



Healing Wounds and Bringing Hope

UCLA Plastic Surgeons Bring Expertise to Iraq Veteran Burn Victims

By MEENA HARTENSTEIN, JAMES HILL and JAIMIE HENNESSEY

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It took Cpl. Aaron Mankin six weeks after his injury in Iraq to finally look at himself in the mirror. What he saw brought him to tears.

"There's this stranger in the mirror that you couldn't imagine in your worst nightmare," he told ABC's Bob Woodruff. "I couldn't help but cry."

For information about Operation Mend [click here](#)

Mankin, a 25-year-old Marine, was wounded in 2005 when the vehicle he was traveling in rolled over an improvised explosive device and exploded 10 feet in the air. Four Marines died in the attack and 11 others were injured.

"I was thrown back inside the vehicle and I knew that I was on fire right away," Mankin said. Assuming he would die, Mankin closed his eyes and concentrated on what he thought would be the last image he would ever see — the face of his girlfriend, Marine Lance Corp. Diana Kavanec.

Instead, he survived, though his injuries were gruesome.

"I woke up to the sound of my fellow Marines saying 'Put him out, put him out,'" said Mankin. In addition to the damage he sustained to his throat and lungs from smoke inhalation, he suffered intense burns on more than 25 percent of his body, leaving him severely disfigured and unrecognizable.

His ears, nose and mouth were so badly burned that they were essentially gone; he lost two fingers on his right hand.

A New Face, With Private Sector Help

Now, two years later, a unique partnership between the military and a team of doctors from UCLA Medical Center is working to give Mankin his face back.

He is the first patient in a program called Operation Mend, which will give returning service members with severe facial injuries access to the country's best plastic and reconstructive surgeons who work in the private sector.

"I think it's the private sector's duty to stand up if they have been fortunate enough and do something extra to help," said philanthropist Ronald Katz, who created the program and also serves on the board of advisers for UCLA Medical Center.

After spending time with several injured veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Katz became determined to combine the efforts of the military with the resources of the private sector to give these wounded service members the best care available.

"I knew we had a spectacular facial reconstruction group," he said of the doctors at UCLA. "And I said, 'Is there a way that we could offer our services and give these kids not only the best that the Army has to offer, but the best the country has to offer?'"

To answer this question, he initiated Operation Mend, and beginning with Mankin, UCLA's Medical Center and Brooke Army Medical Center — the military's premier burn treatment center in San Antonio — will work together to select Brooke patients who will be flown to UCLA for further reconstructive surgery.

Col. Carlos Angueira, deputy commander for clinical services at Brooke, is thrilled about the partnership. "Anytime that you can get an organization of the caliber of UCLA to partner with you to take care of folks, that's a great thing," he said. "I just see it as another example of great Americans doing great things for each other."

Mankin has already undergone nearly 30 surgeries at Brooke to repair the most immediate and critical damage to his face, but he still remains severely disfigured.

Doctors at UCLA are optimistic that they will be able to return his face to something that much more closely resembles his former self.

"I want him to look as normal as possible," said Dr. Timothy Miller, the chief of plastic and reconstructive surgery at UCLA Medical Center, who will be leading the surgery. "There's always going to be some scarring. There's always going to be some evidence that it was a very serious injury, but I believe it's going to look considerably better in the long run."

'My Obligation & to Help Them'

Miller is a veteran of the Vietnam War, and in a way, Operation Mend is a kind of homecoming — Miller performed his surgical internship in Brooke's Burn Center.

Like Katz, he believes that the private sector should step in when it has the ability to help, so he is donating his surgical services for the duration of Mankin's operations.

"The Army resources are thin and these cases take a long time to get to the point where you're finished," he said. "In Cpl. Mankin's case we're looking at a good six months, if not seven or eight."

Miller hopes that Mankin will be the first of many burned soldiers that Operation Mend can help. "I sincerely believe that they have given a great sacrifice to our country, and I feel it is my obligation if I can, to help them in any way I possibly can," he said. "I feel privileged to be able to help them, and to the extent that I can, I am very grateful."

Mankin is grateful, too. Even though he has become accustomed to his face in the last two years, he says the chance to have it repaired has given him a newfound hope, and his mission now is to give other soldiers who have suffered similar burn injuries the hope that they too can recover.

"That means more to me than me looking better tomorrow," he said.

Blushing Bride: 'Not Going to Lose Him Again'

While he still has a long road of recovery ahead, Mankin will not be going through it alone. By his side is Diana Kavanec, the woman whose face he pictured as he lay injured in Iraq.

She is now his wife — just three months after his injury, Mankin proposed to her at the bottom of an airport escalator as she returned from Iraq where she had been serving in the Marines.

At the time, Kavanec had not seen him since his injury and did not know the extent of his wounds or even that he had been burned. "I knew that he was alive and that's about it," she said.

At first, Mankin's badly disfigured face shocked her, and she says she did not recognize him. That didn't stop Mankin from getting down on one knee and asking her to marry him. "She hadn't seen me for more than 15 seconds and I popped the question," he said with a laugh.

Despite her initial surprise at seeing Mankin so badly injured, Kavanec had no doubt that she wanted to marry him. "I knew that I wanted to be with him still, and that's what got us through it," she said. The couple married last year and have an 8-month-old daughter named Madeline.

If anything, says Kavanec, she loves him more now than she did before. "This was almost like [a] second chance," she said. "I almost lost him once, and I'm not going to lose him again."

For More Information

For details about Operation Mend:

<http://www.uclahealth.org/body.cfm?id=403&action=detail&ref=161>

To contribute to the program: <https://giving.ucla.edu/plasticsurgery> or contact Adrienne Walt, director of development, UCLA Medical Sciences, awalt@support.ucla.edu, (310) 267-1835.

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