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JOSE PEREZ (PEPE) DEL RIO

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INTERVIEW

Editor’s Note: Jose Perez (Pepe) Del Rio was for nearly 25 years the MC of VOA’s Spanish Version of the Breakfast show. In Spanish, it was “Buenos Dias, America.” The interview presents a fascinating and often heart warming picture of the mechanics of producing such a show, and the responses it can draw from the listening audiences.

Q: How did you get to be a broadcaster for the Voice of America in the first place?

Del Rio Initially Resists Offer to Go to VOA

DEL RIO: In 1960, in San Antonio, Texas, Pete Moraga and another guy whose name I can’t remember came on a recruiting trip, looking for American citizens with radio experience. They listened to me on the radio, a local Spanish-language station in San Antonio, and I was one of the guys that they approached. They came to see me at KUKA, the radio station where I was working as program director, and offered me a job with the Voice of America. Of course I had to pass the test. And when we talked about money, there’s where we had a little disagreement. They talked to me in terms of GS-9, and to me, a perfect stranger to the federal lingo, I didn’t know what that meant. I asked Moraga, in terms of money, how much that was. He told me, and I immediately said that I was not interested, that I couldn’t sacrifice what I was making, not only from radio, but working in the theater as MC of big shows that came from Mexico with big movie starts. And also I was working on TV, Channel 5, CBS in San Antonio at that time, and also working on weekends in a very plush night club in San Antonio as MC. So all together I was making a very nice figure, and a GS-9 wouldn’t make even close to that figure. So he understood. I didn’t play difficult to catch or anything like that. I just went to facts: I could not take a job because of the difference in payment.

So he asked if I would like to be a stringer for the Voice of America, and I jumped at it right away, and said I would be honored and delighted. So I worked for a about a year as a stringer for the Voice in San Antonio. Sometimes I went to Laredo, I went to Galveston, places where news for the Latin American division was developing. Then in 1961 came the Bay of Pigs invasion, and the Voice went on the air 24 hours a day, as you well remember, and they called me. This time it was Fred Galvan who called, and said, "Look, we have this tremendous problem. We're on the air 24 hours, and we are ready to give you a GS-11 without any exams or anything, just come. We have known your work for a year." Again I asked what that meant in terms of money. I sound like a very money-minded person, but I had to ask, because I had a lot of personal responsibilities with my children. They were small at that time, and I needed the money. I don't want to just sound money-minded; no, I had my reasons for it. Anyway, he offered me the GS-11 without exams, and again I could not take it because of the money. That's April, '61.

Then I had some problems in my private life, and I wanted to leave San Antonio. I had a chance to go to Los Angeles or Washington, but I thought Washington wouldn't take me after turning them down twice. But I was not very enthusiastic about going to Los Angeles. I know the radio stations in Los Angeles are very competitive, and I'm going to try Washington and see what they say. So I called Washington and talked to Mr. Galvan and he said, "Yes, we are willing to take you in, but now the Cuban crisis is over so you'll have to pass the exam." So in a few days they sent a package to the post office in San Antonio, and I went and spent three hours a day for three days on the exams, which consisted of translations and writing and voicing, but they were timing me. The examiner there in the post office never had given an exam like that, and he was curious about it. He said, "I've never seen anything like this in civil service. What are you applying for?" And I told him, and he said, "Oh, well that's very interesting. This is the first time in my life that I've seen anything like this." The exam was not difficult. It was not easy, but it was okay. I finished it in three days, and I remember vividly that the day I finished, coming out of the building, the San Antonio Light had on the front page that Trujillo had been assassinated in the Dominican Republic -- that very same day that I finished my exam. Well, anyway, two or three days later I got a call from Fred Galvan, saying that I had passed the exam and that any time I was ready they were ready for me. I said, "Just give me a couple of weeks to shut down my business here."

Acceptance of VOA Offer

Q: You got the GS-11 level?

DEL RIO: GS-11. I don't remember the money. I think it was something like \$9,000 at that time. But as I said, I didn't want to go to Los Angeles. Probably I could have done very well there; I don't know. But the thing is, I considered that I had enough of commercial radio. I have great respect for commercial radio, for commercial announcers, but on the other hand I was eager to get involved in something different, in something really meaningful, like the Voice of America. I wanted to be a part of that organization because I thought then your profession becomes worthwhile. If that explains my feeling. Commercial radio was fine; it paid for many things in my life, for every thing in my life.

But I wanted to go into something different, something more worthwhile, and that was radio journalism. And I said, this is my opportunity; go with the Voice of America. So I came in August, 1961.

It was not easy. The first months, from August till December, I didn't go on the air. At that time the programs were planned, and they had the staff already for those programs -- writers, voices and everything. So what I did was edit tapes and things like that, and I was very, very frustrated, because I wanted to do more. I talked to Galvan and said, "Look, I don't think I want to stay. I came to do something here and apparently I'm not. It's not that you don't want me, but the system that we have, already established, is for certain voices and certain programs, and there is nothing for me." The only thing I can do is read news -- and they also had their newscasters appointed for that. I read a newscast once in a while. They put me in the morning show. I told Galvan that I wanted to quit. I said, "Look, I'm going back to commercial radio." He said, "No, I think your place is here. The only thing is that you need time, a little time. Probably you miss your family. Why don't you take a couple of weeks off and go to San Antonio and see your family, and come back, and I'm sure you will feel different." I did that. I went to San Antonio, and talked to my agent, Joe Harry. I said, "Joe, I'm ready to come back to commercial radio," and I explained why. He said, "Don't be a fool. I think you are in the right place, the best place in the world. Go back, and do what you do; just be a little patient." So I came back. At that time the morning show was an hour or 45 minutes and consisted of the news, live, and then a girl would come with music and announce the orchestra and the singer, the composer or whatever, and just play music, back to back. Then again at the half-hour, a news summary, and then go back to music and close the hour. While at night we had beautiful programs of 15 minutes or half an hour. I think the reason they didn't use them in the morning was because of the timing. If you have one hour of programming, and you use a half-hour program, there goes most of your time. So then this girl got married in December '61, and they wanted me to do the morning show.

Events Lead to Putting Del Rio On Spanish Language Morning Show With His Own New Format

Q: So that was the beginning of "Buenos Dias, America."

DEL RIO: The program already had the title of "Buenos Dias, America." The title was there. Hoyt Ware was the division chief at that time, and Henry Loomis was the VOA director. I told Mr. Ware that I had in mind something different for the morning --a live show. At that time the English program of the Voice had the "Breakfast Show." Al Johnson was running it at the time. I wanted something like that, something in which you can project a human being through the radio with a message, not just a voice in a piece of plastic. I said, "Look, we can do many things with this show. I can talk to the people, I can inject a little humor. Something different." And Hoyt went for it a hundred percent, but of course he had to go on and sell it to the front office. Alex Klieforth was program manager. Hoyt Ware and Fred Galvan went to the front office and proposed this show. We were then still in the Cold War and everything at the Voice, as you remember, was scripted. Even the break, "This is the Voice of America," had to be recorded -- except the

news. So I thought the timing was very bad. Here we are following a policy of everything written down, and I want to go live, ad lib. Of course I was not going to talk about anything political or anything like that. That can be prerecorded. I just wanted to be a little more human in the broadcast.

Show Becomes Great Success: Fan Mail Heavy

So Hoyt Ware and Fred Galvan talked to Alex Klieforth and Henry Loomis, and they gave the okay, and we went on the air with the new “Good Morning, America” show. I remember that I used to ask my colleagues from the night shift to write little stories to fit the time we had, because everything from the night program was too long. And everyone cooperated willingly. I had little short stories, and that way I put the program together with my newscaster.

We didn’t ask for mail, but the letters started pouring in -- hundreds of letters from people all over the hemisphere. Why? Probably they were surprised to hear a show like that. One of the first things I got was a letter from the President of El Salvador, Julio Adalberto Rivera. He wrote me a beautiful letter, and sent me a five-pound package of coffee from El Salvador. I had mentioned, ad libitum, I said, “Well this morning I’m having a cup of coffee with you.” I didn’t plan to say that; it just came out. So he sent me a five-pound package of coffee. And of course I acknowledged it on the air, and immediately I started getting coffee from Costa Rica, Guatemala, and every place where they have coffee. And people wrote, “Now we spend every morning with you, having a cup of coffee and listening to the Voice of America.” So you see, I think we established a bond, a rapport, between the audience and the Voice. So that’s the way the program started. One hour, little features, news, music, chit-chat. But through the years the program has changed a lot.

Format Changes Over Years; More Direct Live Reports From Correspondents Abroad

Q: At what point did you start bringing in reports from correspondents around the hemisphere?

DEL RIO: Oh, that was several years afterwards. I can’t give you a precise year, but I used to have that prerecorded. I used to have in the morning repeats of what the correspondents had sent in the night before. But then I asked for fresher reports in the morning, and they used to call to Central Recording. They would take them there, and I would send somebody to pick them up, edit them and put them on a reel and take them to the studio. I thought this was fine. At least we have something fresher in the morning. But through a long chain, you know-- Central Recording, editing, put it on the reel, come back to studio.

Why don’t we have a telephone and get the spots from the correspondents directly on the air?

Why don't we have a telephone and get the spots from the correspondents directly on the air?

That was another battle. What is he going to send? I said, "Well, the same thing he's going to send to Central Recording. The piece is already written, has been okayed, so I don't think there is any problem." So we started doing that. And it had its impact, because we started getting live reports from the correspondents in Latin America.

Example of Live Report of Cuban Refugees Arriving By Plane In Costa Rica

One example of the effectiveness of this is when a group of Cuban refugees arrived in Costa Rica, in San Jose. Our stringer was there at the airport, and the only way to get in touch with us was through a public telephone. But he was lucky enough to get to the telephone and get through to the studio, live. He told me, "Look -- this is off the air -- the plane is already in the area, he will land in a few minutes, and from where I'm standing I can see where the refugees will be coming in, and I'm going to use the telephone, if you don't mind." I said, "I can hear you perfectly. Don't worry. If this is the quality you'll give in the report, I'll take it." He said, "Okay, then, don't hang up, because to get the line again is going to be difficult. Stay there." We stayed about 20 minutes, but I couldn't take the chance to cut off the line. Of course, afterwards they called my attention to, you know, "How come you stayed so long on the phone," and I said, "Well, it was a scoop." And it really was, because this man picked up with the telephone the songs that the Cubans that were waiting for the refugees were singing there, and the excitement of the moment. He talked to some of them, and he talked also to the President of the republic who was there. I don't know whether he excused himself, saying, "Look, I don't have a microphone, only a telephone," but he used the telephone, and the president spoke through the telephone, and you could hear the excitement and the happiness of the atmosphere at that moment at the airport.

That's why I said this is an example of what I want to catch, what I want to put in the morning show. That's the only way we can compete with TV -- and with less equipment. Can you imagine a TV station being there? They need a lot of cameras and crew and cables and all that. Radio is the most powerful thing for communications, I think.

1961: Effect of Bay of Pigs On VOA Latin American Programming

Q: You talked about the Bay of Pigs. What about the Cuban Missile crisis? How did that affect the program, and the whole Spanish operation of the Voice of America?

DEL RIO: I think it affected the whole house. I remember I saw many colleagues that used to have the same schedule that I had in the morning, working at night. First of all, in the Latin American Division, all the regular programs were suspended, and we had a gigantic, 24-hour continuous broadcast, with news on the hour and the half-hour, and interviews. Everything was interrupted. It was a rough time, but I think everybody that was there pitched in very well. I used to work from midnight till 8 o'clock in the morning. That was the shift that they gave me. Gene Karst was the division chief at that

time, but I remember that Hoyt Ware, who had gone to Brazil in the foreign service, came back to help during that period. It was a strenuous time for everybody in the Latin American Division. You know, lots of people came from New York and other places to work there temporarily, because the staffers were not enough to cover that. We took everything from the Central Services. It was very touchy. Of course, our people in Miami got a lot of interviews which came through the central operations system. Those interviews in Miami and other places were exclusive for us. They were checked by policy, though they were recorded originally in Spanish. They were translated into English, and the news center would use them for other languages. But we had many original pieces during the crisis.

1983: Morning Show (BDA, i.e. Buenos Dias. America)
Goes On The Road - Broadcasting From Various Countries

Q: You talked about the growth of popularity, the response through the mail, and so on. At what point did you begin to go on trips to Latin America in order to project BDA into the hemisphere?

DEL RIO: I think it was in the beginning of the seventies, when Lem Graves was the division chief. He sent me on the first trip to Latin America. I was not sending any materials for the program. I was sent on this trip exclusively to be interviewed on radio, TV and newspapers, and to make contacts with the local media. I was so busy doing that that I didn't have time to do anything for the program. Through the years that changed, because in 1983 we did the first on-the-road show, broadcasting BDA from various places. First, we went to Central America in 1983. And then we went to Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela in '84. We were originating the program from the capitals of these countries.

Del Rio Becomes Personality In Latin America
Del Rio: Invited to Barbecue By El Salvador President

Q: In looking through some old files, I ran across a note from the past that said, and I quote: "Dividends are beginning to show up in our Spanish breakfast show programs as a result of the goodwill tour of 17 Central and South American countries recently completed by breakfast show host Jose "Pepe" Del Rio. While in Venezuela, Pepe arranged for a future live telephone interview with Sr. Diego Arria, Governor of the Federal District of Caracas. On May 6, with Pepe in our Washington studio and Sr. Arria in his office in Caracas, the Governor talked about a beautification program which he started in Caracas as a clean-up project, and a national environmental improvement program he heads. Carried live by two top commercial stations in Caracas and by the national radio network, other stations also taped the interview and relayed it later in the day. The Venezuelan Minister of Education heard the broadcast, contacted USIS, and requested a similar interview with Pepe. The Minister, Sr. Pinalva, said he would like to talk about education in Venezuela and Latin America."

Give me some more examples of people with whom you talked and the receptions you received. I've heard of one case in which you were greeted by the car of the President and whisked away to his hacienda, or something like that. Can you refresh our memory on that, Pepe?

DEL RIO: There were so many things. Cliff. I can tell you, for instance, that in El Salvador I was invited by the then President, Arturo Armando Molina, for a barbecue. The invitation was for me only. It came through the local employees in Salvador, who told the PAO (Public Affairs Officer), "There is an invitation for Pepe Del Rio from the President for a barbecue tomorrow. The only thing is that nobody else is invited." I was embarrassed for him. He said, "What do you mean, nobody else is invited?" "No, the invitation is for him." Well, you can imagine, this stirred up a little commotion. "Why?" "I don't know. The President wants to meet Pepe Del Rio on a one-on-one basis." So he said, "Okay, we are going to give you a briefing. You have to know what's going on here." So they gave me a big briefing, which I think is correct because if a subject came up that I couldn't deal with it could be embarrassing to the post and to VOA and the United States. So I think they were correct in trying to put as much information in my head as they could. But overnight? That's difficult.

The next day at noon came a big limousine, parked right in front of the USIA office, and a lieutenant came out. I was wearing a suit, and had my tape recorder hanging on my shoulder. I think the PAO or the IO (Information Officer) there at the time was Bill Mateer. Bill was very nervous about it. "Are you sure you have everything?" "Yes, Bill, don't worry, I'll do my best." "Okay. You will be debriefed afterwards." So the lieutenant came in and said, "Mr. Del Rio?" "Yes." "Please." He opened the door of the limousine, and I got in. It was air-conditioned, beautiful. And we drove about 15 miles out of San Salvador. As we were approaching the place, I could hear mariachi music. Very nice, you know. Lots of people there. So we stopped, and they opened the door for me. I didn't know President Molina personally; I couldn't recognize him. But one of the helpers there came and took me directly to President Molina, who was wearing a khaki shirt, no tie, and he immediately threw his arms around me and said, "It's very nice to meet you. You don't know how much we like you here in El Salvador." I was sweating, with the heat and the humidity, and he said, "Take off that coat and your tie," and the tape recorder he gave to a sergeant, and he said, "You just relax." They had so many things there. They had a deer roasting, and lots of ribs and chicken -- it was a big barbecue -- wonderful. And the mariachi music. Then one of the sergeants came with a small plate and two big shots of tequila, one for the President and one for me, and of course with a slice of lemon and salt, which is the way to drink it. President Molina took one and I took the other one. "To our friendship." We drank the tequila, one shot all the way down. Then he said, "Now I want you to meet members of my cabinet." And would you believe that with each of them I had to drink a shot of tequila!

Q: I don't see how you were still standing.

DEL RIO: I don't know. Probably I had practice. But you can't turn down a thing like that. You would be rude. That's one of the things that you, as a U.S. Government

representative, sometimes have to do. They were delighted. After the luncheon, President Molina said that he wanted to show me the stadium they were building, and we were flown there by his son in a French helicopter they had just bought. We went to the stadium, and then we flew to the President palace, and I had an interview with him on tape. The next day I turned it in to Bill Mateer, and said, "Here is the interview." He said, "Okay, now we want the debriefing." I said "We didn't talk about politics or anything." It was fun, what we had, very nice. I think they were pleased. I was pleased. The interview is there, and you can see all the questions I asked him and the answers he gave me. The tape speaks for itself; I don't have to say anything else. It was quite an experience, and I think Bill Mateer and the rest of the officers there were very pleased with the results of the interview.

Another Personal Presidential Meeting (Breakfast)
With President Stroessner of Paraguay

Q: Tell me about another visit to a chief of state, in Paraguay.

DEL RIO: That was another unforgettable experience. I was staying at the Guarani Hotel, and in Paraguay, because of the geography, the sun rises very early. I got a call about six o'clock in the morning, or before six, from the President's press secretary, Alejandro Caceres Almada. He said, "Pepe, the President read in the paper this morning that you are in town, and he just called me to see if we can arrange that you have breakfast with him." I said, "Well, I'll be delighted, but Alejandro, I have to get the approval of my superiors here, the Public Affairs Officer." At that time, it was Mr. Wooten, I think. I called him at home, that early, and of course he was very surprised. He said, "Well, you are not prepared to go to an interview like that." I said, "Well, if you don't want me to, I won't go. I don't think it's an interview. He invited me to have breakfast." "Yes, but you have to be briefed." I said, "Yes, I understand what you mean, and if you say no, I will call Mr. Almada right now and tell him, 'Sorry.'" "No, we can't do that; it's an invitation from the President. I think you should go, but be very careful." I said, "Yes, sir, I will". So far in my career with the government I haven't made any big mistakes. Besides, there was no time. They were supposed to pick me up at 7 o'clock. So I called back to Alejandro, and said, "Yes, they gave me the okay." He said, "Somebody will pick you up in the lobby of the hotel, and you're supposed to be with the President at 7:30. They'll bring you here to the presidential palace." So I shaved and dressed, and went down to the lobby. There were about 150 Americans on a tourist trip, going to the Iguazu Falls. The lobby was bubbling with American tourists. I quietly sat down, and at seven o'clock sharp I saw a jeep coming up to the door; of course, a military jeep. All the Americans looked at it, and immediately sensed that something was going on. I saw this lieutenant step out of the jeep, and I knew he was looking for me, but I just stayed there, thinking I'm going to wait.

So he went to the desk, and they paged me. "Mr. Del Rio, please come to the desk." And of course all the Americans saw me walking over. The lieutenant was very nice, and took me to the jeep. Everybody was silent. He put me in the jeep, and we drove to the presidential palace. There were a lot of people there. Apparently the President used to

receive people in the morning, personally. At 7:30 sharp, Alejandro Caceres Almada said, "Okay, let's go in" He and a photographer and I entered the President's office, and I still have the picture of President Stroessner and me shaking hands, taken by the photographer that entered with the press secretary and myself. Once they took the picture, they left, and I was alone with the President. To tell you the truth, I was a little nervous.

Q: Understandably.

DEL RIO: I think anyone in my shoes could be nervous. You don't know what the President is going to ask you to talk about. It turned out that President Stroessner was very interested in the space program. He had heard many of my broadcasts from Cape Kennedy, and he was very interested in learning the technicalities of the broadcasts, and about the aims of the program, and how you do this and how you do that. The conversation went around the space program. We had coffee. The maid came in, served coffee, and left. I was supposed to be there for 15 minutes, but it was close to half an hour. He asked about some of my colleagues at the Voice, whom he obviously knew personally, among them Mauricio Goldchain. The President asked me, "How is Mr. Goldchain?" They seemed to be friends. I said, "Fine." It was a very nice conversation. Purely social, and space.

At the end of the conversation, Mr. Caceres Almada came in and I sensed that they wanted to wrap it up, so I got up, ready to get out of there. President Stroessner pointed out an article that was published locally, based on an item from USIA World, the Agency organ, about my son and me in Vietnam, accompanied by a picture of us. Apparently the news media got hold of this story, as they seemed to pick up others occasionally from USIA World. They got interested, asked for the material, and apparently he saw the picture and the local article. He said, "I've seen the picture of you and your son in Vietnam, and I think this picture is an editorial. You can see here a father and a son, two generations, fighting against communism with different weapons; your son has a rifle, and you have a tape recorder. And I want you to know that here in Paraguay, we also fight communism." That was the only political reference we had in the whole conversation. I said, "Mr. President, thank you. I appreciate the honor of being invited for breakfast." He asked me if I had been to the Iguazu Falls. I said, "No, Mr. President, when I have come to your country I have not had time to get out of Asuncion." He said, "Well, the next time you are here Almada will see that you go to the Iguazu Falls to see that wonderful thing that we have in our country."

Q: Did you ever get back?

DEL RIO: Yes, I went back, on a private trip, and I went to the Iguazu Falls. But I didn't see President Stroessner again, never again since that time.

Q: President Stroessner's reference to the picture of you and your son in Vietnam brings us to the period of your career which you spent in Vietnam. Tell me how you got assigned to Vietnam, what the circumstances were, how you were able to leave your program.

Temporary Duty In Vietnam

DEL RIO: It was 1968, right after Tet -- the big Tet. My boss at the Voice was Lem Graves. Before me, my colleague Fred Schiele had been in Vietnam for two temporary duty tours (TDY's). This time they wanted to send somebody else. At that time, one of my sons -- the one that's in the picture -- was there with the Marine Corps, stationed in Danang. I had a personal reason to go there. Of course, the assignment was voluntary. They cannot force you to go. They asked, "Do you want to go?" And I grabbed it immediately, and said, "Yes, I'll go."

Q: As a reporter.

DEL RIO: Yes, as a reporter. I want to mention something that probably is not fitting for the interview. But, at that time, my wife Beatrice and I had a boy a year old, and we didn't have any relatives or close friends here in Washington. We were living in an apartment. She knew that I was going to be away for six months, and it was hard on her to stay all by herself with a one-year-old boy, in case anything should happen. So I think it is fair on my part to recognize the courage of my wife. She told me afterwards, "If I had said I don't want to go, you wouldn't have gone. But if I had said something like that, you would tell me afterwards, 'You didn't let me go where I wanted to go.'" So I just want to mention that. She agreed, and she stayed here by herself with the little boy.

Del Rio Sees The Successful Side of The Chu Hoi Program In Vietnam and Other Human Interest Incidents

So I went to Nam as a Spanish-language reporter for the Voice of America. What they asked me to do was to report on the other side of the war -- the positive side, of things happening despite the war. Like What? you may ask. Well, there was the Chu Hoi program -- the open arms program to bring those that went to the other side back, and give them tools to build a hut, and give them medical attention, bring them back to the South Vietnamese society. It was very interesting, very interesting, because I saw so many cases of how the people came back disenchanted with what the other side had offered them. They wanted to start building their own huts and their own communities. It was a very exciting, a very humanized story. Also, the construction of roads, and the help that the Koreans were giving in building orphanages and places for the elderly. All that is not front-page news, and I was told to dig on that.

One of the most interesting stories that I did was on the Spanish medical team that was in Vietnam. Nobody knew about it. There were about ten people -- doctors, technicians -- that came on a rotating basis to Vietnam, and they were in a hospital in Go Cong province, in the south. Go Cong was VC-infested and they were right in the middle. I remember vividly the three flags: the Spanish flag, the South Vietnamese flag, and the American flag. But the operation, the hospital, was run exclusively by the Spaniards, sponsored by the Spanish government. They would take in any patient -- no questions asked. They didn't care if they were VC or North Vietnamese army. They were taking care of a lot of eye diseases, like conjunctivitis. I saw cases there with no eyes, just two

balls of puss -- horrible! And also skin diseases. These guys were working 24 hours a day, and taking in anyone. You had a woman expecting a baby -- you are welcome. You had a problem with your skin, they would take you. I was planning to stay there for two or three days, and I spent a whole week. I couldn't leave. Every day they would have new things to do.

The way I was delivered to that place I will never forget. I left Saigon early in the morning by helicopter, and the flight was not too long, so it was still early in the morning when we arrived at the place where I was to be dropped out of the helicopter. I didn't know I was going to be dropped. I thought we would land. Apparently we were shot at by the enemy, and the pilot had to maneuver around and ask for help. We couldn't land where we were supposed to land, so we stayed around for about half an hour, and then came back to the same place. Apparently the pilot got instructions to go back to the same place, that it was safe. Instead of landing, the helicopter didn't touch the ground, it was about a couple of yards off the ground, and the gunner told me, "jump!". So I jumped with my tape recorder, and the helicopter took off. Just took off. Here I am in the middle of nowhere, in hostile territory, obviously, and I could hear the mosquitoes humming around me, and I said, "What am I doing here?" In two or three minutes a jeep with military pulled up. Can you imagine? Just imagine yourself in that situation. I was scared. But I heard this jeep approaching, with army people -- U.S. army... That's something I want to stress: every time I required services like transportation or lodging in Vietnam, the armed forces were number one. A hundred percent. They would go out of their way in order to give you what you wanted.

So they came, and picked me up. I didn't even mention to them anything about the incident; I didn't want to sound chicken. But I had gone through quite an experience. They took me to the hospital where the Spanish doctors were. And I did a series that was used by our Spanish Service to Spain, by Julian Fernandez, and he told me when I came back that the stories were used very much in Spain. It was a very human story.

Del Rio Meets His Marine Son In Saigon

Q: How long were you in Vietnam?

DEL RIO: I was there from August to December of '68. My son didn't see me till December. He found me. I went to Danang several times looking for him, but he was always out in the boondocks, patrolling. His officers told me if I wanted to go to those places where he was, I was welcome. But I don't think I was prepared to do that; I was not a Marine. Anyway, Joe somehow got a permit to go to Saigon, flying as a gunner on a helicopter from Danang to Saigon, and he got there on a Sunday, of all days. He didn't know where I was staying, so he went immediately to the American embassy. But JUSPAO was separate from the embassy, in a separate building by the Saigon River. But Joe didn't know that, so he went to the American embassy and the guard told him that he didn't know anything about me. He knew that the JUSPAO offices were down by the river. So my son went to the JUSPAO offices. Again, the Marine guard said, "I'm sorry, but they change us; I don't know anybody here personally." So Joe was talking to him

about me when a girl who had been working overtime that Sunday came out. She had to sign the book to leave the building, and she overheard the conversation between my son and the Marine guard, and she said, "Are you talking about Pepe Del Rio, the VOA man?" "Yes, he's my father." She said, "Well, I know that he lives in the Central Palace Hotel, but that's the only thing I can tell you." So he went to the Central Palace Hotel, and I wasn't there. Usually on Sundays I used to go to a place called the Club Esportif, and my son was referred to the club because the desk clerk knew me and knew that I was there. He went there, but he couldn't get in because he was an enlisted man. So he sat on a bench in a small park that was near the entrance of the club until 11 o'clock or so when I left the place to go to my hotel. When he saw me coming out of the building, he didn't say anything. He let me start walking in the semi-dark streets. Just a few steps behind me, he said, "Dad." I heard that voice, and it struck my heart so strongly. Without looking at him, I knew that it was my son. I turned around and just saw his silhouette, a big tall guy, and I cried. I couldn't help it. It was a very wonderful thing for me to see him -- alive. But then he told me -- he was supposed to come home that December -- he said that he had extended his tour for another six months. At that moment, I didn't understand why he did it. He was very honest with me. He said, "Dad, politically I don't know what we're doing here. I came because I'm an American and they asked me to fight for my country. I don't think we are going to win this war. We are fighting it with one hand tied behind our back. But I am staying because I lost many friends, many buddies, and I feel like I owe them something, and the only way to pay this debt that I feel to them is to stay here for another six months." Now, what can you tell a man -- not a boy, a man -- in those circumstances? Come home, I don't want you to stay? No, that was his decision. So he stayed. But he was wounded in February. He didn't last the six months. He was evacuated to Okinawa. It was not even in combat. One night a rocket landed in the barracks and killed several guys there, and my son was lucky enough just to get a shrapnel wound in one of his shoulders. Now he's okay, after two operations. He's got only limited movement in one of his arms, but he's okay. He has three wonderful girls, a wonderful wife, and he's working fine.

Does Feeds Both For VOA (Buenos Dias) and Latin American Stations

Q: While you were in Vietnam, did you feed material specifically designed for "Buenos Dias, America," as well as the rest of the programs?

DEL RIO: Yes, I was trying to feed, taking into consideration the difference in time. Unfortunately I could not go live on the show because of the time element and also because of the communications system. I had to go through the Pentagon in order to get to the Voice. Anyway, it was very difficult for me to get

live on the show. But I could send material to Central Recording of the Voice, and they would pass it to the show. So every day, I was on the show from Vietnam, not live but on tape, but with only one or two hours of difference. I was also sending material for the Feed Service for stations in Latin America, and that was a very successful idea.

Q: In which we do correspondent reports for broadcast on the local stations.

DEL RIO: Right. I used to close, "This is Jose Perez Del Rio, for this station, in Vietnam" -- without mentioning any station. And Cliff, I remember Dan Garcia, who was the deputy chief, told me, "You know, we are selling these like hot biscuits. Every- body in Latin America is using this material." I used to send three or four stories, without closes, so the stations were getting information from Vietnam free of charge. I don't know whose idea it was, but it worked out very well.

Q: So when you returned and resumed "Buenos Dias, America," what changes did you put into effect?

DEL RIO: Well, first let me tell you that Ramon Levy, who was my back-up man and took over the show as MC when I went to Nam, when I came back we started again trying to inject new ideas or whatever. I was glad to be back, in the sense that I was doing more radio. Being in the field is nice. It's a good experience, but it's not the kind of human broadcasting we were talking about. It's not the projection that you do in the studio. I went back to Vietnam in 1970, and noticed a big difference in Vietnam from '68 to '70. This assignment was less than six months. I was there in March, April and May, and I came back in June -- about four months more. But I could notice the difference in the smallest hut of the Vietnamese people the South Vietnamese flag. Also in Saigon, the fountains had water again. The people went to the zoo on Sundays, and they had music in the zoo, and colored balloons, and the children playing. No more shellings in '70. No more bombardments. But I remember, one piece I wrote described how you could walk the streets of Saigon, not feeling threatened at all.

Q: I'd like to go back and talk a little more about the space program, which President Stroessner talked about. You said you reported from Cape Kennedy, now Cape Canaveral again. How did you get out of "Buenos Dias, America," to go on this kind of trip? Was it the same as when you went to Vietnam? Sort of a leave of absence?

Broadcasting Space programs From Cape Canaveral

DEL RIO: No, it's not a leave. Let's go back. At the beginning, the pioneers of the space broadcasts in Spanish were Ivo Luis Alonso and Herb Morales. Morales covered the Glenn sub-orbital flight and Ivo covered Alan Shepard's first flight. So I went there after these two guys. My first assignment was with Walter Schirra, and from then on I covered the rest of Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo until the moon landing. I was assigned there to cover the space flights, but that didn't mean I was quitting the breakfast show. I had my reports every morning in the show, live. We didn't have the time problem the way we had in Vietnam. This was very easy to do. Communications were very easy. Besides reporting the live action, I used to give reports every morning to "Buenos Dias, America."

Q: Did you utilize a good deal of Laszlo Dosa's and other correspondents' materials?

DEL RIO: Yes, by all means. I think -- and this is something that I believe the rest of my colleagues in the language services would agree to -- Laszlo Dosa's pieces were the base

for the languages. He was the guy who provided us with the insight, the basic information, the technical information. I think that Laszlo Dosa did -- and will do any time -- a superb job. He's a wonderful writer, and he has the gift of explaining the most complicated technical situations in a layman's style" which is what you need in radio. I know he's retired, but I want to express my admiration for Laszlo Dosa for the wonderful job he did, and the scripts that he wrote on the space program.

Q: What special memories do you have of your many years on "Buenos Dias, America"?

DEL RIO: I think in our type of work you go with a happy heart. If you don't go with a happy heart, you are not going to project, my friend; you are just going to do a job that you have to do. But if you really want to tell the audience that you believe in what you are doing, you have to be with a happy heart. So every day, regardless -- and you have to get up at 2 o'clock in the morning to do "Buenos Dias, America," and shovel snow off your car in order to move -- but I knew that every day was a different challenge. Even though we knew what we had prepared for the next day, every day was a challenge for me and the rest of the crew. We enjoyed every day, every day, and we kidded among ourselves. We had a spirit.

Mechanics of Putting "Buenos Dias" Together

Q: Tell me a little bit about the mechanics of putting the program together. You talked about your crew. How many people were involved in the program? What time did you get to the studio? What time did you start getting your material together? Did you use material from the night before?

DEL RIO: Okay. The news editor and the news translators got there first, about 2 or 2:30 in the morning. By that time the newsroom has sent already the items we are supposed to pick up from the ticker. So that's the first thing that starts working -- the news. I used to get there at 3 o'clock. Then I went to the ticker to see all the CR's (correspondent reports) that we had -- the latest ones. Select whatever is the high priority, wherever it has anything to do with a news item, so it could be an extension of the news item. That was my first priority, to see what we have in CR's related to the news items, and distribute them to the translators. Then see the log from the night before, and see what you can still use in the morning, that's not outdated. Then check with the man in charge of the (Spanish-language) correspondents (around the hemisphere), the calls that he has already set for you. He had talked to these people the night before or the day before, and told them, "Tomorrow morning you call at this hour on this subject." So I had that information on my desk -- say, "The correspondent in Bogota is going to call you at 8 o'clock on this subject."

Q: These correspondents were employees of the USIS posts.

DEL RIO: Yes, or free-lancers that worked as stringers. So that information has to be combined with whatever CR's I have, you see; if not, they will go by themselves. Once you have all that, you start writing down the themes of the day. By that time it's almost

six o'clock. We go on the air, and some of the material has not been translated, so we will do that during the show. I would have two or three calls that would come during the show, so it was not precut: "This is the way it's going to be." No, you have to be flexible. And then suppose there is a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico. George Wehby, our excellent correspondent in Miami, will call me about five o'clock in the morning and say, "Look, I'm planning to listen to the six o'clock weather report, and I'll give you a live report about 6:35. Is that okay with you?" Let me write it down. So we communicate, and I'll get that report live from Miami. So every day is the same structure, but different insides. And that's beauty of the show. And everybody pitched in beautifully. We were a team.

Q: How long did you run this program?

DEL RIO: Twenty-five years. Twenty-five years.

Q: When did you retire?

Wisdom of Assigning Foreign Service Officers to VOA Jobs

DEL RIO: 1986. And now, if you'll allow me, I'd like to say something about the presence of our colleagues from the Foreign Service. I'll ask you a question. How do you feel about having new people come to the Voice every two or four years. Foreign Service Officers, and they change what their predecessors did, and they have their own ideas. Do you think that's good for the operation of the Voice of America?

Q: I think there's a better way. But I'm supposed to be asking the questions.

DEL RIO: I think there's a better way, yeah. And I think these gentlemen, they bring their baggage of knowledge of the regions that they come from. I'm talking about the Latin American program, but it applies to the whole operation. So they go there and spend two or three or four years -- obviously they have a deeper knowledge than we do in Washington of the countries where they've served. So now these guys are put in a very difficult situation, because all of a sudden, next assignment: Washington, Voice of America. They might ask themselves, "What do I know about radio?". But they have to come and perform. I can't blame them. They are in a hot spot. I guess they are in a hot spot. So they come and try to run things the way they used to do it in their own offices abroad. And it's quite different. They discover that -- afterwards.

Q: Some do and some don't. Some are excellent and some are lousy.

DEL RIO: Well, as I said, you cannot blame them, because most of them, I know, don't want to come to Washington. For many reasons. They'd rather go on another assignment abroad. But they are required to come to Washington and jobs have to be found for them. But I think the Voice and the government would be better served if these gentlemen were sort of advisers, but let somebody else run the day-to-day operation, dealing with the personnel -- the announcers, the writers, and others -- and just have their wonderful

knowledge help us to direct the content of our broadcasts. I should also note that a number of these Foreign Service Officers have journalistic backgrounds, and have been able to contribute to better programming.

Q: Some of the Foreign Service people we've had in senior positions at VOA started at the Voice before going into the Foreign Service, like Bill Haratunian and Vallimarescu, but these are very exceptional cases.

DEL RIO: They are exceptional cases. But they are two different capacities. Absolutely. The capacity of running a radio station, and the capacity of advising in policy. I think it would be fair to them, also.

Q: Before you left the organization, Pepe, you received one of the greatest honors that could be bestowed on you by the organization. You were named Outstanding Employee of the Year. What year was that?

DEL RIO: It was 1984; February 1984.

Q: You had also received Superior Service awards in the past.

DEL RIO: Yes, I received some citations for my work in Vietnam and my work in Latin America, for my trips. But this Outstanding Employee of the Year award in 1984 was the first award of this kind.

Q: "For extraordinary commitment and dedication in making a personal contribution to the goals of the Voice of America." That's very impressive.

Comments on Success of Program - and Some Criticisms

DEL RIO: And then in 1986, On October 31, when I retired, I got this: "Presented to Jose Pepe Del Rio upon retirement in grateful recognition of 25 years of service in the government of the United States of America."

Q: Well, I do think it is very ironic that, because of the way the law is written, and we're not supposed to publicize ourselves -- the USIA is not supposed to publicize its activities -- you are practically unknown in terms of publicity in the United States -- except through the network operations that you've now been able to engage in commercially, and yet through your travels in Latin America, you've gotten so much ink, as it's put, in terms of newspaper stories wherever you've been. I've seen your albums, and I know of these hundreds of stories that have been written about your visits to the various parts of the hemisphere. As in the case of Willis Conover, who's hardly known in the United States at all but overseas is well known.

DEL RIO: I think you were involved in a very successful project that I took part in. Bill Reynolds made some contacts on the West Coast, and this project was sort of a tourist visit to San Diego, Las Vegas, Palm Springs. They approached Bill Reynolds, who came

to you because you were the deputy program director. You had to give the okay for that project, and it worked beautifully. It consisted of me going to those places and doing reportages with sound, interviews, and then broadcast that as Americana themes in our programming in Latin America.

Q: And Bill Reynolds' material in English Breakfast Show to the rest of the world.

DEL RIO: The way to determine the success of these programs were the letters that we got. The Voice told these people that we weren't going to answer the letters we might get, so we'd give their address. We gave the address of these tourists departments so people could write there to get maps and brochures of Disneyland, Las Vegas, the San Diego Zoo and the other places -- a beautiful package for the audience. They got thousands and thousands of letters from Latin American, flooded with requests for the package. And the only way they knew about it was through "Buenos Dias, America." It was very successful. I don't see anything wrong with that. We're trying to project our country and our society to other societies, and this is a beautiful way to do it. The Voice should be able to do that more often.

Q: Of course now they've got this big bus that they go around in. Only they've cut the budget so they can't travel much. Have there been any criticisms through the years of your approach to broadcasting -- of the human side as opposed to the straight, deadpan, objective reporting?

DEL RIO: Yes. Within the Voice there have been criticisms of me, saying that I don't have enough "freight," they my program didn't carry enough freight, that I was too trivial on the air. That's within the Voice, at different levels. That's all I can say. I cannot pinpoint or determine who said what, but I know because I was told several times that there had been criticism about me, that I didn't go in depth with my interviews, that I was too light, didn't carry enough weight. I don't know if I personally did that, you know. I don't think I was a commentator. I never even tried to pretended to be a commentator. My job I think consisted of delivering the policies of the country, and I tried to make it palatable for the audience. I worked for radio, and I know it's very easy for anyone, if they think you are too hard or harsh, just to move the dial a little bit and you are gone.

Q: Some people used to say that we're not in the entertainment business, and I agreed we were in the information business, but it had to be information presented entertainingly.

DEL RIO: Those are exactly the words that I heard from some people at the Voice. We are not in the entertainment business, and Pepe Del Rio is trying to do an entertainment program. Nothing is father from the truth than that. I was trying to put as much freight as we could in the morning show, that now is three hours long, with the best flavor for the people that listen to it. That was my only sin.

Q: Since you left, has the program retained its format and its shape and style and content?

DEL RIO: From what I have heard, yes, it has retained the same format. I've heard in general terms that it's still the same, with an emcee, and they still do the show on the same basis.

Q: Well, I'd consider that a high compliment to you.

DEL RIO: At the beginning, I understand that they were trying to make drastic changes in the show. There was a phrase that said something like, the Voice of America is not going to cultivate personalities. Now, I don't know what they mean by that. Cult of personalities. In my case, I think it was a very big injustice, saying that I was trying to sell myself in the show, that I was pushing Pepe Del Rio. I don't know who said that, but people at the Voice said that, that I was pushing for me, and that's the biggest injustice and the biggest lie, because the only thing I was thinking of on the air, when that red light went on, and I knew that I was on the air with three hours to fill, the only thought I had in my mind was to do a good show and tell what we have to tell.

I also have letters from Latin America in which they said that I was another guy sold to the American imperialism -- which is a favorite phrase in Latin America. I remember once -- I don't have to mention the country -- one newspaper, the guy who interviewed me asked, "Are you an American citizen?" I said, "Yes, I am." He asked me, "Why?" I said, "Because I believe in the American ideology and my life has taken place in the United States and I want to be 100 percent a part of the American people." That's what I told him. But what he published in the newspaper was a different story. The article came out saying something like, "I have betrayed my country of birth, that I have become an American citizen because of convenience." Absolutely nothing of what I told the guy. Unfortunately we didn't record it; we were just talking. That's an experience I will never forget.

Q: What politically motivated kind of paper was it? Left, right, center?

DEL RIO: I don't remember. That was the way it came out. It was embarrassing to me. As a matter of fact, the USIS office, when they saw that the next day, asked me, "How come you gave this kind of statement?" And I said, "I didn't give this kind of statement. What they say there is not true."

Q: Did anybody protest?

DEL RIO: I don't know. I left the country; I was only there for two or three days.

Q: Considering all the good press you've gotten, that one you can live with.

DEL RIO: Yeah, I guess. But that's unfair. Another criticism, again, this one from some Latin American listeners, is that I was trying to sell myself, to promote myself. But what you really are doing is trying to project an image of complete control, or something like that, about the show.

Q: Well, you can't please everybody, Pepe, but you've pleased an awful lot over a long time.

Heart Warming Experiences That Offset Bitter Moments

DEL RIO: But it's not roses all the way. Cliff. You have beautiful experiences. Like once I was in Bogota and an old friend of mine whom I hadn't seen for ages, the signer, Leo Marini, all of a sudden I saw his picture in the lobby of the hotel. I said, "My God, I thought he was dead." He was performing that night in the penthouse of the Tequendama Hotel in Bogota. So I called the operator and said, "May I have the room of Mr. Leo Marini?" I called him up on the phone and he said, "Hello?" I said, "This is Pepe Del Rio, you remember me?" "Yes, my God, I haven't heard from you in ages." "Well, same here. I saw your picture downstairs." He said, "Listen, I'm performing tonight, as you know, in the Roof Garden here in the hotel. Are you coming?" I said, "I'm by myself." "Okay, you will have a table." I went up there, about 11 o'clock. (The night club shows there are late.) I told the maitre d' who I was, and he showed me to my table. And there is Leo Marini in the spotlight. The guy is a master. He sang more than an hour by himself, with his old songs, and the public was delighted with him. At the end of his performance, he said, "Tonight, I have a wonderful guest, a dear guest of mine here, came all the way from Washington -- giving the impression that I came there for his performance -- Mr. Pepe Del Rio from the Voice of America." They put the spotlight on me, and here I am all by myself. That was beautiful. And then Leo went to sign autographs. A young Colombian couple came to my table and the boy said, "Mr. Del Rio, are you really Pepe Del Rio from the Voice of America?" "Yes, I am." "You know, if my father could be here instead of me, he would be the happiest man in the world. I am 23 years old now, but since I was a little boy, your name has been a household word in my home, because my dad listened to you every morning and you are just like one of the family. I am here on my honeymoon. I am from Santa Marta. And this is the best present that I ever had. I can't believe I'll go home and tell my father that I met you." He introduced his wife, and I asked if they would care to have a drink with me and he said, "No, no, I just want to say that you are like an uncle to me. I never thought I was going to meet you on my wedding trip." His wife was very nice. That's a moment. That's beautiful

Q: That's gratifying. That made it all worthwhile.

DEL RIO: And then in Costa Rica. Did I tell you this story? I was there, and the guys in the (USIS) office said, "We've got to go to Alajuela, because there is an old farmer who keeps asking us about you. He's always writing letters. He cannot afford the postage to send a letter to the States, so he brings the letters here to us for us to mail." And I'm sure that I got some of his letters, but I couldn't remember the name. So we went to Alajuela, and we went to this little hacienda, and the old man came out, all wrinkled by the sun, an old man. He was crying. Cliff, with emotion. He embraced me, and I embraced him -- wonderful! Meeting somebody that he knew just on the air. He said, "Listen, I want to share you with Oscar." Who's Oscar, I asked myself. Sure, let's share this moment with Oscar. So we went back in the field, and Oscar was an ox! An ox that he uses to plow the land. He hangs on his horns a transistor radio, and that was how he was listening to the

Voice of America, and the morning broadcast. While he was plowing the land, he was listening. And Oscar was listening too! My God, those are things. Cliff that -- how can you forget them? I think that pays for every bitter moment.

Twenty-five years. And I still miss the Voice. I miss it. I miss the exciting moment, you know, preparing the show. I used to shout, close to airtime, to everybody: "It's showtime!" (Laughter)

Q: What are some of the oddball memories you have of events that occurred while you were out covering a story?

A Birth Aboard An Eastern Airline Plane Out of Puerto Rico

DEL RIO: Well, I cannot precisely tell you the odds, but something happened to me that I don't think could happen ever again in my life. I might go back to cover a war or I might interview presidents or what have you, but I don't think something like this would happen to me over again. I think the odds are very high; I don't know how many millions.

Q: So what happened?

DEL RIO: I went to San Juan, Puerto Rico to cover a music festival -- with my wife, Bea -- and we had a nice time. We were coming back, flying toward Miami. I always carry my tape recorder, and I had it in my seat, next to me. I was having a drink, enjoying the flight, and all of a sudden I hear this commotion in the back of the plane, people talking, and I asked, "what's going on?". Somebody said, "A lady is about to give birth." (Laughter) That's what I mean about the odds being so high. I went back to my seat and picked up my tape recorder and went toward the back of the plane. The crew put a big blanket up to separate the last back seats from the rest of the cabin, and that was where this lady was.

Q: Was there a doctor on board?

DEL RIO: Fortunately. The captain announced the event over the speakers, saying, "We are in a rare position" -- something like that -- "a baby is going to be born. If there is a doctor on board, we would appreciate his help." I couldn't believe my ears. Fortunately, a doctor from Argentina was aboard the plane, and went behind the blanket. The crew was kind of rude with me, because I wanted to see the lady. I didn't know how old she was, where she was from -- on those flights, lots of people come from Puerto Rico, but maybe they are from Colombia or Venezuela or where have you. So I didn't know the nationality of this lady, or how old she was, or her name. The flight attendants refused to give the name or let me see this lady. By the time I got my tape recorder, they had the blanket there. I got close to the blanket but didn't see anything that was going on.

Q: Well, I think the woman deserved some privacy.

DEL RIO: Of course. But you know I was always looking for news. Anyway, I had my tape recorder on, I was taping everything, including the discussion I had with the flight crew, and all of a sudden there was the cry of a baby, and you could hear it in the recording. Unfortunately we were talking at that moment; I was arguing with these people when we heard the cry of the baby, and everybody started applauding and cheering and what have you. I said something like, "Maybe you hear the cry of the baby." Once I edited the whole thing, I said, "I want to repeat that particular moment. Please pay attention, and you will hear the cry of the baby." And I repeated the same part.

A few minutes later, the doctor came out from behind the blanket. He gave me his name but he didn't know the name of the girl. The only thing he could tell me was that she was from Puerto Rico, about 18 or 20 years old, and that she had given birth to a baby girl. That was all the information he had. The stewardesses sent me back to my seat because we were approaching the airport already. We were supposed to change planes in Miami and continue to Washington, but I said I had to follow this story. I made arrangements to pick up our luggage, and went to the hotel. (When we landed), an ambulance was waiting, and before anyone left the plane they took this lady on a stretcher into the ambulance and took off. I talked to the captain of the plane. I was interested in knowing the nationality of the baby, born in the air, and he told me that when a baby is born in a plane that flies under the flag of the United States, wherever it's flying, that baby is an American.

Q: It doesn't just take on the nationality of the mother then. As a Puerto Rican, this mother was an American citizen, but if she'd been Venezuelan, the baby would still have been an American.

DEL RIO: This was a first time for the captain, too, he'd never flown a flight when a baby was born on board. Anyway, we went to the hotel, and I immediately called the Eastern (airlines) PR people. They already knew, because the guy on the phone said, "Oh, you were the reporter aboard the plane that was asking questions." He said, "I'm sorry, I want to apologize, but these are company rules, that they cannot give you this kind of information." I said, "I stayed because I want to follow the story." He said, "I will be very glad to pick you up at the hotel and take you to the hospital so you can see the lady." I said, "Wonderful!" So he came and drove my wife and me to the hospital. And there she was, in a room by herself, very young and very tiny. In the interview, she told me that she was on her way to Chicago to join her husband. I asked, "How come you boarded a plane being so close to giving birth?" She said, "Well, it was not very noticeable to begin with, and second, I didn't expect to have the baby for another four or five weeks. She was very nice. Then they put one of those green hospital gowns on me and a mask on my face and we went to the nursery, this lady with me. She was walking already. They took a picture of the mother and baby.

During the interview, I asked her, "Is this your first baby?" She said, "No, this is my third baby." I said, "My God, you married very young," and she said, "Yes" and gave me a special smile. She said, "You want to know something? My first baby was born on a train." I couldn't believe my ears. I said, "I beg your pardon. Your first baby was born on

a train?" "Yes. I was traveling from New Jersey to New York, and I just had the baby right there on the train." I said, "My God, this is unbelievable! How about the second one?" She laughed, and said, "Well, the second one was born at the airport in St. Thomas, while I was waiting for a flight to go to Puerto Rico." I said, "You mean you gave birth, the first time on a train, the second one at the airport, and the third one on a plane?" And she said, "Yes sir, this is the truth." Well, that's the story. Then I had to do a lot of editing, and put it on the air at the Voice.

I understand that Eastern Airlines took care of the hospital bill, and somebody told me that that girl was going to get a lifetime pass on Eastern so she could fly free. They flew her, with the baby, to Chicago. I gave her my address, and she sent me a clipping from a Chicago newspaper -- a big story, with the baby and the husband and she and the whole story -- and I have it somewhere in my scrapbooks. So I think that's something that's extraordinary.

Q: I'm not going to ask you for another one, because nothing could top that.

DEL RIO: I don't think anything could top that. As I said, you can go and cover one war or another one, you can interview one president and another one, but something like this I don't think will ever happen again in my life. It was unbelievable.

Q: It certainly is. But I have to believe you.

DEL RIO: Let me tell you who else was on that flight, who could be a witness: Guillermo Portuondo, our (VOA Spanish) sportscaster, who had been covering some sports events in Puerto Rico.

Importance of Complimenting the "Troops" -- "Little Things Mean A Lot!"

Q: Changing the subject drastically -- what would you suggest as a means of helping to improve the morale or working conditions at VOA?

DEL RIO: I'd like to see something like incentives for the people that work at the Voice. I will use the word troops, and by that I mean simple announcers, writers. Incentives. When you work at the Voice, or in a private organization, you don't expect a pat on your shoulder every day; that's overdoing things. But I think that in the Voice, due to the work that we do, the people should be reminded more often by the supervisors, by the chiefs -- the higher the better -- that they are doing a good job. I think that's a wonderful incentive that promotes the creativity in the people. We don't have that at the Voice.

Q: But in recent years, Pepe, there has been a significant increase in the awards program, honoring every quarter programs put out by the Persian Service or the Latin American Division or the whoever.

DEL RIO: All right, you might have that kind of awards, that go only to one or two are dealing with human beings, with people, and in this kind of work many of us, you know, have big egos.

Q: There's also the tendency because there's so much to be done by so few people. People are too busy to acknowledge what other people are doing.

DEL RIO: That's another good example, you know. Sometimes when we have these blizzards in Washington, and you're supposed to operate with seven or eight people and all of a sudden you have only three. Well, the next day, buy a cup of coffee for these people, tell them, "Hey, you were great, only three people handled the job of ten." Little things like that I think are important. It boosts the morale of people.

Q: What else do you want to talk about?

DEL RIO: (JPDR muses about retirement, his own and others, and about his new career as Washington correspondent of a Spanish-language U. S. network)

I wanted to stay longer at the Voice. I retired because of my health; I couldn't cope with the pressures of a daily program like that. That would take a lot out of anyone, especially if he does it with his heart. My doctors advised me not to go farther, and I decided to retire. Sometimes I listen to the Voice in the morning and at night, and I listen to many other international short-wave stations. That's something that everybody that works at the Voice of America -- I don't care what language -- should do, so that they know what the competition, the other side is doing. It'll give you a more realistic perspective on what you're facing. I think that a guy that writes a story or translates a story and gets it edited and goes to the studio and records it, and that's it -- but in order to analyze where that story is going to and what it's supposed to do -- it's not just punching a clock and I'm through. I think that's very important.

Q: They need to know the context into which they are broadcasting.

DEL RIO: Right. You have to listen to what the other people are doing -- the sound, to begin with, what kind of voices they have, their delivery, their content. Then compare with what you're doing. I listen -- in Spanish -- to BBC, I listen to Radio Moscow, I listen to Radio Havana, Radio Peking, Radio Praga in Czechoslovakia, Radio Vaticano, La Voz de los Andes, Radio Canada, Radio Nacional de Espana, Radio Israel. That gives you a different dimension of what's going on. And I'm sure that if I went back to international radio I might make some changes in order to compete. I have more time now to listen. Sometimes it's two o'clock in the morning and I'm listening to short-wave radio.

Q: So what else is on your mind?

DEL RIO: Well, I know that somewhere here in the States, and somewhere in Latin America, there are a lot of professionals that are dreaming of coming up and working for

the Voice of America. That's a fact. Why? Because the Voice of America is an institution, a respected institution. My only advice to these guys is, if they come to work at the Voice of America, try to do it with all their hearts. Not just try to fulfill the agreement, the job description, but try to put their hearts in it and I'm sure they will find very satisfactory results.

Q: Thank you, Pepe.

End of interview