

Mending Michael: Recovering From Wounds of War

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The wounds of war are shockingly obvious for some military men and women. Despite severe burns, Army Ranger (Ret.) Michael Schlitz is an inspiration on and off the job. We caught up with Schlitz at UCLA Medical Center under a groundbreaking program called Operation Mend.

"Happy Alive Day." That's how some friends greeted Michael Schlitz on Facebook on February 27th. The date marked the six year anniversary of the day he was blown up and survived. The Army Ranger (Ret'd) responded back with a Facebook thumbs up.

Schlitz is among those where the wounds of war are shockingly obvious. Severe burns tell their own story. While Schlitz was burned beyond recognition, on and off the job, he continues to be an inspiration.

On this day, Schlitz strolled into his surgeon's office at UCLA Medical Center. He was in town from San Antonio under a program called Operation Mend. He had a bounce in his step and a pleasant excitement in his voice. Schlitz was readying for yet another surgery. This one would put him very close to the completion of his new nose. In total, he's had eighty surgeries.

Dr. Timothy Miller studied his handy work. He had already rebuilt his patient's lips and eyes. Rebuilding the nose was particularly difficult as Schlitz had no circulation in his forehead skin, so necessary for reconstruction.

Schlitz, like many of Iraq's war wounded, is the result of an IED explosion. Because he survived and the others in his unit died he considers himself the lucky one. He remembers the blast, hitting the ground and being on fire. He lost both arms below the elbow. His burns are among the worst Doctor Miller has seen. Miller's job is the plastic reconstructive surgery part. With 25 of his 80 surgeries at UCLA, Miller literally built Schlitz a new face. Miller guesses 15-thousand Americans were injured by IED's in Iraq.

As painful as it is to see Schlitz at his worst he'll remind you he signed up to serve. Ever the patriot, he continues to be of service. Schlitz is among the backers of GallantFew, an organization helping veterans transition from active duty. He's particularly concerned about "military suicide."

Always the athlete, Schlitz is still stronger than a lot folks. He's still an avid runner. Schlitz is single, yet not alone. His mother does what mom's do. She's by his side and his companion to Los Angeles for surgeries.

Home will be in Georgia. This summer the Gary Sinese Foundation is building him a custom house.

Schlitz likely has another surgery with Operation Mend. He's in the homestretch, and smiles, "I don't get the stares that I used to."

To learn more about Operation Mend, to donate, volunteer, become a Buddy Family or if you know someone from the military in need:

<http://operationmend.ucla.edu/>

Help veterans transition from active duty

<http://www.gallantfew.org/>

Facebook posting my Michael Schlitz

27FEB07 started out like any other day. Got the boys ready for our daily road clearing mission just Southwest of Baghdad, Iraq. It may have started out as a normal day but quickly turned into the worst and best day of my life.

Normally we plan our routes so that we never go down the same path twice. Unfortunately one of the roads that needed clearing was a dead end. We had taken our time moving down, but it took longer to turn around the five vehicle convoy consisting of 2 Husky (mine detecting vehicles), 1 Buffalo (mine interrogation vehicle), 2 RG31 (gun trucks), and a HUMMV. The hummv was my vehicle as was last in the order of movement. As we continued up the road to get back on track I could remember hearing a large boom.

That boom set everything into motion. That boom later identified as a command detonated IED that struck my vehicle killing my entire crew my Driver CPL Lorne Henry Jr., Gunner SGT Richard Soukenka, and Medic SGT Jonathon "Doc" Cadavero. These guys were the Soldiers and Men a Leader could ask for. It breaks my heart knowing that I wasn't there to save them.

I was thrown from the vehicle on fire. Initially I tried to run back to the vehicle but quickly realized I was on Fire. I dropped my kit because I felt the flames hitting me in the face. As I hit the ground the extreme heat came over me and I wasn't able to roll. I thought my life was going to end right there laying face down in the dirt. About that time I could hear the guys yelling they were on their way. When the fire extinguisher hit me things came over me. First, the physical relief of the cooling sensation that felt better than I can describe. Second, the emotional feeling of being saved which again is indescribable. The men on the ground used their quick thinking, training, and experiences to save my life. Something I will always be grateful for.

Over the next few days following the injury I was evacuated to the green zone, onto Germany, and finally Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, TX. I have no memory of this time due to a medically induced coma that lasted another 4 months. I stayed in ICU for a total of 6 months and another 4 in the Burn Ward. It was a challenging time and I will go more in-depth about at a later time.

My life has taken me on many journeys ever since. I learned to walk and run again, use my new prosthesis, and travel around the world. The one thing that was hard for me was finding that new sense of purpose. I loved the Army and it was my life for so many years, but I had to find something new to wake up too. During my travels I was able to tell my story to my fellow Veterans and realized it could help them. It has become a true passion of mine and one I take very seriously. In a time where Veteran Unemployment, Homelessness, and Suicide rates are at record highs I try to find ways to help them and raise awareness. I don't have all the answers but will do whatever I can to help.

This journey I have taken hasn't been alone. I have leaned on my Family, Friends, and fellow Veterans for support. Without each of them I would not be where I am today. My mother has been my biggest support giving me the love, support, and sometimes the kick in the butt I need. She acts as my caregiver helping me do the things I can't do and sometimes the things I just don't want to do. My friends have been there to encourage me to continue on. My fellow Veterans have been there to remind me that quitting isn't okay and that the same traits we use in the military should still be applied. Each in their own way has provided me the inspiration and motivation I need.

I live a very blessed life. I have had some amazing opportunities and adventures over the years, which drives me to give back. I am lucky to be alive. Not everyone gets a second chance to live. I try not to waste any days and will always try to be a positive role model. I'm determined to live a life my Fallen Brothers would be proud of.

It's been 6 years and it has gone by fast, but every day there is a reminder of what it costs. I know the cost and can only hope my fellow Americans can appreciate those sacrifices so many have made for their freedoms.

I am grateful I had the chance to serve with so many Honorable Soldiers, that I got the chance to know these Fallen Heroes, and that I get the chance to see tomorrow.

My Brothers are Loved, Missed, and Not Forgotten

Rest In Peace Brothers

SGT Jonathan Cadavero

SGT Soukenka

CPL Henry