

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

DAILY BRUIN

Resilience drives army vets' trek to South Pole



Courtesy of Mark Wise

📅 January 16, 2014 ⌚ 1:14 am

[More stories in News](#)

BY ARIANA RICARTE

Temperatures dipped far below zero as the team of 12 people dragged sleds filled with supplies through the icy white terrain.

Months earlier, they had been trained how to eat, dress and ski in order to survive the harsh environment and ski through their 13-day trek to the South Pole.

For Mark Wise and his teammates, this journey was only possible after months of healing.

Wise, a U.S. Army veteran and patient of UCLA Operation Mend, recently participated in a 200-mile trek to the South Pole through the group Walking with the Wounded, a charity which aims to showcase the resilience and determination of wounded servicemen and servicewomen. The team reached the South Pole in mid-December.

Through UCLA Operation Mend, a program that provides reconstructive surgery to veterans, Wise was able to undergo procedures that increased functionality of his hand and mouth, which were injured in Afghanistan.

Since its establishment in 2007, the program has serviced 98 veterans, many of whom have had multiple surgeries, said Melanie Gideon, program manager for UCLA Operation Mend.

“Going through the surgeries changed my perception of how I looked and helped me gain back the confidence I lost,” Wise said. “Now I would like to be an advocate for other veterans to help them move forward.”

Although it was a painful process, Wise said the surgery provided by UCLA Operation Mend was the turning point in his journey to recovery.

When he trained to be an army officer, Wise said he wanted to be part of his family’s history of servicemen.

Wise was deployed to Afghanistan in May 2009 and served as an infantry platoon leader where he and other soldiers ran patrols and daily missions to secure the area.

During a morning patrol in October 2009, he said his platoon came under fire and Wise and a fellow soldier Pfc. Devin Michel tried to switch positions with each other. When Michel stepped behind Wise, he accidentally set off an explosive device.

Michel was killed instantly.

Wise said he felt his body being thrown back to the ground and was temporarily blinded by the blast. The front of his armor and his helmet were blown off.

“I knew I had to stay conscious for as long as possible to increase my chances of survival,” Wise said.

When Wise regained consciousness nine days later at Walter Reed Army Medical Hospital in Washington, D.C., he said he saw his arms and legs were fixated to the hospital bed and he was eating through a feeding tube.

The blast had left him with several injuries, including a hole in his face, three amputated fingers and shattered knees.

“I was in a very bad state of mind when I woke up,” Wise said. “I really had to come to a state of acceptance and realize that this was going to be a long recovery.”

One of the most difficult moments of recovery was seeing his injured face for the first time.

“When you look in the mirror and you don’t see yourself looking back, you don’t feel like the same person,” Wise said. “How can you interact normally with family and friends?”

Wise said the turning point in his recovery came when he heard about UCLA Operation Mend. He just needed to regain enough physical strength to travel, and the Army would send him to UCLA for treatment, Wise said.

Through small and painful steps, Wise said he slowly began to regain the use of his legs through intensive physical therapy and eventually was well enough to travel.

Wise said coming to UCLA Medical Center for the first time was a frightening ordeal, although it ultimately helped him regain his confidence.

At the hospital, he met his surgeons, Timothy Miller and Kodi Azari, who he said calmed many of his concerns about the procedure.

Wise underwent his first surgery to close off the hole in his cheek in April 2010. Since then, he has had additional surgeries for his face and hand.

Azari, hand surgeon for UCLA Operation Mend, said he freed tendons in Wise's hand in order to increase the range of motion and improve functionality.

"It was so important to improve the use of (Wise's) hand because aside from the face, it's the second-most exposed body part," Azari said. "What the mind conjures, the hand executes."

Although the first surgery was the most traumatic, Wise said it did wonders to improve his self-esteem.

Before the reconstructive surgery on his hand, Gideon said she noticed Wise felt self-conscious about his appearance and used to put his hand in his pocket. After the surgery, she said she saw him start gesturing and not being as shy.

Wise said he had to readjust his eyes to reading and writing, and relearn how to type after the injuries.

"It was such a mental struggle, but it was satisfying to go from not being able to do anything, to running," Wise said.

Wise said that although he was able to go back to school and start working again, he wanted a sense of a higher purpose.

When he received an email about potentially participating in a program called Walking for the Wounded as an advocate for other veterans, he said he knew it was something he needed to do.

He applied and eventually was selected to be on the team of American veterans who would travel to the South Pole.

Wise said it was easy for him to transition from the military to the arctic conditions because the training is somewhat similar.

"You still have to be very diligent and take care of yourself and teammates if you want to survive," Wise said.

Although he and his teammates all had suffered some type of injury while serving in the military, Wise said they all filled in each other's gaps, making the journey a success.

Wise said each participant had their own personal reason for participating in the trek.

For Wise, thinking of Michel was part of the reason he kept going.

"I respect him so much and wanted to do something to honor him," Wise said.

Email Ricarte at aricarte@media.ucla.edu.