

Retired Abita Springs Army sergeant wounded in Afghanistan to march in NYC Veterans Day parade



Retired Army sergeant Matthew King of Abita Springs, stands for a portrait at the veterans memorial at the St. Tammany Parish courthouse in Covington Friday, November 8, 2013, where he was honored after he was wounded in Afghanistan in 2005. He has undergone a long and painful rehab, a new surgery more recently has dramatically improved his leg function. (Photo by David Grunfeld, NOLA.com |The Times-Picayune)
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Retired Army Sgt. Matthew King has come a long way since May 3, 2005, when doctors at Kandahar Air Field told him “not to freak out” if he woke up from surgery without his left leg.

King, who was 19 at the time, was going into emergency surgery after a rocket-propelled grenade struck his upper left thigh during a mission in Afghanistan. The blow left a huge hole in his left leg and a scar that runs from his groin to the bottom of his knee.

“At first, it didn’t hurt enough for me to understand the magnitude,” he said. “Your adrenaline is pumping so hard. When you see that arterial blood spatter, you’re like, ‘Oh that’s bad.’”

Now 28, King will celebrate Veterans Day in New York City Monday, marching down Fifth Avenue in the America’s Parade. He is marching with **Operation Mend**, which provides reconstructive surgery and medical services to service members wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Thousands are expected to line up along the 1.4-mile route on Fifth Avenue to cheer on the veterans. Operation Mend asked King to march with their group, an invitation King called “awesome.”

“I’m glad I can help raise awareness during Veterans Day, especially now that the war is winding down” he said. “Veterans need to be received with open arms.”

After his surgery at Kandahar Air Field, King was transferred to Landstuhl Medical Center in Germany and then to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio. He spent almost two years there, undergoing several surgeries and countless hours of rehab.

“I bled for 677 days straight,” he said, noting he kept that tally on his own. “Some mornings I’d wake up and my sheets were red. Other mornings it would be just my shorts.”

He was “plagued with infection,” and thought more than once that he was going to lose his leg. Doctors actually told King that cutting off his leg would be easier than rehab.

“I said, ‘No, I’ll take my chances,’” he recalled.

Rehab was hard on King, both emotionally and physically, but he said being in an Army hospital with soldiers who were suffering from similar—and in many cases, worse—injuries helped him get through.

“To see these guys have all these burn injuries, it made my injuries look a little small,” he said. “Some of them, 90 to 95 percent of their bodies were burned.”

‘It was either walk or die’

King was injured while assisting scouts and special forces from his unit that were under heavy attack. He’d been in Afghanistan 4½ months, and this was the most dangerous mission he’d been on to date.

“We were very cranked up to go,” King said. “We were a little scared, too, but we wanted to do it. We needed to help our buddies.”

King was the gun team leader and he and another soldier were in charge of getting the heavy machine gun – the weapon that King said gave the platoon most of its firepower – into action.

The enemy did exactly what King said his platoon was trained to do – take out the machine gun. The rocket-propelled grenade landed between King’s legs, striking the inside of his left thigh.

King rendered self-aid and wrapped a tourniquet around his leg. A medic was by his side within two minutes to lead him to a nearby helicopter.

King dragged his left leg “like a flat tire” 700 yards to the helicopter landing zone. On the way, he got shot in the right leg. But he kept going.

“It was either walk or die,” he said. The Army couldn’t risk bringing a helicopter into the war zone just to save one person, he said. And he was OK with that.

He joined the Army when he was 18, not long after he graduated from St. Paul’s School in Covington. His grandfather was in the Army; his dad was a Marine. So his decision to join the military was “hereditary almost.”

Before he signed up, King said he was told to expect to go to overseas. He planned to spend 20 years in the Army and retire at 38.

“I couldn’t be happier that I joined the military,” King said. “I’ve met thousands of people because of it. It’s definitely changed me mentally and physically, but I’m very thankful.”

He’s now in the process of applying to work in a federal police position.

‘Let’s do this’

King was honorably discharged from the Army in 2007, and was promoted to sergeant. He received the Purple Heart while in an Army hospital in Germany in 2005.

Five years later, in September 2012, Operation Mend contacted him.

They asked if he was in pain when he walked. They said they could help him.

“I’m like, ‘Let’s do this then,’” he said.

Dr. Sharon Hame, an orthopedic surgeon at UCLA, performed surgery on King’s left hip that improved his mobility by about 40 to 50 percent.

King had to go through about a month of rehab after that surgery to learn to walk differently. Hame said he had learned to walk after his injury to compensate for muscle defects and hip pain. He no longer has to compensate for that hip pain.

King said he’s “absolutely” better since the surgery. The pain has been cut by 90 percent, he said. He’s more nimble, more agile and said he feels like he can take better care of himself.

Operation Mend was formed in 2007. It is a joint venture involving the Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles, the Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio and the Veterans Affairs–Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System.

Melanie Gideon, the program’s manager, said most veterans who were injured on active duty are eligible to receive the program’s services. Private donors and some grants fund the program, and the services provided come at no cost to veterans or their families.

Gideon said Operation Mend covers whatever costs are not covered by the veterans' insurance. The program also pays for transportation and hotel costs veterans and their families who need to travel to Los Angeles for services.