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Wounded Soldier Says Surgeries Changed Life

Operation Mend Helps Treat Military Wounded While Serving In Afghanistan, Iraq

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VISTA, Calif. -- A Vista man who nearly died after a roadside bomb struck his vehicle in Afghanistan said one organization gave him a second chance at a better life.

Joseph Paulk grew up in Vista and had dreams of going into law enforcement. He joined the Army when he was 19 years old and trained to be a military police officer.

Everything for Paulk changed on July 5, 2007 when an IED killed his team leader and nearly killed him in Afghanistan. The army specialist suffered severe burns all over his body.

Paulk spoke to 10News on Monday from his Vista home, recalling the explosion like it happened yesterday.

"I still had my military issued gloves," he said. "They were still on; they couldn't take them off. Then [I] come to find out, they had melted to my hands."

He lost all ten fingers and spent more than a year and a half recovering in Texas. He said support from both his mother and girlfriend kept him going through those difficult days.

When Paulk moved back to Vista, he learned about Operation Mend and Dr. Tim Miller. Miller attended high school in San Diego and is now head of reconstructive surgery at UCLA. Operation Mend was established to help treat members of the military who are severely wounded while serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Through Operation Mend, the doctors are able to perform surgeries for free. Paulk, who is now 25, has had four operations with the organization and credits it for helping him feel more confident.

"I didn't want to go out. I was very nervous [about] going out," Paulk said. "Surgery by surgery with UCLA, I started looking better. I just started opening up and going out."

Paulk said his life is almost back to normal. He snowboards, hangs out with his friends but because he lost his fingers, he won't know if he'll ever play baseball again.

Paulk wanted others with similar injuries to know there is nothing to be ashamed of.

"You're alive. Be happy. If anybody has anything negative to say, they're ignorant. Just keep moving forward," he said.

Operation Mend has helped around 24 soldiers, including another soldier from Camp Pendleton. Paulk's next surgery is scheduled for April.