San Diego at Balboa. And from there different hospitals. I spent a time in VA clinic in La Jolla and also in 29 Palms, the hospital there on base.

DOEBELE: Why are you jumping around?

VALLES: Mainly because they're trying to get – probably just to spread-load people. So it won't be one hospital is stuck with – not stuck with but, you know, is having to deal with all of the casualties and it kind of spread-loads everybody closer to their units. And the closer – the more I got to the west coast, the closer and closer I got to where I was based out of and that was good because that way we can go home to our house and eventually enter home healthcare where I stayed a few months on home healthcare.

DOEBELE: So what brings you back to Walter Reed?

VALLES: My amputation. We fought to keep the legs. My right leg it's a miracle that I still have it. That we were able to save this and the foot. And the only thing – my left leg was a problem due to the infections. We got infections left, and we fought them off left – one right after the other. It was terrible.

DOEBELE: When was the amputation?

VALLES: The amputation was January 19.

DOEBELE: Just six or seven weeks ago?

VALLES: Yes, ma'am. So from March 31, from when my injury occurred to mid January, we fought to keep it. But it's probably better that we did that. I feel better about that, that we did attempt to. If not, I think it would be harder for me to deal with having it gone. Now I know – at least, I know that I fought for it and we tried to keep it and it's a little easier to deal with this.

DOEBELE: How do you explain to somebody that decision that has to be made?

VALLES: I don't think you can. It's different – I guess it's different for everyone. I'm very lucky to the fact that I got to keep my leg, and I got to, at least, try to save it. You know, you have some soldiers, marines, sailors, who wake up and it's gone, and I don't know if I would have been able to handle that. You know, being an infantry officer, my job is on my feet. And to, you know, have one missing, you automatically assume my career is over. You know, I'm no longer going to be a good use to the marine corps in that aspect. Of course, there's other avenues I could have approached.

But, I guess, the easiest way to tell someone is that, you know, you've got to take it one day at a time. Coming up to that decision you have to really think, and research and understand what you're getting into. It's kind of hard to go to get an amputation done and then change your mind the next day. So if you have the opportunity to fight to keep it and there's, you know, avenues to go to try to do that, then I suggest try to do that first.

DOEBELE: So what was the point in which you went from I'm finished fighting, I'm ready to move into an amputation?

VALLES: We had spent since March fighting infections. I was on antibiotics 24/7. I had two picc lines. I went through two picc lines one on each arm.

DOEBELE: What's a picc line?

VALLES: It's a – instead of putting an IV, what they do is they place a more permanent IV into your arm which goes directly into your system. The line can go to register above my heart, and that way it's a little safer. It can last longer. It doesn't have to be changed so much. And I had one on my left and one on my right. After one would break down, I had to switch to another. And before that, I had a central line over my heart, where they placed the antibiotics in up here on my chest. And that's not – it just wasn't a way to live for us. We spent several months fighting infections and at home. I couldn't go anywhere. Our quality

of life wasn't that great. You know, I had a son who was several months just walking around crawling around and it just wasn't fair, I don't think to him, or to me, or my wife and my other son, that we were always at home, on the couch, when I could be trying to get rehabilitated. And that's, I think, towards the end, after Christmas, I think, we finally made a decision that, you know, I think life would probably be a lot better if we went ahead and amputated.

DOEBELE: How old are your sons?

VALLES: My first is 14. And then my second is one.

DOEBELE: How does the 14 understand this?

VALLES: I believe it's real hard. At first, when I first was injured they flew me down to Bethesda it was just my wife and my youngest. We decided to keep the oldest in school in Texas with his grandmother because I didn't like the idea of having him come up and seeing me in the condition that I was. I didn't know how he'd handle that. So we kind of left him there for a few months.

Once we got back to the west coast, a few months later, we brought him back him out. And, I believe, it's hard, hospital stays, we were in the hospital all of the time. That's kind of hard for them to go out and do things. So as a 14-year-old, you know, you feel kind of trapped, I guess, in those four walls and I didn't want to do that to him. But once he got to us, I sure did miss him. And, you know, that was a big missing part of us. It was just us three and we had, you know, our oldest gone. But once we were all together, it was better. But, I think, he's handling it well. He doesn't say much about it. He asks questions, but it's not, you know, you don't see him breaking down and feeling sorry for me. It's more like how are things going? You know, are you going to be all right? Giving me a lot of support. Giving me a lot of, you know, just a pat on the back when I do something.

You know, the simplest thing, you know, walking from the one room to the next on crutches, you know, he was there to pat me on the back to say you did good. So it's very positive and very helpful especially around the house. You know, he's had to take my role in doing the lawn, you know, cleaning the cars, you know things that I would normally do on my own.

DOEBELE: Will that always be like that?

VALLES: I don't think so. I hope not. But I'm glad that he's there to help us. But, I think, I'll be able to do that stuff shortly.

DOEBELE: Do they come visit you here?

VALLES: Yes. That's the – we're staying at the Navy Lodge on Bethesda and they come over here every day with me. Today, they're just not here. I mean we home school our son. So that's why my wife and my sons are absent this morning.

DOEBELE: How – does the government pay for that? How does that work?

VALLES: Well, we pay out of our pocket for it. They don't – not that it know of. I don't know if I need to go to talk to somebody about that. But we decided it would probably be better for him to be home schooled instead of pulling him in and out of school. And we have a good program here in northern Virginia that we take him to, where he gets one-on-one tutoring.

DOEBELE: And how does the government help you have your wife and your whole family?

VALLES: They place them on temporary orders. Actually, they're invitation orders. They allow them too – they – pretty much, the Marine Corps invites them to come with me. And then they give them all per diem per day so we can have – so we can afford food and a place to stay also. And then here we also have

the Fisher House which is an organization that donates houses to the areas as in to the medical – I’m sorry to the military installations with the – near the hospitals to help out with that stuff, so it’s been pretty great having pretty much that’s covered.

DOEBELE: Do you mind turning a little bit and showing us your leg?

VALLES: Sure.

DOEBELE: Is this – what is this – is this state of the art? How do you compare this with other entities?

VALLES: Actually I’ve only – it’s weird because I’ve never paid attention to amputees and not that I didn’t you know, didn’t look or didn’t know. It’s just I never paid attention to what they had in prosthetics. I still don’t know exactly everything about them. I’m – this is my second one. My first one was made in San Diego, which they took away from me here when I got here. I guess they wanted me not to overdo it.

And as time goes buy, my leg shrank so I no longer fit in that, so they had to make me a new one. And when they made me a new one, this one seems a little more lighter than the one I had before. The foot is still the same that I got in San Diego, but it just seems a little bit more comfortable.

To compare, I really don’t know because, you know, this is new to me. But, I like it, it’s comfortable, it’s not hard to put on. It just depends on what I do.

DOEBELE: What is the green?

VALLES: The green is a liner that I place inside, and if you – I’m going to go ahead and take it off so you can see what it does. And it attaches with the screw. I place the liner on top. And I can add or subtract socks, depending on whether it shrinks or it swells and to help me fit into the socket which will, you know, make it, at least more comfortable for me or have a nice tight fit, so that way it’s not rubbing raw.

It attaches from here, this little screw goes right into a little whole down at the bottom.

DOEBELE: I see it right down through. And that keeps it ...

VALLES: And that keeps it nice and tight. It actually keeps it where it needs to be, so that way it’s not falling off.

DOEBELE: And day-to-day the size of your stump changes?

VALLES: Changes, yes, ma’am.

DOEBELE: How does that work?

VALLES: It’s – if I do a lot of – if I work out a lot, do a lot of cardiovascular workouts it changes. It shrinks. If – at night, after I’ve had it on for a while and being out and about, it will swell a little bit, and I usually ice it, or place a shrink (ph) on there to help it keep it down. And then, in the morning it’s back to a normal – not to a normal size but to a – it shrinks down to where I’m able to put in the leg.

DOEBELE: How have you dealt with the pain?

VALLES: Good, actually. Very good. I don’t like to use any kind of pain medication. I just never had been. I just never liked it. As far as I can get off them the better. But I’m not taking any pain medication at all.

DOEBELE: None.

VALLES: None at all. None. Just a multi vitamin.

DOEBELE: How long will you be here?

VALLES: Probably about two or three months is what I figure.

DOEBELE: And that is for what?

VALLES: That's so I can get – be able to walk without crutches and cane, so I can learn how to use this properly. Also, I have issues with my right leg and my right foot that I'm working on also that is going to prevent me from walking right away.

The time that I'm going to spend here is going to be spent on getting up and walking.

DOEBELE: And then what?

VALLES: And then back to the Marine Corps, hopefully. It just depends on, you know, I had – I don't have – I'm not really a clue what I'm going to go through after this because I'm taking it one step at a time. I know I would like to return to the Marine Corps. And I don't know if I'm going to be an infantry officer again, but due to my right foot, but I'd like to finish out.

DOEBELE: Your situation is a little bit different. From others we have talked to and the fact that you're not 22, you're 29.

VALLES: No, I'm 29.

DOEBELE: You're married, you have two kids.

VALLES: Yes, ma'am.

DOEBELE: How does that – when you see other amputees around here, is it different losing a limb at 29 than earlier?

VALLES: I think it's a lot easier, maybe. At 21, at 18, 20, 19, 20, I mean you're young and you're really athletic and you're always out and about and you're always doing things. And, I think, it's a lot harder for the younger guys to get it done, just because it's, you know, it takes their mobilization away.

As an older father of two it's easier because I had that family support system. I had my wife who's always there with me, you know, who's gone through this double what I've gone through just because, you know, she's my wife, and she's had to do what she's had to do.

But, I think, it's easier for me being a father and a husband and older because, I think, I can handle it better, I think. Of course, the young guys here, they're excellent. I mean they're up and running and they get right up on it and before you know it they're out of here. And that's the good thing about being young, you heal faster. But, I think, emotionally, I think it's better that it happened now than probably before.

DOEBELE: How does the government deal with paying someone in your position?

VALLES: The same.

DOEBELE: You earn full active duty pay?

VALLES: I'm still active duty. Yes, ma'am. I still get active duty pay. I still get everything I would if I was active, which I still am active.

DOEBELE: Do you lose your combat duty pay? Or was there combat duty pay?

VALLES: No, ma'am. Once you come back you do, you lose your – because you're no longer in theater. But while I was in the hospital I was getting combat pay. So we – they do take care of us. They do take care of us. And, you know, the great thing about being in the service is that, you know, there's no workman's comp. There's no dealing with social security, there's nothing like that. You're just – you're a marine, you're a marine, you're a soldier, you're a soldier, you're still on contract. You're still getting paid. My temporary duty assignment is right here at this hospital. So I'm being paid to be here. This is my duty station for a temporary time. So they take care of us, the Marine Corps takes good care of us.

DOEBELE: Have any contact with the guys who were with you that day?

VALLES: Yes, ma'am, all of the time.

DOEBELE: Really?

VALLES: Yes, ma'am. They – I love them like kids. They're – I call them my children. They're a great bunch of 18, 19, 20-year-old kids that when the time came they took up the ball and ran with it and it's amazing, you know, how our youth, you know, does what they do, 18, 19-year-old kids that are sitting right next to me. You know, they're the ones patching me up, you know, getting me ready for the ambulance to take me away. Holding my hand, telling me, sir you're going to be all right. We got you. You know those are – you know, I can't say anything more about them other than, you know, they're in my heart. And –

DOEBELE: When you read the papers here and watch television about the news of what's going on in Iraq and the American response to it, after you're back here, what's your reaction?

VALLES: At first, when I first came back I watched the news and I stopped watching the news just because I wasn't there, and I didn't have the time. I'm like well, they have a story right, but then they don't have the story right. You know, I don't – you know, it was kind of an issue I didn't want to watch the news. After a while, I went back to watching the news and hearing people. And one of the big issues was that people were complaining, you know.

I remember, about a few years my wife and I were watching TV and they had a woman come up in front of an army base come up and say something like her husband didn't sign up for this. And it kind of offended us. We were – you know, how can you say that? If your husband to sign up to go somewhere, not – you know not to anywhere combat driven, but, you know, if we're going to go, if we're going to go. If you're wearing the uniform you signed up and you knew the risks. And that was one of the issues that we had trouble with, dealing with people that were upset because their husbands had to deploy or they were upset because they had to go. You know, you sign the contract. You put the uniform on. You should – if you're willing to take the G.I. Bill, then you should be willing to do what you've got to do. Now, that's not everybody, but that's, you know, what we saw on the news that we were like, I can't believe this, you know, come on guys. You know, wake up and smell the coffee because this ain't right.

And one story that we were – we found some unexploded ordinance one time and – in this area about 500 meters. It was a square about 500 meters. And there were about three or four areas that had unexploded ordinance. And we found it. We kind of made a perimeter and we called EOD to come out and take care of it. Two little kids came up to our perimeter, probably 9 and 10. And they were very curious, what are we doing, what's going on, who are you guys, and we had an interpreter who kind of explained to them what's going on. And they detonated one of the areas without – the information either didn't get to me fast enough or they didn't tell us. And these two kids grabbed on to this interpreter and they're crying and shaking and real afraid. And I told the interpreter tell them we did this, we caused them. You know, it's OK, it's not the bad guy, it's us. We're doing it so it's OK for them to be out there, OK. We're trying to

take care of it for them. And they kind of settled down. I have them Jolly Ranchers that I had and they calmed down. And they were OK. And then they ran away when their mother was calling them.

But I turnaround and I told my marines, if anybody every asks you that question about whether we belong here, whether we need to be here, you know, about the politics, about anything negative about you having to be here, you remember this day. And you remember that and we were here not just because it's a political issue and not because somebody told us to be here, it's because these kids need a backyard to play in. And that's all of the justification that we need to be here and that's the only justification that you need to have to anybody who asks you that question.

And I think that's probably one of the – that's probably the best day I had out there, to see those two kids and realize that, you know what, what I'm doing here isn't wrong, isn't bad, it's needed. I'm needed here.

DOEBELE: Did you have any anti-American experience there?

VALLES: Not too much, ma'am. When we drove we had some rocks thrown at us a couple of times, but we don't know, you know, it could have been kids, it could have been anything. But that's about the majority of it. We didn't really face too much protests, not hardly any at all.

Some people that we meet there were pretty eager to have us there. They were happy. They mostly – you see a lot of people coming out to greet us, say hello, wave to us. Of course, you get the people who don't, but that's OK, you know, we understand. But the majority of the people were OK with us being there.

DOEBELE: Thanks a lot for your time.

VALLES: Well, thank you, ma'am. I appreciate it.

DOEBELE: Sure.

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