

HUGO GONZALES
January 26, 2006

CHARLES FERGUSON: Sir, could you tell us your name?

HUGO GONZALES: My name is Hugo Gonzales.

CHARLES FERGUSON: And can you tell us what your position was in the Army?

HUGO GONZALES: In the Army?

CHARLES FERGUSON: Yeah.

HUGO GONZALES: Well, my MOS is, uh, eh, 13 Bravo, which is actually field artillery.

CHARLES FERGUSON: And can you tell us, well, first of all, what was your job? What did you actually do?

HUGO GONZALES: Well, my, what I used to do is, uh, work on the cannon, as a cannon crew member. We are the ones, uh, responsible to deliver and manage bombshells into, in a specific area. We, we receive coordinates, and uh, through the radio. And then we place the bomb in that, in the cannon, and we shoot them.

CHARLES FERGUSON: When did you join the Army?

HUGO GONZALES: I joined the Army six years ago. That was, uh, June 2005.

CHARLES FERGUSON: No. June 2005 is not six years ago, sir.

HUGO GONZALES: Hm. Today, now seven years, I think so.

CHARLES FERGUSON: But we're in 2006.

HUGO GONZALES: Okay, let me see. I joined 2000, eh, 1995.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Nineteen ninety five.

HUGO GONZALES: Nineteen ninety five.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Ten years ago.

HUGO GONZALES: I have 10 years in the Army! I don't...someti-, I don't even think about it. June '95.

CHARLES FERGUSON: June '95.

HUGO GONZALES: June '95.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Whoa. Okay. How come you joined the Army?

HUGO GONZALES: Well, I joined the Army looking for, uh, better opportunities, for college, and for economical reasons, specifically.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Can I ask where you were born and raised.

HUGO GONZALES: I was born Dominican Republic. That's in the Caribbean.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Yeah.

HUGO GONZALES: And uh, I was raised in Puerto Rico.

CHARLES FERGUSON: And where were you living when you joined the Army?

HUGO GONZALES: Puerto Rico.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Puerto Rico. And how come you felt you had to join the Army, or wanted to join the Army, for economic reasons?

HUGO GONZALES: Well, at that point, I was married. And I was having a little bit of struggle with my family. And uh, we have a conversation, and we come out with the solution; joining the Puerto Rican National Guard. That is an army, Puerto Rican Na-, National, w-, National Guard.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Um hm.

HUGO GONZALES: Eh, that allows me to have a civilian life, and also a military life. And it is gonna help us with, uh, a little bit of income, extra income, monthly. And, and uh, I end up going to basic training; eh, being a military member; and finish my college; and helping a little bit my family.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Um hm. So you were in the National Guard.

HUGO GONZALES: Yes sir.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Not the full army.

HUGO GONZALES: At beginning, I was National Guard.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Ah, okay.

HUGO GONZALES: And then I change, I switch, to the, to the active duty.

CHARLES FERGUSON: When did you do that?

HUGO GONZALES: I switched to active duty, um, February 25, 2003.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Two thousand and three.

HUGO GONZALES: Yes sir.

CHARLES FERGUSON: So just before the Iraq war.

HUGO GONZALES: It was on its way. It was on the atmosphere; that fear, that...that something bad may happen.

CHARLES FERGUSON: So when you joined the Army for active duty, I assume you realized that you probably would go to Iraq.

HUGO GONZALES: Yes. There were a big possibility for me to go Iraq. But I also has the...have the planning to go Europe, and maybe learn another language; eh, expand my culture; eh, travel a little bit through the, through the Europ-, European nation. But that didn't happen. As soon as I get to Germany, they inform me that my unit was, eh, attached, eh, depart-, departure to Iraq; that I had to, eh, meet them over there.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Okay. How come you enlisted for active duty? Why did you make that decision?

HUGO GONZALES: Well, as soon as I end up my bachelor degree, I found out that I wish to see something else. And the only way that I, the easy way to do it, it was, um, going Germany. What about going Germany; learning another language; get the opportunity to travel around the European nation; and maybe, eh, get chance to finish a major in there? Also, I put in jeopardy the possibility of being in war. But I play that game.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Okay. So you had already gotten your bachelor's degree...

HUGO GONZALES: Yes sir.

CHARLES FERGUSON: In what, if I can ask?

HUGO GONZALES: Advertising.

CHARLES FERGUSON: I see. And from where?

HUGO GONZALES: Eh, Puerto Rico. Was the Sacred Heart University, in Puerto Rico.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Okay. So you have a family; you have children.

HUGO GONZALES: Yes sir. I do have, uh, eight years old, little girl.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Um hm.

HUGO GONZALES: And uh, I'm about to have twins. I'm expecting two little girls, I found out.

CHARLES FERGUSON: I see.

HUGO GONZALES: Um hm. They're gonna be identical. [UI].

CHARLES FERGUSON: I see.

HUGO GONZALES: Um hm.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Congratulations.

HUGO GONZALES: Thank you, sir.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Okay. When you learned that you'd be going to Iraq, what did you think about that?

HUGO GONZALES: Well sir, I think about duty. I think about responsibility. And I think about all those years training, for a reason.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Uh huh.

HUGO GONZALES: That if I got something inside of me, I'm gonna show it off, now, right now. It was a showoff. I was excited about it.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Hm. Okay. And when you got to Iraq, what did you find?

HUGO GONZALES: {sigh} When I first saw the Middle East, through the window of my, of the airplane that I was, I ha[ve] a feeling and I think about, and I said, how come God forgot the green? Because I never saw such an...ah, [dis-grateful] eh, environment in my life, especially coming from the Caribbean, where we used to see so much color in our [UI]. And I asked myself-, myself, how, how come God forgot the green? Where are we, where, where I am? And I seen it from the airplane. I wasn't even put a step into the Iraq land yet.

CHARLES FERGUSON: When did you arrive in Iraq?

HUGO GONZALES: I, if I don't remember well, it was around May, May or something.

CHARLES FERGUSON: O?

HUGO GONZALES: Two thousand and four.

CHARLES FERGUSON: May of 2004.

HUGO GONZALES: Yes sir.

CHARLES FERGUSON: So a year after the war.

HUGO GONZALES: Um hm.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Tell us about arriving in Iraq.

HUGO GONZALES: Well, sir, to be sincere, I was expecting pulling my trigger since I was getting down of the airplane. But that wasn't happ[ening]. I was expecting receiving bullets from all directions, but that didn't happen. When I get to Iraq, I was introduced to the other part of the, of the unit, that was in there.

And uh, I get to hear the, the histories and stuff. Eh, we wasn't doing artillery missions anymore. We was, uh, doing a infantry missions. We was doing combat patrol[ings]; eh, raids, to homes. We was escorting, eh, convoys; we was doing a patrol in, in, uh, eh, saving some, eh, buildings and facilities. Doing guards, guard duties.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Um hm.

HUGO GONZALES: That's what I used to do over there.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Um hm.

HUGO GONZALES: I don't even see a cannon [UI] while I was there.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Okay. What was it like?

HUGO GONZALES: Well, it was...a little bit like, like the poorer side of Dominican Republic. It was like a poor country. No...no complete buildings; no, no paints on the walls. Eh, they were trying to do their normal life. You found people selling things in the streets. Crowded streets. You may found yourself trying to do [friends] in there. But with the, eh, [incognito] in your mind that maybe the one

that you are, eh, saluting during the da-, during the day is the same one that pull the trigger in the night. You have that be incognito in your mind.

CHARLES FERGUSON: And did you make any Iraqi friends?

HUGO GONZALES: I think so. I think so. Because, eh, we have to leave with s-, with some Iraqi personals, that they, they had to, some, they had to do your laundry sometimes, for example, in the [sea-muck]. That we were doing guard duty. They, they have Iraqi personnel that works in there, that [C], that [C] use in the daily basis.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Uh huh.

HUGO GONZALES: So you found yourself, if you're interested, trying to learn some words in Iraqi, in Arabic language. Eh, because on my personal experience, I didn't like to go outside, and try to give them orders in English, when, where they don't, were not going un-, understand. I thought that they will going to respect me more if I talk to them in Arabic. So I, [UI] might as well depend on the, those Iraqi personals to tell me, at least, how to say, eh, do you, do you have a gun? Or, going to the floor. Or maybe how to say a greeting. How to say "thank you." Eh, with some exceptions, because they can easily, easily, eh, misunderstand a kindness with weakness. They [found] yourself saying, I'm very pleased to meet you, and they may say, hm, I'm gonna take this one.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Did that happen to you, things like that?

HUGO GONZALES: No.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Hm.

HUGO GONZALES: To me, to be sincere, I...wasn't betrayed. I didn't come back from [them] betray...

CHARLES FERGUSON: Hm.

HUGO GONZALES: ...from somebody that I didn't expect nothing, something. I...I received what I expect from what I was expecting.

CHARLES FERGUSON: So you learned Arabic by talking with the Iraqis who were working with you. Did the Army provide any Arabic lessons?

HUGO GONZALES: No. No. No at all. No Arabic, like concentrate like that. They give you a manual. Where they tell you might as well how to move around. And uh, eh, where you are; where, what is gonna happen over there. Eh, but a specifically, like they tell you how to say “please,” or how to say “do you have a gun”? Things important, like that, or “go to the floor,” that we used to do it. We used to use that. But we end up, other people end up saying, “Go to the floor!” You know, and uh, maybe they are not understanding what you are saying, but they can feel what you [say].

And uh, I found, for me, very important to, can’t, eh, communicate in their language. Either ways, I was saying don’t, something good or something bad.

CHARLES FERGUSON: So you said that you sometimes went on raids.

HUGO GONZALES: Yes sir.

CHARLES FERGUSON: What was that like?

HUGO GONZALES: Ahh. It was like...like you know what you are doing, but you don’t know what to expect. You found yourself looking the worst things in your life. For me to see a boy, uh, newborn, living, sleeping in the floor. And uh, I never thought that flies fly at night. They were covered in flies, in the middle of the night. I never see something like that in my life, not even in Dominican Republic. I mean it’s not, it’s not that Dominican Republic is bad, but you can see some, some, uh, bad things over there, too. But it, that, over there, you got, it didn’t go near. That smelling when you get in there.

And uh, you have to separate the women from the boys from the men in the house. And uh, you don’t know if that woman is the one that knows where the guns are, and she is the one that shoot to you, that shoot you. Because if you are not, eh, managing the men, or if you have to kill that man for some reason, that woman is gonna pick up the, the gun, and shoot you. And if you have to kill that woman, too, the little boy is gonna pick up that gun, and he’s gonna shoot you.

So it’s a tense situation. Although with the IEDs, things going on, eh, you have to be aware of pulling a, a, a door, because it may blow [out] right there. I consider my sen-, myself and the other soldiers as the [sons] of the IEDs, [improvises] the explosive devices.

CHARLES FERGUSON: When you were on raids, did anything like that actually happen?

HUGO GONZALES: No sir. I heard stories.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Ah. So other...

HUGO GONZALES: Not to me.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Okay.

HUGO GONZALES: Eh, about the blowing doors, and stuff like that. And uh, womens, eh, pulling the trigger; it didn't happen to me. I heard some stories. But I was always aware of that thing.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Um hm.

HUGO GONZALES: I was in situations that the, the men didn't, didn't know, we need him to open some cases, to open doors, and stuff. And they didn't know where the keys are, though, because the womens are the ones that, that are in charge of the house things. And then we have to talk directly to the woman, and the differences between man and woman, and uh, how to, how to direct to a woman is very sensitive, all this kinda thing.

For me, what is, is, it was important. Maybe for other soldiers, they just do whatever they have to do.

CHARLES FERGUSON: When you went on raids, how many raids did you go on?

HUGO GONZALES: Well, eh...I have to tell you about...about two weeks. Two weeks. Because we change, we change missions on a weekly basis.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Um hm.

HUGO GONZALES: Maybe one week, you go to do raids. Meanwhile, the other platoon is going to do, eh, convoy escorts. And the next week, you gonna do a guard duties. So I didn't s-, stay that long in Iraq. I only stayed like, like one month and a half, between, uh, before I get injure. So I thinking I only get o-, over two or three raids, [in], while I was in there.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Okay. And what did you find in the raids? Did you find what you were looking for?

HUGO GONZALES: Well, we found [UI]. We found, eh, batteries. We found, uh, a, cord-trols, remote controllers. We found guns.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Um hm.

HUGO GONZALES: Those are all those sensitive things, like [cel-er-ars], they are not allowed to have it, because they are building bombs with that kind of things.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Yep.

HUGO GONZALES: And if you found in ar-, in a closet, five remote controllers, and not even one c-, remote car, there is something going on here.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Um hm.

HUGO GONZALES: And if you found doors, there is another sensitive thing that we were looking for, because they paid insurgents with dollars. Those little things. That's what we're, we looking for, and we found a lot of, a lot of times. Then we get [captive]. And we took them to the military police.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Okay. You said you also went on convoy escort missions.

HUGO GONZALES: Convoy duty. For me, convoy duty, it was like, here I am; who wants to fight me? Who dares to throw a bullet on me? Because I need to throw some bullets at, at somebody. They are no, nobody to fight. Maybe one, one little, eh, guerilla in the night. And everybody's talking about it, the whole, [UI] the day. You just go, escort the, the VIP. And uh, to that place. And then you took it back. On the way, if you are interested, you may take, uh, advantage of, uh, the [Dejala] River, that is a very good view.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Did anybody shoot at you on convoy duty? Or was it always perfectly okay?

HUGO GONZALES: No, it wasn't perfectly okay. Eh, there were some little things that happens. Some IEDs blow out. But basic-, but majority under the night. During the day, nothing happen. Only, only, eh, almost things. But during the night, you can see the, you can see the tracers

going to you, and you just shoot back to the tracers. If I tell you that I shoot somebody, that I see a person, and I shoot it, at him, it's not gonna be true. Because I never saw my enemy.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Hm.

HUGO GONZALES: I never saw them. I'd shoot at them. But I never saw them. I know that I saw the tracers, coming at you as lines of lights. Da, da, da. And this is, this is scary.

CHARLES FERGUSON: I'll bet. What did you think about the Iraq war? Did you think it made sense? Did you think it was a good idea, a bad idea, you weren't sure? What did you think?

HUGO GONZALES: Well, sir, from my point of view, it was my duty to go over there, and do what I was to do, what I [tell] to do it, so for me, it was, uh, an honor to go there and help my fellow soldiers to do what they telled us to go and do there.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Um hm.

HUGO GONZALES: Maybe take out a dictator, out of the power; to reestablish the democracy; to free the country. That was an honor for me, to go there, and uh, be an helping hand to my fellow soldiers. No question[s] ask about that, when I go there. Like, I don't want to do a lot of crazy things. Then I'm gonna, they don't gonna make me walk in the middle of a firing, firing range. Or, look, there is a bomb; step on it. I [not] gonna do that. But, eh, I was trained to do that. I was, it's like, was waiting for this to happen, it seems, like all my military life. I knew that maybe one day I will have to go and face [a] war. And that day came.

CHARLES FERGUSON: And do you still feel that way? Do you still feel the same way about Iraq and about the war?

HUGO GONZALES: The way I'm feeling right now: maybe it's not the same. 'Cause now I am in the other side. I am thinking right now about the war that whatever is in your, in my, in the mind of the soldier when they go there — it was going to free a nation, going to, to take a dictator out of the throne, going to reestablish the democracy — whatever we go there to do, it has to be finish. Because otherwise, the suffering that I was through and the other soldiers that's suffering wha-, was under, there were no meaning of it.

CHARLES FERGUSON: So you still basically feel that the Iraq war was a just war, and that it was a good thing for the United States to have done, and you're optimistic that it's gonna come out well. Or am I wrong?

HUGO GONZALES: In the point that it, it is, was a good thing or a bad thing, uh...I didn't go, get to go that deep.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Hm.

HUGO GONZALES: There were times that I felt, over there, that we are here, eh, to make this nation free. But they are not free. They are slave of the past; slave of their religion. They are slave of their future. So [from] who are we gonna get them free first? We found a very, very strong culture in there, that they didn't want to change.

But anyway, I was doing my job. I was doing my duty, from heart, and with honor, and with our responsibility. Right now, I think that the work that I was doing in there, at, at my time, and the suffering that I suffer, eh, has a meaning. Someday, my life, in the future, I gotta s-, look back to Iraq, and I gotta see something done in there, so I can look back and say, I was part of this, and my suffering and my loss have a, have a meaning; have a, they have a reason, as well as all the wounded soldier that I, that I saw each and every day in the Walter Reed Hospital, sir.

CHARLES FERGUSON: How were you injured? What happened?

HUGO GONZALES: Okay, sir. Eh, the night I got injure, it was the night of the 21st of June, 2004. We went out on a combat patrolling. Eh, because we f-, we get a confidence that in the town of [the Gadir], eh, a very bad town in, in, in Ba'qubah, they were building bombs.

So we go up there, trying to surprise them, trying to make some raids, trying to get some information. And uh, go inside houses to see what, what is going on in there.

That night, I was lucky. Because I was assigned to a cruiser weapon. That gonna make me stay in the, in a vehicle, taking command of a cruiser weapon all night. I didn't have to go walking, and go inside houses. I didn't gonna be that [UI]. But, I was in the bucket. The bucket is a non-armor vehicle that we have in there, and we take to, to convoys, and we take everywhere we, we go. But to be in the

bucket has an extra inconvenience because anything that happen, you gonna get it. So nobody wants to be in there.

That night, when we get down there, eh, we start, they start to make some questions; the lieutenant and the [smoke] start to make some questions, [founding] some information. And we, we start to see some, some, uh, some uh, eh, things that a-, that happen inside there that they was, eh, the sense of something bad, bad is gonna happen.

For example, they, they shut down the lights. They shut down the light. We turn off the [UI]. That's no problem for us. But there is something going on. Then they turn off the light again to, to disturb us, and make us, you know, the shining in the, uh, making blindness in the eye because of that li-, [UI]. But nothing happen there. That was the perfect time to, to attack us, when they turn off the light again. Nothing happened then.

Then we saw the, the, there were a lot of people gathering. Then we saw the mens kicking womans and boys. Telling you sir, literally, actually, kicking, kicking them. That, that telled us that something bad will happen. That's another, another, another thing that let us know that there is something gonna happen; they are taking the womans out; they are taking the kids out.

So everybody was saying the same thing, and the, the, the sergeant[s] say, okay, we gonna go. When we were leaving, eh, at the, at the entrance of the, of the, of that town, the [UI] go out. I suffer the blast almost, almost directly, sir, of that blast. And then I came, I, I start hearing the firefight. From the far to the closest: ba-ba. We started firing.

As a consequence of that blast, I suffer a penetrating traumatic brain injury. And uh, I lost the perception of the light in my right eye. I suffer a pellet in my left eye that gets me a [macular] hole, in the retina. Eh, but we fight. We fight until, until we hear the cease fire. It wasn't that long. It was only like 10, 10 or 15 minutes; no more than that.

But I knew I was hit. I come, I, I c-, I can feel the, the warm and the wet of my blood in my hand. And uh, at that point, I just call for my mother. I feel a little bit dizzy. But my sergeant helped me get out of the bucket.

Ahhh. Over there in the floor, they gave me the first aid. When they laid me down, I lost conscious.

The only way that [it], the only reason that I know [my as well] what happen until [days], because we have some pictures that night. They let me get it. Eh, I wake up {sigh} in, in Baghdad. They practice a craniectomy. Eh, they take out a piece of the skull, from my frontal lobe; [tempora]. [Tempora] and parietal; they took out a big piece. Because of the penetration that my brain suffer, the brain starts swelling. And uh, it didn't have any room to go, so they have to make room to [go] out. It was swelling very bad, because of the wound. And uh, they placed that piece of skull, they place it in my belly. They make me a, a marsupial wound. So I, so I can take care of my own bone.

Uh, right now, as, as a consequent of all that things that I tell you, sir, I am suffering from post-traumatic migraines, and post-traumatic epilepsy. Eh, sometimes I have bad memories about what happen. But I am not scare of them. I face them; eh, I have some dreams, with my mother with me, in, in, in the theater right there, in the middle of a mission, and me, you know, eh, getting very anxious about what are you doing here. My mother and my family. And um, eh, here we are; I am going forward, sir. There are things that are gonna be there with me, with all my life. But uh, they are there for a reason.

What is the reason? What's the meaning? Only God knows. God is the one that have a purpose. And uh, eh, He know where, where he want me to go. I mean, his ha-, his [hands sees] the 21st June, in 2004, sir.

CHARLES FERGUSON: How long were you in the hospital?

HUGO GONZALES: Two years.

CHARLES FERGUSON: That's a long time.

HUGO GONZALES: Still living in the hospital, right now.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Do you know when you'll get out?

HUGO GONZALES: No sir. Right now, the future is a little bit uncertain. Uncertain? Because, eh, I have plans. I have [might as well] what I wish to do. But I cannot tell you something

specifically, because I don't know when I'm going out. My case right now is stuck since, since October the 12th, 2005.

CHARLES FERGUSON: What do you mean, stuck?

HUGO GONZALES: Stuck means that I already finish [and not] all my bureaucratic process. I already have a 90% disability. They offer me. But is, is a stuck, and they are trying to figure it out, what, what are they gonna do with me, because they have questions. Nobody knows.

CHARLES FERGUSON: So when you say "stuck," what you mean is that since October of last year, they just haven't decided...

HUGO GONZALES: Haven't decided, yes. I was about to go out, and then the case went back. This, this become an extraordinary case, from one moment to another. And that means I am over there. G-, uh, playing the waiting game. But I have my wife. And I gonna have twins. And uh, I gonna have to start making preparations for this, because they are coming on June. And uh, for me, as a soldier, you can take me to, you can take me to anyplace, and I'm gonna adjust. But, I'm gonna, I'm putting my wife into this situation now. And I'm thinking of her, and I care for her, too.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Do you think that you'll be able to handle life outside of the military?

HUGO GONZALES: That's, that's another question mark, because what I'm living right now is not the real life. I am not, this is not real life. Real life is gonna be going out there, eh, finding people that maybe they are not in a good mood that day. My tolerance in to frustration is not the same right now. I am not, I am not, my vision is not the same. Eh, my wife has become my new pair of eyes. And uh, I don't know how I'm gonna handle the struggles of life anymore, because I am not [sposed to] those struggles anymore. I am living the, eh, patient's life of the Walter Reed Hospital. They have been taking good care of me. They fix me, as much as they can. But this is not real life, sir. Real life will be outside, with daily, basic struggles. I don't know what's gonna happen.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Hm.

HUGO GONZALES: I don't [be] exposed to real-life struggles anymore. It's gonna happen. I don't know.

CHARLES FERGUSON: When you said that the night that you were wounded, you were unlucky because you were put in the bucket, which was an unarmored vehicle, how come they had to take that unarmored vehicle along? Do you know?

HUGO GONZALES: You mean the bucket, sir?

CHARLES FERGUSON: Yeah.

HUGO GONZALES: That's what we have. We know the consequences of, uh, of a, a encounter with the enemy. And you being in that bucket. But it's your turn. They assign one day to this person; they, they, they change. Today is your; tomorrow you; who's going to ne-, who's going in the bucket today? Gonzales. Gonzales go, Gonzales's turn. Go ahead and prepare your bucket. And you start the ritual. It's a ritual, sir. Like preparing those sandbags in the, in the floor, just in case you are stepping to an IED, it didn't blow out from the bottom.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Um hm.

HUGO GONZALES: It's a ritual, eh, preparing all, [gathering] all your armor and ammunition that you, uh, hopefully [do] don't have to expend them all. But if you get into a firefight, you gonna expend them all. You don't gonna let even a bullet in your, in that case. So you, as soon as you get out of that entrance of the base, you only get one big breath.

You go out. When you came back, you, phew, release that breath. Only one.

CHARLES FERGUSON: And the bucket was what kind of vehicle? It was a Humvee?

HUGO GONZALES: Yes sir.

CHARLES FERGUSON: An unarmored Humvee.

HUGO GONZALES: Yes sir, it was an utility Humvee. Two person, just in the front. Then the whole back is, uh, like a, an utility.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Um hm.

HUGO GONZALES: Then you have a [tube]. You place a [UI] in there. And you can go, you going out of there. We should have something better.

CHARLES FERGUSON: So it could have been an armored vehicle. It would have been okay to have an armored vehicle.

HUGO GONZALES: Everybody should have an armored vehicle over there.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Hm.

HUGO GONZALES: Complete ones. The biggest one. Because as you can, as you go over there, and you see an una-, an unarmored vehicle, you go ahead, and you see the other ones. The big armored ones that are completely air-conditioner, everything, they have. There are only a few of them. And uh, higher ranks have the, the priority.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Yeah. I see. That night, was anybody else hurt?

HUGO GONZALES: Yes sir. Yes sir. Yes sir. I have, I have more, more friends that were hurt that night. Actually, the, a very close friend of mine was hurt with me that night. And uh, he suffer, [might as well] the same injury as me. But he only didn't have the traumatic brain injury. And uh, he got, eh, he got fixed. And uh, they send him back to Iraq, without all this, without all these teeth. I only lost one, here. But he lost the front, the frontal one, the frontal pieces.

CHARLES FERGUSON: But they still sent him back?

HUGO GONZALES: They send him back. As soon a- he get better, they send him back. He went back to Iraq. If I didn't suffer that traumatic brain injury, I'd a-, I didn't know if they will send me back with only an eye. But yes, they, they get you better, and they send you back. [You have found] soldiers that have three, two, Purple Hearts.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Um hm.

HUGO GONZALES: Easily.

CHARLES FERGUSON: What do you think about the Army now? Has the Army treated you well?

HUGO GONZALES: Yes, the Army...the Army is there. And uh, right now, I am in home care. Eh, I have a, I have a platoon sergeant. I know that if I had a, that if I have something, some

inconvenience, I can go to him. Eh, but uh, my main, my main treatment is coming from the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, which is the Army. They I have to said, yes; the Army is treating me well.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Good. Good. Are you still in touch with your friends, your friends in your unit?

HUGO GONZALES: Yes sir. They already came back from Iraq.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Um hm.

HUGO GONZALES: Eh, they fly me all the way to Germany, to the welcome ceremony...

CHARLES FERGUSON: Oh.

HUGO GONZALES: ...of the [UI] one...

CHARLES FERGUSON: Ah.

HUGO GONZALES: ...it was a big experience there. Ah, they fly me and my wife over there. I get in touch with General Sanchez that day. And uh, we was placed in the VIP area. And he was, when he was revising all the troops, in a airfield [long], all the way, I...I cry. I cried. And uh, I told my wife: I should be there. You know. Deep inside of me, how I feel. I should be there. And she answer me: do you realize that if you was there, if you be there, I wasn't here? Did you get it, sir?

CHARLES FERGUSON: I got it.

HUGO GONZALES: If I was in that troop, getting revised by the general, she wasn't with me at that point. That...everything happen a reason.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Let's hope so. Okay. Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about?

HUGO GONZALES: Life is great!

CHARLES FERGUSON: Is it?

HUGO GONZALES: It's great! Yes sir. I, I am a, right now, this thing, the meaning for me, the bad experience, everything; it means to me, eh, a big resurrection, from all aspects. Physical; spiritual; economical. It's a big, new opportunity for me to, to start all over again.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Do you...

HUGO GONZALES: With my family, and everything. It means a lot to me, the opportunity that God gave me to [let] me here, to save me from the clouds of the de-, the angel of the dead. That certainly, he was claiming, claiming myself that night. And He didn't let me go that night. And I'm very grateful, and I'm very glad I'm here today, sir.

CHARLES FERGUSON: Okay. Thank you. Thank you very much for your time. Very much indeed.

HUGO GONZALES: Thank you, sir.