

## Working together to support wounded vets

Operation Mend, which is supported by Land of the Free Foundation, provides reconstructive and plastic surgery to veterans wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan.



By **SCOTT M. REID** / THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

The war in Afghanistan never ends for James Barclay.

More than six years after Barclay was severely wounded by a roadside bomb that killed three soldiers, the war is still always at his fingertips. More than 30 surgeries later it's still there each day waiting to stare back at him in the morning mirror.

Edward Roski, left, and John Semcken teamed with fellow veteran Kent Valley in 2007 to launch Land of the Free Foundation, a non-profit organization that raises money for veterans support groups.

**What:** Land of the Free Golf Classic

**When/where:** Monday, Pacific Palms Resort, City of Industry. Registration begins at 8 a.m. Dinner and awards are 5 p.m.

**More information:** [www.landofthefreefoundation.org](http://www.landofthefreefoundation.org)

**More on Operation Mend:** [www.operationmend.ucla.edu/](http://www.operationmend.ucla.edu/)

The explosion burned 47 percent of Barclay's body, including his face. Thirty-five percent of his body was covered with third-degree burns, including severe burns to his hands and fingers.

"You wake up with it," Barclay, a retired U.S. Army captain who was a platoon leader for the 10th Mountain Division, said of his wounds. "You can't wash it off. It's not like a uniform. You can't just take it off.

"You have to live with it."

And so Barclay, like thousands of wounded veterans, continues to wage his own private battle against a war that followed him home, the war that never ends; a daily pursuit of simple triumphs.

As Barclay began a series of procedures to repair among other things his mouth, so burnt and scarred that he couldn't eat anything larger than a grape, he was asked what he hoped for after the surgeries.

"I would like to eat a burger," he said.

Barclay also would like one day to teach his 3-year old son how to golf, just as his grandfather taught him on a nine-hole course in northeast Alabama a generation ago. It was a goal that for years seemed unrealistic, given how the roadside bomb had ravaged his hands.

Yet Monday morning Barclay will be on the first tee of the Land of the Free Golf Classic at the Pacific Palms Resort in the City of Industry, golf club in his hands, a wide open future in front of him.

Barclay's ability to play golf again as well take part in a number of other daily activities thought of as normal by most but extremely difficult if not impossible for many wounded vets is due to a series of surgeries by Dr. Kodi Azari, a UCLA hand surgeon and co-medical director of Operation Mend.

"I never thought I'd be able to do stuff like this again," Barclay said.

Operation Mend, the brainchild of philanthropist Ronald Katz and his wife Maddie, is a collaborative project between the U.S. military and the UCLA Health System that provides veterans wounded and disfigured in Iraq and Afghanistan with access to some of the nation's best plastic and reconstructive surgeons.

Operation Mend is one of the groups that will benefit from the Land of the Free Foundation and its golf tournament, which will raise at least \$1 million Monday for veteran support groups. Land of the Free, a non-profit organization, was set up in 2007 by Majestic Reality executives Ed Roski, a decorated U.S. Marine Vietnam veteran; Kent Valley, also a vet; and John Semcken, a former Navy Top Gun pilot.

"Ed Roski called me and said we've got to do something for these kids and their families," recalled Semcken, who has led Majestic's bid to land an NFL franchise to play in a privately funded City of Industry stadium. "Ed said these kids are getting blown up. They have to go back for two, three, four, five deployments. We have to do something."

Roski had two rules: every cent raised by Land of the Free would go to support groups, and the money would go only to organizations that spent 15 percent or less of their budget on salaries and other organizational costs.

"If 16 percent of your (budget) goes to staff you don't get any money," Semcken said.

Helping to fund Operation Mend was a natural.

Operation Mend, Semcken said, "basically gives these kids severely wounded and maimed from battle their lives back.

Kids such as Marine Corporal Ronny Porta, who in 2007 suffered life-threatening injuries when his vehicle struck an improvised explosive device in Iraq. The explosion cost Porta his right arm, right ear and caused severe damage to his right eye. Third-, fourth- and fifth-degree burns covered 80 percent of his body and left him severely disfigured.

Porta spoke at a Land of Freedom event last year, recalling how his young nephew had told him he too wanted to enlist in the Marines when he grew up.

"Uncle Ronny," Porta recalled the boy saying, "I've just got one question. Do I have to look like you?"

Semcken, the hard-nosed businessman and former fighter pilot, broke down in tears last week as he recalled Porta's talk.

The story hits even closer to the heart for Barclay, the father of three young children.

"My kids don't know what I looked like before I was burnt," Barclay said.

Only Barclay and his driver survived the bomb. Barclay was put into an induced coma and woke up a week later in a San Antonio hospital. He would spend the next two years bouncing around hospitals to treatment centers.

"When you're lying up in bed you start thinking about all the things you're not going to be able to do again," Barclay said. "You think 'I won't be able to do this anymore, I won't be able to do that anymore.'"

"At the beginning it really does suck."

It didn't get much better after Barclay finally was able to get back on his feet.

"Kids stare at you," Barclay said.

His left arm was nearly amputated but was eventually saved by one of the dozens of surgeries he's undergone on his hands, arms, face and mouth.

"After 30 surgeries Humpty Dumpty was put back together again," Barclay said.

It was Katz who asked Barclay about his goals as he began his mouth procedures at UCLA.

"We're going to fix that," Barclay recalled Katz saying.

Katz made good on his promise, taking Barclay out to a steak dinner on a recent trip to Los Angeles.

And Monday he'll be on the golf course, playing the game his grandfather taught him, surrounded by people he has grown to consider family. The fade in his shot is gone, the result of his injuries, and there are more surgeries in his future. Some scars, like his war, will never go away. Deeper wounds, however, are mending.

"You do feel related because they have treated us like family," Barclay said. "When those guys came home from Vietnam they were forgotten, people didn't want to remember them. Now those guys that were in Vietnam are making sure guys like me aren't forgotten like they were.

"When you're in the hospital or going through the surgeries to know there are people out there who care about you and support you, that makes a huge difference. I can't tell you how much that means. It's a tremendous boost to you. You've bled and sweated for your country. You gave up part of your life and body for this country. And it's important to know that's not forgotten."