

'Beauty is who you are - not the way you look': U.S. Marine who was severely burned in combat opens up about life after 60 facial reconstructive surgeries

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A U.S. Marine corporal has opened up about the challenges of adjusting to life after being severely burned in combat.

Aaron Mankin was just 23 when his assault vehicle ran over an explosive device in Iraq in 2005, killing four of his fellow soldiers and causing severe damage to his lungs, throat and face.

Eight years later, he has undergone 60 reconstructive surgeries and says that despite his devastating injury, he feels 'blessed' to have life and love. The father-of-two told [Today.com](#): 'Beauty is who you are. It's not the way you look.'



Inspiring: U.S. Marine Corporal Aaron Mankin was 23 when his assault vehicle ran over an explosive device in Iraq, causing severe burns to his lungs, throat, and face. Today, he inspires other veterans by telling his story



Courage: Eight years later, the father-of-two has undergone 60 reconstructive surgeries and says despite the hardship, he feels 'blessed'. 'Beauty is who you are. It's not the way you look,' he said

He added: 'That's important for my kids to learn. Just the way they look at me makes me feel special.'

In an interview, Corporal Mankin opened up about waking up in the ICU with severe burns to 25per cent of his body, and how it took him weeks to finally look at himself in the mirror.

'When I finally got the courage, I cried for the longest time,' he said.

'It's such a disconnect looking at yourself and you expect to see someone that resembles you, and it was a stranger staring back at me,' he explained. 'It was a lot to deal with.'



Family love: He added that that outlook is 'important for my kids to learn. Just the way they look at me makes me feel special'



Unrecognizable: Corporal Mankin opened up about waking up in the ICU with severe burns to 25per cent of his body, and how it took him weeks to finally look in the mirror

Instead of cowering from the world, however, Corporal Mankin decided to reclaim his life.

Upon his return to the U.S. from Iraq, he proposed to his girlfriend Diana, a fellow Marine whom he had begun dating before his injury.

Shortly thereafter he became the first-ever patient at UCLA Medical Center's Operation Mend, a charitable organization that offers medical services to wounded soldiers.

'Life happens to you. Your power resides in that you can choose how you respond to that'

And over the past eight-and-a-half years, he has undergone more than 60 reconstructive surgeries, and his face has been remarkably restored.

In the video, Corporal Mankin sits in his Marines uniform, tearing up as he admits: 'I never thought I'd look this good.'

While it took him and his loved ones some time to adjust to his new appearance, his children were both born after he returned from Iraq, giving them a unique perspective on their father.



Recovery: Corporal Mankin (pictured with a friend) decided to reclaim his life; he became a patient at UCLA Medical Center's Operation Mend, a charitable organization that offers medical services to wounded soldiers



Role model: Now, he helps other veterans by recounting his as a public speaker for Operation Mend



Positivity: 'There's so much in life you can't control,' he said. 'Life happens to you. But your power resides in the fact that you can choose how you respond to that'

'My children don't know me any differently. I've always been this way and they see me getting better through the years,' he explained, calling his son and daughter part of the 'healing process'.

Now, he helps other veterans by recounting his story as a public speaker for Operation Mend.

'A lot of what I have to tell other veterans [is] that there's so much in life you can't control,' he said. 'Life happens to you. But your power resides in the fact that you can choose how you respond to that.'