

INTERVIEW WITH ERASMO VALLES

2008

CONNIE DOEBELE, C-SPAN HOST: Erasmo Valles, it's been three years – it was a little over three years since we last talked with you. What's happened to you after March of 2005 when we last spoke?

ERASMO VALLES, IRAQ WAR VETERAN: Well, after March of 2005 I was still recovering and rehabbing at Walter Reed and I decided to return back to 29 Palms in May. My unit was going back to Iraq, and I wanted to do something to you know to be a part of that. I didn't want to be stuck somewhere where they were going to Iraq.

So I decided to talk to my commander and told him you know I wanted to do something. And so they made me the family readiness officer for the battalion, and I was in charge of the remaining behind element of the battalion while they went to Iraq.

DOEBELE: What is that and how does it work?

VALLES: Well, they tend to leave a small element of the unit back in the states to handle liaison with the families and also sometimes we have Marines who are unable to deploy for medical reasons or different other reasons. And it gives the unit commander a liaison back on base to anything they need to get done back in the you know back in the rear while they're out doing their job.

So that I – that's the job they wanted to give me, and I was happy to take it. And also it gave me a chance to serve them as the way they served me. So I had a lot of – I guess a loyalty issue to my unit and then also I wanted to be a part of what they were doing out there.

DOEBELE: Does that mean you might have worked with wives who were – or members of your unit were killed or injured?

VALLES: Yes, ma'am. My – actually as the family readiness officer, I was not in charge but placed as an advisory role to the RK (ph) volunteers, which is a network of spouses that do pretty much take care of each other while we're deployed.

And dealing with that, I spent a lot of time with the spouses, a lot of time with all the different families, and even the outside – not just the immediate families but the you know the little distant families, the moms and dads, uncles, aunts and grandmothers and the people that I would keep informed of what was going on.

And then I was their liaison, too. They'd contact me saying, "Hey, I need to find out you know where Johnny is or how he's doing," and you know, or he hasn't called so I send an e-mail saying, "Hey, you know find him. Let him know to call mom."

You know, so it was a neat experience dealing with the families. And I saw a total different side of the Marine Corps. And being on that side of it I saw like what spouses and what the families had to deal with and go through. I never always thought I had the harder part leaving my family and you know what normalcy was there was no longer you know because I was gone.

But you always think admission, I had to do this, I have to do that. I'm in combat or in somewhere away that life goes on here. But it does in a different way. And I got an opportunity to see that that I probably would have never really understood unless I went through it.

So I have a lot of respect for the spouses, the children, the moms, the dads, the support network that we have when we go out there.

DOEBELE: And the support network is all private, right? Does the government sponsor any support network?

VALLES: Oh, they have different organizations. One source that the military has, it's kind of a telephone call, a way for you know I need help in different things. So there is avenues and organizations to go to within the government.

But it seems to work better when it's within the unit and they see a face to you know whatever the problem might be. They know who – that they can go to somebody here on base that's just a few doors down or you know at the office that they can take care of whatever the deal is.

So I think it tends to work better when it's that close and personal than you know just a hotline to call and you know hopefully you get an answer.

DOEBELE: Now, you were a platoon leader...

VALLES: Yes, ma'am.

DOEBELE: ...is that correct, when you were in Iraq? And how – so you were an officer. Do many officers from the unit stay back?

VALLES: Not really. At one time I think it was just myself and another officer. Medical issues, family issues, whatever the situation might be that they are called to not deploy. So at the time it was just myself and a fellow officer and a staff of, let's say, about 10 or 15 Marines that were helping me out with all this.

And then I had of course the rest of the Marines. At the moment I spent about 100 – I think it was 100 Marines that were either on their way out of the Marine Corps, medical issues or non or for whatever reason they couldn't deploy. I kind of had to corral them and make sure they were going to do what they were supposed to do.

And so it ended up being a company sized element stayed behind. And that happens just because you know we have people that are on their way out of the Marine Corps or going to another school or not – don't have enough time in the unit to be pulled to go do a deployment.

DOEBELE: I remember in my earlier conversation that you called the soldiers that you watched over, "My boys."

VALLES: Yes, ma'am. They were – and they still are. You don't – I don't think you ever lose that connection with the men that you serve with. And I felt that's probably the biggest part of the thing that made me want to come back and do something because I felt I was sending them back out there and I wasn't going with them.

So I really needed to do something that made me feel like I was helping them. And if it was helping their families you know I thought that would be the next best thing than standing right next to them you know doing the job.

DOEBELE: Do – what was the unit's mission when it went back over? Was it different than what your mission was when you were there?

VALLES: No, ma'am. No, ma'am. It was the same mission that we went out there to do patrols and to provide security you know trying to keep the peace. So pretty much the same – the same mission.

DOEBELE: And what did you hear from your colleagues about the differences in the Iraq that you went to and the Iraq that they went back to?

VALLES: You know, in that aspect I don't think there was much difference except that maybe a little bit more acceptance. You notice that you would see more of the gestures that they were happy that you were there. But I think they were getting used to us being there.

And in the long run eventually I guess that's what it's going to take to you know, to get them back on their feet is to keep us there for a little bit to insure that you know they have the ability to continue on and then to eventually take over themselves.

So they felt – from what they were telling me, they felt a need to be there and that things were going a little bit better for them. Of course, you hear a lot on the media. You know, you hear a lot of – sometimes for some reason the negative always comes out before the positive.

But they were doing real good out there and I know that they were happy to be doing the job that they were doing.

DOEBELE: How long were you then the family readiness officer?

VALLES: I spent nine months as a family readiness officer for the unit, starting before they deployed and once they came back. And then I was moved up from the battalion to regiment so when regiment took off. So I spent the next year after leaving Walter Reed as a family readiness officer for both the battalion and then for the regiment.

DOEBELE: And then what?

VALLES: And then after that my medical retirement came up. They decided – well, we collectively decided that it'd probably be the best thing for us to go ahead and retire just because at the time it was very – it was uncertain for us. I had great command. I had our battalion commander and our regimental commander who all the way up to division they were saying, "If you want to stay, you can."

But there was a part of me that felt that you know I don't want to be a burden to the Marine Corps. I don't want to be a burden to my men. And the last thing that I would want is to have them worried about me when they're supposed to be worrying about themselves and the mission at hand.

So there was a lot of soul searching going around in that year for Sandra and myself on what we were going to do. You know, I miss it, yes. You know, would I – I would – I love being with my family and love spending the time that we did because it wouldn't – it probably wouldn't have happened if I didn't get injured as close as we are now.

But there is – there is that part of me that wants to put my uniform back on and go back and serve my country. And I don't think I'll ever lose that. And no matter what happens, that's always going to be there and that's always going to be the strength that you know that I know that you know when need be you know if Uncle Sam, the Marine Corps, want me back, I'm here.

You know, but the truth you know being that I would never have spent as much time as I did with my family. You know, and I'm grateful for that, too. Right now I stay at home and I take care of my kids that I probably wouldn't have gotten the chance to do if this didn't happen to me.

So it's – there are mixed feelings. You know, one of them, I'm so grateful to be here with my you know my children and my wife and it's you know spending all this time with them, being involved with their daily lives. And you know Lorenzo and I learned how to walk together. He was a year and starting to walk while I was barely learning to walk with my prosthetic there at Walter Reed. And we – you know, those are memories I can't you know I wouldn't want to replace or wouldn't want to not have happened you know now that I have them.

There's a special bond that I have with my children because of that stuff. You know, so I have mixed feelings you know one being that I you know I think I'll always be a Marine no matter what. And the other being that I'm a husband, a father, first.

So I'm happy. I'm happy.

DOEBELE: So you left 29 Palm. You left the Marines, and what happened then?

VALLES: After the Marine Corps – I don't think one ever leaves the Marine Corps. I think we're always – we'll always be one. But we decided to come out to San Antonio. And the reason why is because the medical. We knew that it was – it's just a haven for medical retirees out here and then also we felt that if something goes wrong, if something you know it's probably better to be close to a military installation.

At the time, the Center for the Intrepid was being built. It was still under construction.

DOEBELE: What is that?

VALLES: The Center for the Intrepid is the amputee clinic for veterans for Sam Houston. And it's right now I believe one of two, one being Walter Reed and now here in San Antonio is where our wounded are going to learn how to use prosthetics. Great place. Great place. Couldn't – I wouldn't even know how to begin to do the wonderful things that they're doing, to explain you know the stuff that they do out there.

And it's much like Walter Reed, probably a little bit more geared towards amputees. But it's a great thing. It's a great place.

DOEBELE: So there was not a job here.

VALLES: No, ma'am.

DOEBELE: There was nothing that – it was really the medical supervision that you would get from the government, from the VA...

VALLES: Yes, ma'am.

DOEBELE: ...that brought you to San Antonio.

VALLES: Yes, ma'am. Well, we had – we liked it, also. There's always that you know – Sandra and I had vacationed – or vacationed here. For our honeymoon we came here. And so we liked the area and we were looking at Texas being you know where we probably would end up, either Texas or New Mexico. But Texas won for the medical reason.

But we had always like San Antonio. So it was – it was on the top of our list, or one of the top of the list.

DOEBELE: And how long have you been here?

VALLES: We've been here since 2006. Sandra came out before I did, so exactly two years, a little bit more than two years.

DOEBELE: And if anybody could hear the audio, they might hear a little bit of an echo. We're in a – we're in a house that doesn't have much furniture in it. What's that mean?

VALLES: Well, we're moving. We've been awarded a home in League City in the Houston area, probably just a great gift that I still feel unworthy. I feel that there's somebody out there that probably deserves it more than I do or that you know is just a blessing that just caught us off guard, overwhelmed us.

But we're being awarded a house by the Bay Area Builders Association out of League City, Texas. And they have a Web site, BABAsupportourtroops.com. And it explains a little bit what they do.

They started building homes for wounded veterans coming back from Iraq. They're on their third house right now. We're the third house. But – so they all donations and pretty much builders and contractors who got together and decided that you know this is what they wanted to do for us.

And they all donate their time, their abilities, their services, their companies. You know, whatever they do, it's either a money donation or a physical, they come out and put up the walls and the concrete and the – it's just a collective group of builders that got together and they're – I just, I don't even know how to thank them other than you know every time I see one, shake their hand and tell them thank you for such a great gift.

And God has been very, very good to us. And His light has shined on us since before this happened. And it seems like every day is just a better day.

DOEBELE: So did they – did you apply for this or did you just literally pick up the phone one day and they were on the other end of the line?

VALLES: Pretty much we were contacted and explained that if we would like to go down to Houston, Texas to talk to this committee. And we said, "Sure." And when we got down there, they explained what they were doing and that they wanted to put us as candidates for the house. We were overwhelmed. You know, we didn't think we were going to get it. We thought, "No, there's no way." Somebody – there's always somebody who needs it more than we do.

And after speaking with them and telling them what you know what had happened with us and everything that my wife and my kids had gone through for you know and after a few interviews, we were told that we were going to be the recipients of the house. And that was done in any way – it was done at Bapsies (ph) outside a pavilion that was being donated by Ted Nugent and some other donators that were out there that they actually built the pavilion out there for the guys so they could come out and relax and not have to be in the sun.

So they asked us to go down there. We went and we had no clue that they were going to introduce us as the 2008 recipients of their home. But during that ceremony, they got up and explained who they were and what they did. And they called us up saying the Valles family is the next recipients and you know overwhelmed us.

DOEBELE: What was that like, that moment?

VALLES: Oh you know I've never – we've worked for everything we've had. We always have. And to be given something like this was – I mean, it's overwhelming. I mean, I wouldn't – I think – I know I cried and Sandra did, too, but it was just to think of a gift of a home you know for something that I don't think I you know I didn't do any better than anybody else before me.

But it was just too overwhelming that I wouldn't – you know, there's no words for it. All I know is that it's just a grateful feeling to have great Americans out there who are willing to you know do this for someone like me and my family. You know, it just brings a big just a great feeling in this nation and the unity that you know people out there are willing to do so much for us. And they you know it's just – you know, it's funny, I'm lost at words even now. I can't express how I really feel about what they were doing and what they've done for people before me and hopefully for the guys and gals after me you know that they continue on.

DOEBELE: So will this – the move to Houston take you further away from the Center for the Intrepid and the VA?

VALLES: Yes. Yes. But that's OK. I'm sure the VA down there and the area's probably going to have good doctors and good medical facilities for me to go to. And I haven't talked to the VA yet in Houston, but eventually I will. And then I'll get the information I need to find out what I need to do down there.

DOEBELE: We hear sometimes of a paperwork nightmare, whatever, when military – full time military retire and go to get their health benefits from a VA, especially someone like you who needs health benefits and healthcare oversight. Did you have any problems?

VALLES: Well, I think we did. We did have some problems. And it's kind of like there's no manual written for you know exiting or being retired or going on with life after the military. Maybe that's something they – we should think about doing is giving us a plan on how to do it.

You know, we did take the classes and we were told to go talk to the VA. But it just – it took a little longer than needed, I think. But then again, in the times you know that so many of us are getting out, I think they got overwhelmed with guys coming out and trying to get their benefits done.

Thirty – what was the 30 day you know rule that they were trying to fulfill ended up being a year. So at times we struggled a little bit trying to get things done and you know turning things in and having to resubmit and it just became a paper – a paper trail of craziness.

And it gets tedious and annoying at times. But we know that they're dealing with a lot, too. So you just have to have some patience, some understanding, and know that eventually you'll get taken care of.

DOEBELE: What happened to your medical care with your leg during that time?

VALLES: Oh, they took care of me. They...

DOEBELE: So it wasn't that you weren't getting...

VALLES: ...no, no, no. Medical treatment, yes. You know, I was given a temporary status from the VA until my rating was done. But I was allowed to go in for anything. It was almost a – it was a temporary, 100 percent rating. So if anything happened, I was taken care of. You know, that was never a question.

It just – it takes a little longer to get into the VA so it's just to actually start you know getting appointments. But after that was done you know we had no problem with you know I could walk in and said, "I just need an appointment," and they would take care of me.

So medically and appointment-wise, that was fine.

DOEBELE: So what did the medical board decide?

VALLES: Oh, they decided that it was time for me to – well, my – they gave me 80 percent out of the Marine Corps disability and the VA gave me 100 percent coming out. So I was taken care of both by the Marine Corps and by the VA.

DOEBELE: So now you were...

VALLES: I'm retired – yes.

DOEBELE: ...covered 100 percent.

VALLES: Yes. 100 percent. And now actually officially medically retired from the Marine Corps.

DOEBELE: And what government benefits does that give you? Can you just click them off?

VALLES: Sure. Well, it entitles me to an ID card. I'm allowed to go on base, use the commissary, the PX, actually forever. Of course, some of the entitlements being – well, the VA pays me my disability. So I would – if I didn't have a disability then I guess the military would pay me a retirement.

So they – that comes in. And then also the tri-care benefits. So I can go either VA or to a military medical facility for treatments. So – and in the family, too. So we're – you know, we're taken care of around the board. They've got us covered.

DOEBELE: And I understand that recently your disability benefits became tax free?

VALLES: Yes. Yes.

DOEBELE: Can a family the size of yours, a family of five, live on those benefits?

VALLES: It's hard. It's very hard. My wife had to return to work. When I was first got commissioned and my wife stopped working and she kind of supported me and followed me around while we went from base to base. And she didn't have to work.

You know, and then once we were retired or we were let go, my wife – we spent another year kind of waiting. And we had a little girl in the process. And then after she was about six months, my wife decided that she needed to go back to work. And she started working to help make ends meet, of course. And right now she's a school teacher for the Pleasanton School District just south of San Antonio. And she's a special education teacher so she loves it. And she's having a great time with that.

And I'm very proud of her for what she does. And you know I think she's found her true calling. But she did have to go back to work. And I didn't really want her to at first because I kind of liked the idea that we were all at home and we were you know getting back to getting to know each other a lot better and spending so much time together.

But of course that's you know you can't have that and you've got to live, too. So it is a little difficult at first.

DOEBELE: And what have you done? I mean, are you back to work?

VALLES: No. No. I'm not. What I do is I – well, I just recently began my – to continue my education and I got into the Master's program at Ovino (ph) College, the College of the Southwest in – out of New Mexico. And I'm just awaiting to do that, get done with that and then hopefully applying different places to go back to work.

DOEBELE: Doing what? What's your specialty?

VALLES: Well, right now – well, I'm a criminal justice major, Bachelor's. I have all my life has been in some sort of criminal justice field. But being disabled now, I guess – I

wouldn't call it disabled, just being unable to fulfill the physical requirements of law enforcement – I had to look for other avenues of you know what I want to do next.

So I saw a spark in Sandra when she went to teach. And I always thought that I would want to go do something different. But I really like what – when she comes home and the feeling she has when she started working and what she does when – you know what she does, especially in special education and the feeling that she has of accomplishment.

I knew that I wanted to do something that's going to come back and give you the same fulfillment that I was in the Marine Corps also. And I think the education might be the key. I want to go – I want to continue to serve. That's what I want to do.

So I think what better way to serve than to you know to help out kids and you know maybe in the education field or maybe kind of you know a little both of the criminal justice and education field and work with kids that are troubled.

You know, I want to give back. And that's what I really want to do.

DOEBELE: How has your health fared since you left Walter Reed?

VALLES: My health has been – it's been good. Of course, dealing with a prosthetic and the different changes that you go about. You know, it's funny how you – you just can't jump out of bed like you used to. You know, and then you tend to spend a little bit more time in the morning and a little bit more time in the evening getting ready for you know for the day and ending the day.

Health wise I've been OK. I've gained a little bit of weight, but I guess that's to be expected with the loss of the continuous P/T. But my health other than that has been great. I feel good and I feel great.

DOEBELE: Is this the same leg as...

VALLES: No. No, ma'am, it's not.

DOEBELE: ...you lost?

VALLES: It's actually the third leg after from that first...

DOEBELE: From 2005?

VALLES: ...from 2005. This leg was made by the Center for Intrepid, and it's my newest leg. And I just received it about a month ago, a little bit more than a month ago. So I'm getting used to it.

And it's – the leg is more of a to be outside, different terrain. I can step on enough (ph) rocks in creek beds. If I wanted to go you know on a nature walk, I can. So the foot gives me that kind of flexibility.

DOEBELE: You know, you were kind enough to show us this sleeve and everything last time. Would you mind showing us the foot...

VALLES: Sure.

DOEBELE: ...because we're – you were – we were talking about the idea of the fact the technology is changing so much in these things.

VALLES: Yes. Sure. I don't mind. Oops.

DOEBELE: You want to take that?

VALLES: I've got to loosen it up a little bit. But the funny thing about this is I don't have to take my shoe off very often.

DOEBELE: Oh, that's true. So tell me about this.

VALLES: Well, it's the – the foot, I believe, is a flex foot. It's the next version of what I had before. And it allows me, it gives me a little bit more ankle movement and ability – it doesn't push off as much as the other foot did, but it gives me enough kick to – for the momentum of the leg.

The one before when I first had – it's funny, it was like walking on a spring and it would spring me to action you know to move up. And then I guess I needed that back then. Now it's more of a – it's a step but it doesn't spring as much and as hard.

So but it allows me to walk on different terrain. The flexibility in the foot gives me the – see you can see a little bit of movement there. It allows me to step on uneven terrain and for a longer period of time than before.

DOEBELE: The older prosthetics were very – there was no give to them at all.

VALLES: No. My first one I had no give at all other than – the one thing I really liked about it though was that spring you know because it helped me move faster. But it was very hard to walk in uneven ground and I couldn't go up a hill, do anything different. It was basically for more even terrain you know being in the town and not going out you know into the country or any kind of nature walks, which I like to do.

DOEBELE: Your earlier leg, you showed us, had a – something inside it that kept you – does this one, too?

VALLES: Yes, it does. I like the pin. You can get different – you can get different types of – you can either have a section where the leg doesn't have a pin – or you're not required to have a pin in there to lock it. Those work great.

But I found – I find it more convenient for me for the pin because my fear of losing the leg and you know...

DOEBELE: It tumbling out.

VALLES: ...exactly. So I feel more secure with the pin. But it – how it works, it – of course, I put a liner on my leg. And then at the end of it, here the screw attaches to the inside of my – of my socket there. And that's where it locks into place.

And after so many clicks, I know – this is set up for me to be able to push it in seven clicks. So I count to see how you know how many clicks I have on it when I'm putting my leg on. And after the seventh click, I know I can't go any further down so I know it's on right.

DOEBELE: And you push this right here in order to release it?

VALLES: Yes. Yes.

DOEBELE: So there is an actual release?

VALLES: Yes. The release is right here. And I don't remember if – the first one, it was a big old knob that stuck out that you know was a push button. But this the button is hidden. And it's just a real simple push and let it go.

DOEBELE: Can you move – does this move back and forth?

VALLES: No. Well, to adjust it, yes, but no, it stays firm and tight there. It – that's – the only part is I can adjust it to I guess different positions for my foot to go, of course. But other than that it doesn't move.

DOEBELE: Tell me about the sleeve.

VALLES: The sleeve – the sleeve was a – actually this is a different sleeve than before, a better sleeve. It – some tend to react with the skin and gave you I guess at times I'd get rashes on my leg because of the different – the material.

But the material, I don't know exactly what it's made out of, but it seems to be a better – I guess it doesn't give too much of an irritation to my leg. And it fits just like a sock, extremely tight. And it allows for me to place the leg on. That's all I know about it.

DOEBELE: The older prosthetics actually had a cotton sleeve, as I recall. It was just literally cotton that would come out over the...

VALLES: For my socks.

DOEBELE: ...through the – just – oh, the socks. Is that underneath your sock here or does it take that place?

VALLES: No, no, no. Actually this is what I put on before. And what you guys would have saw before was probably the level of socks that I had on. Now, a sock is kind of gives you either – it gives you more of a, I guess, a width to you leg so when it actually fits in here, it actually fits in either snug or you can release – remove a sock and it would loosen it up for you, depending on the swelling of your leg.

And I guess my leg has stopped decreasing, I guess, or stopped shrinking that I no longer need the socks to – when I wear my prosthetics because now they are able to fit it more to me rather than to my leg swelling or dealing with that. So it works better for me because I don't have to deal with socks.

But after a while your legs just – it's going to get to the size it's going to remain.

DOEBELE: Yes. You had mentioned when we talked before that it was shrinking at that time, that it was still shrinking. Now, how many – how many, or did you have, any surgeries after we saw you in 2005?

VALLES: No. No more surgeries.

DOEBELE: None.

VALLES: None after that. I had 22 surgeries leading up to the amputation and then after that it was just rehab, which was great. No more having to deal with going under the knife.

DOEBELE: Well, you had talked a lot about infections.

VALLES: Yes.

DOEBELE: Did you suffer from those after the amputation?

VALLES: No. No, after the amputation the infections went away. And it was basically the infection was concentrated in my lower limb or my left – the area that they amputated. That seemed to have been the, I guess, the worst of it. Once they removed that and I never got another symptom again, which is great.

DOEBELE: You talked at the time about how difficult the decision was since you had had your leg from – what was it March to January?

VALLES: Yes.

DOEBELE: Or from the time that you got hurt, you kept your leg – both legs – until January and then you made the decision to have your...

VALLES: Yes, ma'am. We were injured March 31, 2004. And about 12 surgeries after that they told me that they thought that it'd be better to take both legs. And I told them no. I told them I was going to fight for – I wanted to keep them. There's – that we're going to give them a good fight. And they told me that I'd go back and request – and they kind of said that I'd come back and want my legs removed. And I said, "Well, when that time comes, that time comes."

And nine months fighting infection afterwards, we got down to Christmas time and we were in New Mexico and I was still attached to an IV, this time with an actual pack that I wore 24/7 and had it for 10 weeks. We finally – and the infections weren't going away.

And we started thinking, "Well, it's going to be," and my doctors agreed. Then it goes now we're looking at it's probably going to be life or death situation so we need to make action. And collectively we decided that it's time.

So in January I opted to have my leg amputated and so I can continue on with life, too.

DOEBELE: You talked about how difficult that decision was. Do you think about that?

VALLES: You know, I think about it every day. I need to say it twice a day. You know, it's funny how you both – there's certain things in life that you will always have to deal with. And that decision – it made it easier to fight for it first. You know, I didn't want to lose my leg.

But I look at it now as you know I wouldn't be here if I didn't. And that fight that we fought those first few – those first long months you know at least I feel better about that we tried. And you know if it wasn't for this injury, it's weird how we wouldn't – I probably wouldn't be here you know talking to you guys about this and spending as much time as I do with my family.

So it's a give and take situation. You know, there's good and bad in everything.

DOEBELE: When you talk about infections, are you talking about sores on the leg or are you talking internal infections?

VALLES: It was internal. It was – what end up happening is because I was a blast victim, I received this bacteria that seems to live in the dirt in Iraq. It was called the antecenal bactor (ph). They ended up getting dirt inside my wound because it was a blast injury and it embedded pretty good in there.

After I think it was six weeks of the initial treatment, they believed they got it. And my right leg, same situation other than they had put a nail in or a metal hardware inside my

leg for it to heal. And that one was OK. It was just the left side that kept getting infected time after time again. And it was just constant battle that in the work we had to do was just eating up my – eating up the process, wouldn't let it heal, wouldn't let the bones – you know, wouldn't give them the opportunity to put the bones back in place.

And then every attempt that they put to put a metal rod in there, the rod would become infected so they had to remove it. And finally it was just a fight just to stay healthy rather than you know to stay free of the infection. And that's what prompted the amputation after that.

DOEBELE: So how long did you end up being on antibiotics 24/7?

VALLES: Afterwards?

DOEBELE: Yes.

VALLES: None. I was...

DOEBELE: I'm sorry, during that year. Yes.

VALLES: Oh, during that first year from March all the way to beginning of January.

DOEBELE: The whole time.

VALLES: The whole time.

DOEBELE: And have you had any long-term effects of getting on antibiotics that long?

VALLES: Not – no, thank God. I haven't – I haven't felt anything. You know, we were always afraid for my liver or any other kind of reaction. And then now I'm more afraid of taking any kind of antibiotics now because I think that you know that might have more of an effect later in life you know just because I was on it so long.

But I haven't had any symptoms or any effects of it, thank God. You know, I just think that God is really you know watching out for us. And then you know the decision to amputate you know was probably the best decision because I would probably still be in that situation or I probably wouldn't be here right now, so.

DOEBELE: Some of the veterans that we've talked to for this series have a lot of phantom pain and also find that they still have to take some painkillers. What was your experience?

VALLES: Phantom pain came a lot at the beginning. It was – and it was just something that I always felt that it was still there or the pain in my ankle or my foot or my toe. And it was very – it was almost – it was constant at first.

DOEBELE: Constant.

VALLES: Yes, it was constant at first. And after a few weeks and after therapy and after a while, it seemed to have gone away. And maybe I just got too used to it because I – every once in a while I still go, “Ow.” You know, for some reason my ankle hurts and I know it’s not there.

You know, and – but it’s still – even until today. I actually had some kind of pain earlier right before I took my leg off. So it’s something I’m going to have to deal with for the rest of my life. But I’m getting used to it. And I guess the severity of it, it doesn’t hurt as bad as it did before. You know, now it’s more like a numbness feeling that you know like your leg fell asleep or you sat wrong on your foot you know or a pin prick you know just something to let me know that something was there, so.

DOEBELE: Because I hear that some people who experience the phantom pain also experience it as if it was when they lost the leg.

VALLES: No.

DOEBELE: It’s excruciating pain of the leg loss.

VALLES: No, I never – I’ve never – thank God, I have never have felt that pain again. But it was just more of the sensation of it I guess wanting to feel that it’s there. And I don’t think it’s psychological but maybe it’s the – of course, the nerve endings searching for what used to – you know, for its receptors down there.

But it’s never been that.

DOEBELE: What about painkillers? How have you done with that?

VALLES: No. I’ve – as soon as I can get off them, I was off them. I told them I didn’t want to be addicted to anything. I didn’t want to go back to being dependent on that. I never liked medication to begin with. And after a while, we were like, “I think we’ve had enough.” And I’d tell my doctors, as soon as you can pull me off this stuff, please pull me off of it.

You know, I’m fortunate that you know we were able to do that. And I didn’t stick very long and I wouldn’t take them anyway. My wife would ask me, “Have you taken your stuff?” “Sure.”

But no, I tried not to. I think I'd rather deal with – and it didn't hurt as bad afterwards. So – or you get used to it after awhile. But I didn't want to become dependent of that stuff.

DOEBELE: You also talked at the time that we – in 2005, about how your right leg – your right leg was injured in all of this.

VALLES: Yes.

DOEBELE: So your right leg has to do a lot of work now. How has that – how has that healed?

VALLES: Well, it's – it's healed well. My – it's with my right foot. My right foot is – I feel like I walk on a brick. I don't have any toe movement. I don't – my ankle moves but it gets sore often.

It's funny how my prosthetic leg is now my strong leg and my right side is my weak side. And the most – the defining factor for me being retired or medically released was because of my right foot. It prevents me from running. It prevents me from doing a lot of the physical stuff that I was – you know, that now the type of prosthetics and technology allows me to do on my left, my right, because it's still my – mine, and it's still – it's unable to do any of that stuff.

So that's what – it's funny how my most disabling factor is the leg that I wanted to keep – or was able to keep.

DOEBELE: So what do doctors say about the aging process and what's going to happen to your right leg?

VALLES: Oh, eventually my doctors told me that probably the best thing was to get out of the Marine Corps because of that issue, that later in life I'm going to wear my right leg down. And eventually I'd probably end up in a wheelchair in my later life.

So I – to prolong or to – yes, prolong that from happening, I – that's one of the reasons why we opted to go ahead and retire. And so that way if I can hold on to being able to walk on my own without any use of a wheelchair or any other – any other devices then we're going to do it just because of my kids – for my kids' sake. And for me, too, of course, peace of mind.

DOEBELE: Is there any – is there ever a time which you don't think about this or that you think that your family doesn't think about this?

VALLES: You know, I think we're – I know I think about this every day. There's two times during the day that I think, one in the morning. You know, I think it's funny that

you look at it and say, you know, “Well, I’m not in Iraq,” but sometimes I think I am. You know, Iraq is always going to be on my mind because that’s where this happened.

So twice a day I remember what happened to me and I remember everything that happened after, leading up to where I’m at now. I think of it at least twice a day you know when I put my leg on and when I take it off. And I think I’ll always have that in the back of my mind.

And I know my wife – my wife probably does, too. And they’re more accepting of you know the stuff that they have to go through. Of course, it was hard you know from being the, I guess, the invincible guy that we tend to think that we are and then now kind of a – not reduced to disability but kind of held back by a disability, if you think. You know and remembering what happened and how it happened is going to be an every day part of my life.

And the good thing, my kids – well, Ty being the oldest, you know, he’s – he remembers me running and he remembers me you know being outside and playing ball or the physical stuff that we used to do. And then now Lorenzo and Tatianna, Lorenzo was only six weeks old when this happened to me. And we both learned a lot together.

And you know my physical ability to do things with them has been altered. But they’re used to it. It’s funny how they – you know, they probably wouldn’t think it was me if they saw you know my left – my real left leg you know – because they’re so used to this. And it’s funny, like, “Daddy’s leg.” Lorenzo says, “Daddy’s leg.”

And they touch it and Tatianna, I mean, 18 months, you know she’ll grab onto it and hold on to it and hit it and you know she’s just – they’re just used to it. So I think that they’re probably better dealing with it because they’ve seen it so young and not you know had to deal with that frustration that Ty had to and Sandra had to.

So I think that you know between the three of us, we’ll probably remember this for the rest of our lives. But you know what can you do. You know? You move on. You’ve got to move past. You’ve got to move past and move forward from it.

DOEBELE: You were particularly concerned about Ty when we spoke last time...

VALLES: Yes.

DOEBELE: ...when we spoke last time because he was not getting accustomed to this. And then you also were concerned because he was having to do some of the man of the house chores...

VALLES: Yes.

DOEBELE: ...and you were – didn't know whether you would be able to do them. How's that transition?

VALLES: Oh, we both share them. We share – the stuff that I can't do or days that I can't do something, Ty's usually there to do it. You know, he's 17 now so he takes a lot of the yard work responsibilities you know on his own. And we share things.

If I can – when I can go out there and do it, I'm out there with him. You know, my wife, Sandra, helps me out a lot, too. And you know little by little, we've come to the point to where we – we no longer – or I no longer feel unable to do things. I just had to adapt and overcome it and push on to the you know what, I guess, those limitations that I have to set for myself and be able to understand that you know there's only certain things I can do for so long.

You know, and now that that's you know – that's a hard heal to come – or that's a hard bridge to cross, I guess. But once you realize you know that you're – you know that you can do stuff but at a different level, it takes away that anger and that you know frustration of not being able to do the things that you did before.

DOEBELE: How old are you?

VALLES: I am 33.

DOEBELE: So you had Ty at a very young age.

VALLES: Well, actually Ty is Sandra's first born child.

DOEBELE: Yes, and...

VALLES: He is my step son but he's really my son. He's really my son.

DOEBELE: And then Lorenzo you told us about because you hadn't seen him when this happened.

VALLES: No. No. I – Sandra was nine – almost nine months pregnant, a little – well, about nine months pregnant when I left. And that was probably one of the hardest – that is probably the hardest thing I had to do is to leave her in that position. And I married a strong woman. She took care of herself and took care of the family while I went away with little to no help being you know so far from home.

And she – you know they did well. And they were able to adapt and get to what they needed to get done. And of course, Lorenzo being six weeks when this happened, I mean, you know I didn't think I was going to have the chance to ever see him, let alone you know to think Tatis (ph) would ever come. You know, and Tatis (ph) – Tatianna, my 18-month-old daughter you know I was so afraid of not ever meeting Lorenzo and you know

that I never realized, “Hey, wait a minute, you know, Tatianna would have never been born if I never came back either.”

So you know reflecting you look at you know the bigger picture of how life you know – how life is now and what has happened to us to get us to where we’re at. And you know I wouldn’t change any of it. You know, you can’t go back and you know take my leg back or not go out that night. You know, I can’t change any of that.

And you know do I really want to? Probably not. And it sounds kind of weird you know to even just to say that but you know I wouldn’t go back to change that night, to replace any of the memories that we’ve made and how we are today. I wouldn’t want to go back and change that.

So I wouldn’t risk it.

DOEBELE: With three children and everything that you do, being house husband, basically, do you have any contact with other veterans? Do you have any kind of counseling groups? Are you in any of that?

VALLES: You know, at first I was when I first got here after starting the VA process. I started to see a psychiatrist – well, not a psychiatrist but a – I went and talked to the VA about you know things you know the dreams, the feeling worthless, that kind of stuff.

And really it was a big – it almost put me in a depression you know coming out and realizing that, “Man, I could never do what I wanted to do the rest of my life. Now I have to readjust everything.” And it put me in a depressing role – in a depressant mode, I guess.

And so I talked to the VA and they got me in a group. And we – you know, we sat around and discussed things that happened to us. I mean, it wasn’t so much a PTSD group. It was more you know dealing with you know what could go on now you know what’s going to happen now.

And with the PTSD and you know on the side there so they could make sure we’re OK. And it worked. You know, it got be thinking. I had talked to and dealt with other veterans who were in – they weren’t in the similar situation but were in situations that you know like being depressed about not being in the military no more. And you got different looks and the spectrum of – I guess the different situations that have happened and you started seeing that you know it’s OK because there’s guys have dealt with this for a long time you know from you know before Vietnam era and the Gulf War and that are still dealing with stuff that I felt that you know I wasn’t going to – I’m not in a bad position.

You know, I’m actually capable of not falling into that and pulling myself out because you know it’s funny how you see – you wouldn’t want to say funny – but it’s weird how you see that there’s some people out there that are worse off. And then you come home

and realize that you know, “I’m not that bad. You know, I’m not in a position where I can’t pull away from this.”

And ever since then I – you know, I’m not in that area, I guess. You know, I still think and remember and you know reflect and deal with it. But we’re – you know, it’s not an issue.

DOEBELE: Do you have any requests for you to talk to people or other veterans or civilians ever?

VALLES: You know, I do get people that want to talk to us and find out – just this last – a few months ago, it was Sesame Street came up and did a – they were doing a – they do a video for military families to help them, especially the children, to help them with deployments.

And we were invited to talk and interview with them in Spanish – it was pretty neat – about coming home with changes and that you know things like that happen all the time. Well, not that but you know, wanting to talk to us about what had happened and what’s going on.

And you know, you guys come in to speak to us and interview then and then interview now. I mean, every time I turn around somebody wants to know something and how that happened to you. Even kids on the street – I was taking my son to a swimming lesson and one of the little girls there you know, “What happened to you?”

So you get different levels you know one being the media wanting to know what’s going on and one being you know the kids that just are you know, “Why are you different?”

And so I do get a lot of you know, “What happened to you?” which is great, too, because it helps with dealing with everything. I think I talked my way out of everything when I was first injured.

I was at Bethesda Naval Medical Center and they – I had visitors every day. Two or three different people would come in and you know generals, senators, all kinds of different people would come in and – you know, and every once in a while celebrities would come in and want to know you know, “Hey, tell your story.”

And after the first month of being there, I think I told my story so much that I was tired of hearing it. You know, and – so it works as good medicine, I guess, if you want to put it that way. Therapy.

DOEBELE: Is there any – anybody that wanted to come visit you that you didn’t want to see?

VALLES: No. I saw anybody and everybody. There were, of course, times where I wasn’t able to. But that was probably because I just got out of surgery. But any time

somebody wanted to see us, we opened the doors and let them come in. And I talked to them and you know explained my story or what had happened.

And you know just gave them the opportunity to say what they wanted to say. And it was great, too, because it gave me a sense of it. I didn't feel alone in my room, even though my wife was there you know. And that first month was kind of a – and as she puts it the best way – that I kind of was non talkative, didn't want to say anything. I was in my own little world.

And if it wasn't for visitors coming by and my wife being there to talk to me, you know I probably would have went into a shell.

So, early on I think that was taken care of by the visitors and by my wife being there and finding out about stuff.

DOEBELE: I asked you – I asked you that because two of the veterans that we've been talking to would not see Secretary Rumsfeld.

VALLES: Really? I had a great experience with him. I met him – we were asked to go down to the Pentagon. And that's while I was in Walter Reed. And when we were there, I met him, shook his hand and you know – you look at those guys in those shoes and then you look at me in mine and you know they've got a tough job, too. Not every decision that is made is going to be made to the you know to – there's always going to be drawbacks. It's not – you know, this isn't a perfect world. If it was, we wouldn't be in Iraq.

If it was a perfect world, we wouldn't need our military and we wouldn't need our government to have to step in to do things.

So – and they're people, too. You know, not – you know, I don't have you know no knowledge of what goes on in those offices other than that they're people trying to do their best to get something done. That isn't the easiest thing. How do you – you know, how do you tell America that – to give up their sons and daughters to go do something that you know that you can go to war or go do something that you know really is against our nature to do. You know, we don't want to send our children or our sons or our husbands and our wives, our daughters you know to go do something miles away.

You know, that's got to be hard on them and that's got to be hard on you know our leaders to do that. So we've got to give him a little bit of more respect. You know, and everybody up there. You know, the decisions that are being made are being made for our benefit.

Sometimes we don't agree with them or we might agree with them, depending on how it's going to swing, but they're people, too. And they – you know, if they made mistakes, they make them. If they didn't you know great for them, too. You know, I'm glad that I don't think they did anything to harm us in any way.

So to look at them – sorry, I didn't mean – to look at them and look at them in a bad light, I can't. You know, they had to make decisions that I had to make, too. You know, it's not easy being the guy with the rifle standing on the hill pointing to a direction knowing that somebody's going to not come back from it.

You know, so I kind of – at a different level or different scale – kind of you know, have the same feeling that they probably have. You know, especially when they turn on the news and you know so many more of our men and women have died or injured or something didn't go as planned or the way it should have.

So you know I just give them you know my blessing. And I know that they're doing their best and it should be good enough for everybody.

DOEBELE: Do you feel any different about America's involvement in the War in Iraq and Afghanistan than you did when you went over there?

VALLES: No. No. I had a great experience when I was over there. One situation that kind of defines my being there – and I said it then, too – is with the two little boys, that there was an area in Iraq that – or sorry, in a farm area, there was a collection of – oh, excuse me – of little farms that were together right by the Euphrates River. And these two children came up and we were actually securing that area because there was five different areas of unexplored ordinance.

And these two kids came up to us and starting asking us what we were doing. And you know right out of nowhere we – the Army exploded one, detonated one, to – before they could tell me. These two kids grabbed my interpreter and before you knew it, I realized at that moment, like, "Hey, you know these two kids didn't have a back yard." You know, these two kids had – you know, it wasn't safe for them to be out where they were out. And it was only you know a few hundred feet from where they lived.

You know, what if those were my two boys? You know, that moment is a turning point for me saying, you know, "I'm supposed to be here." You know, and I turned and told my Marines the same thing. "Guess what? If anybody ever asks you how you feel about this and what's going on, you remember this day and you remember what you did for these two boys, that even if it was for just one day, they got – they were able to play in their back yard then you know what, you did that for them." And there's nothing anybody can tell you that can take that away from you.

So as – I believe, firmly believe, that what we're doing out there is what we have to do. And it's a human issue, too. You know, we're dealing with people and lives. And you know what? If we're able to – you know, for me being there losing my leg was you know was the price I had to pay for those two little boys to have one day of safety then you know what? Sign me up again because that's how I feel about it.

So they're doing a good job and they need our support. And you know, it's funny how the times are – things take too long. You know, it's just – we're all gung ho about it at the beginning you know after the aftermath of 9/11. And then towards the later portion you know people are starting to say, "Hey, we need to pull out or we need to get out."

And you never understand that you know the guys that are doing their jobs out there you know that have died or were injured you know did we do it all in vain to pull out to have to go back again? And I would hate for my kids to be in Iraq you know doing the job that I got – I was trying to do out there.

So mixed feelings? Yes. But you know we stay the course and do what we're supposed to be doing.
Thank you.

DOEBELE: Thank you.