

Operation Mend gives disfigured soldier his face back

By Erica Fox FOX 5 San Diego Reporter
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VISTA, Calif. - A soldier who was severely wounded and disfigured while in **Afghanistan** is getting his face back thanks to a Vietnam veteran and doctor from La Mesa.

A program called **Operation Mend** has provided **reconstructive surgery** to nearly 45 injured military members, including Joey Paulk from Vista.

In 2007, he was deployed as an Army MP to train the Afghanistan police.

"When (Afghanistan police) would come up and say thank you for what you taught us saved our life, it's a great accomplishment in itself," said Paulk of the sense of accomplishment the job provided.

Paulk's life changed in July of 2007, when an *improvised explosive device (IED)* hit his convoy.

"My team leader was killed instantly, they say," said Paulk. "I was engulfed in the flames and ejected out of the truck."

After spending three and a half weeks in a medically induced coma, he awoke at Brooke Army Medical Center in **Texas**. Paulk spent another five weeks avoiding the mirror. Finally, though, he looked at himself.

"It was way worse than I thought and I broke down crying," he said. "Needless to say, that session of therapy wasn't happening. I went right back to bed. I just laid there and realized that's me now."

For 18 months in Texas, he looked the same.

"My lower eyelid went halfway down my cheek," Paulk said. "I had no upper eyelid; my lower lip was all the way down to my chin."

He was frustrated by how he looked and what he could no longer do.

"I couldn't pronounce P's. I couldn't whistle. I couldn't eat a double-double from In and Out," he said.

That was until he got connected with Operation Mend, a partnership with Brooke Army Medical Center and UCLA offering reconstructive surgery for service members disfigured in war. Paulk has undergone several surgeries at UCLA under Dr. Timothy Miller, who grew up in La Mesa.

"With each operation, and there have been three, his personality has visibly changed," said Dr. Miller who served in Vietnam. "This is without a doubt the highest accomplishment I can imagine in my professional life."

Paulk said he couldn't be happier with the reconstructive surgery and the changes he's seen in his face.

"(Dr. Miller) said, 'That's what we'll get to then - you'll eat a double-double, you'll be able to pronounce everything you want to, and you'll be able to whistle again. I'll get you there.' And he has, he really has," said Paulk.

Paulk can whistle, toss a football, drive, he has a girlfriend and hopes to one day open a sports bar at the beach.

"What I did for our country is so much more that I'm just real proud of what I did," he said. "I'm proud of what I look like for what I did."

The **Operation Mend** program is open to receiving donations.