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Quilters honor valor in mending torn life

"I've been given the hands to mend and the heart to bring comfort and healing."

Patti Taylor

UCLA nurse and former Army nurse who led work on a patriotic quilt for Marine Cpl. Aaron Mankin

How to help

Anyone interested in participating in Operation Mend can purchase and donate fabric to help make quilts for military men and women. Call Patches Fabrics at (818) 344-2678 for more information.

BY SUSAN ABRAM

Staff Writer

Two years after an explosive device nearly tore him apart, the story of Marine Cpl. Aaron Mankin's recovery is about various pieces coming together.

It's about UCLA's partnership with a military burn center in Texas to help heal the hundreds of wounded U.S. military men and women coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan. It's about Dr. Timothy Miller, a plastic surgeon and a Vietnam veteran, who will use Mankin's own skin and bones to reconstruct the corporal's nose and eyes.

And it's about Patti Taylor, a retired Army nurse who led the effort to stitch together red, white and blue fabric to create a small token of comfort to wrap around Mankin as he undergoes the first major stage of facial reconstruction beginning today at UCLA.

"I've spent many years at the bedside of many soldiers," said Taylor, 63, of Sylmar, a clinical nurse at UCLA. "I know what happens to them when they come home."

On Monday, Mankin stood tall and proud in his dress uniform as Taylor presented him with the patriotic quilt, sewn together by at least a dozen pairs of hands in a Reseda fabric shop.

He is the first to participate in Operation Mend, a project that will provide reconstructive



Tina Burch/Staff Photographer

UCLA clinical nurse and former Army nurse Patti Taylor holds Marine Cpl. Aaron Mankin's infant daughter and a patriotic quilt to add comfort as Mankin, badly burned by a bomb in Iraq, undergoes reconstructive surgery starting today.

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QUILT: SYMBOL

Brave Marine comforted in patching war-torn life

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tive surgery and support to injured military personnel.

"A quilt like this is significant," he said during a news conference at UCLA. "It means individuals had me in mind long enough to make this."

Mankin had been working as a military combat correspondent along the Iraq-Syria border when an improvised explosive device detonated underneath his vehicle.

The blast seared the skin on his right hand and face. More than 25 percent of his body was burned. But as the first Operation Mend participant, Mankin said his story will help hundreds who share the same injuries.

"There are several servicemen and -women right now lying in bed who don't know what to expect," he said. "There are days that are harder than others, but we inspire each other in the burn clinic."

Mankin's surgery is made possible through a collaboration between UCLA Medical Center and the Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio.

The Katz Family Foundation is paying for all other costs, including housing for Mankin and his wife, Marine Lance Cpl. Diana Mankin, and their 8-month-old daughter, Maddie, at UCLA's Tiverton House in Westwood.

Philanthropist Ronald Katz said the idea to create Operation Mend was inspired by a visit to the Brooke hospital.

"Walking through the burn ward — it's not a place that is easy to go through," he said. "We felt it was our duty to do this. ... Aaron is the first of many who will be coming here. He is a great American, and I am proud to bring him here."

And as long as there are soldiers and Marines and other servicemen and -women in need, Taylor and her quilting group will be there, meeting once a week in Reseda to make as many American quilts as needed.

Born and raised in an Amish Mennonite community in upstate New York, Taylor said she had wanted to be a doctor, but her father



Tina Burch/Staff Photographer

Maddie Mankin, 8 months old, sits on a patriotic quilt made by UCLA clinical nurse and former Army nurse Patti Taylor, left, for Marine Cpl. Aaron Mankin, 25. Below is a photo of Mankin before he was burned by an explosion in Iraq two years ago.

had not allowed it.

"He wanted me to be a farmer's wife," she said.

She mustered enough courage to leave her community to join the Army, and she was trained as a military nurse during the Vietnam era.

Her military career took her as far as Iraq, where she helped treat the wounded during the Persian Gulf War. And she worked at Brooke as well.

But it's the sewing skill she gained as a child that still brings her pleasure. Each Wednesday, she and about a dozen other local residents gather at Patches Fabrics in Reseda to make quilts.

"I've been given the hands to mend and the heart to bring comfort and healing," she said. "We are a nation at war. It will take a nation to heal."



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