

Program helps disfigured war veterans look and feel better

By David Tarrant

dtarrant@dallasnews.com

2:38 pm on September 20, 2012 | [Permalink](#)

Operation Mend, the nonprofit organization that helps soldiers in need of reconstructive and plastic surgery, was the focus of a fundraiser Wednesday, hosted by billionaire T. Boone Pickens, at the Dallas Country Club.

Operation Mend began in 2007 after founder Ron Katz visited San Antonio's [Brooke Army Medical Center](#), the military's primary burn center. Katz met with troops suffering from burns and other complex blast injuries. As a board member and benefactor of UCLA Medical Center, Katz was in a position to help, by making available the services of world-class plastic surgeons. Along with his late wife, Maddie, Katz forged a private-public partnership between the military and UCLA called Operation Mend, to provide cosmetic surgery at no cost to the injured veterans..

Since then, Operation Mend has reached out to dozens of service members in desperate need of plastic and reconstructive surgery. Many of these troops sustained facial trauma injuries that left them badly scarred, with missing or mutilated ears, noses and mouths. They also experienced post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues, including depression.

That was the case with Joey Paulk, 26, an Army specialist who nearly burned to death in Afghanistan in 2007, while serving with an military police unit.

Paulk's vehicle was hit by roadside mines causing the fuel tank ignite. Paulk's team leader died, and Paulk sustained extensive burns over his face and body. After 18 months of hospitalization and dozens of surgeries at Brooke, Paulk was medically discharged in 2009. He returned to his hometown of San Diego but struggled to adapt to his new life. Outgoing, athletic and active before his injury, he avoided leaving his home because he didn't like people staring at him. He could cover up the scars on his hands, arms and legs but he couldn't hide his face. He fell into depression. "I wasn't very happy with the way I looked," he said.

At the time of his Army discharge, Paulk was given information about Operation Mend, but at the time, he didn't want to go through any more surgeries. Now, he decided to contact the organization. Three surgeries later, he feels like he looks ten times better.

"It's helped my friends and family, too," Paulk said. "Because I'm happy, they're happy."

Katz said that Operation Mend has provided free surgeries to more than 50 veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. He estimated that each surgery costs about \$500,000. Pickens, 84, said that while

he is opposed to the war in Afghanistan, he's committed to helping wounded veterans, like Paulk. "We want to do our best for these men and women when they come home."

You can [follow me](#) or our [investigative reporting team](#) on *Twitter*. You can also like our page on *Facebook*.