



## Severely burned Marine is face of program that's changing lives

by JOHN MCCAIA

[Bio](#) | [Email](#) | Follow: @johnmccaa | Follow: @johnmccaa

WFAA

Posted on May 7, 2011 at 1:49 AM

Updated yesterday at 12:49 AM

Recommend 9

SAN ANTONIO - We all face challenges, some more difficult than others. For one man, it's led to more than 50 surgeries over the last six years, but it's how he has handled it that makes him remarkable.

In 2005, an IED tore through a vehicle in which Marine Corps Cpl. Aaron Mankin was riding.

"All I hear is 'boom,' loud noise," he recalled. "At that time, my sleeves were on fire, and my helmet was also on fire."

He was lucky. Four other Marines died that day. However, Mankin was left with burns that severely disfigured his face and hand.

While at home recovering in 2007, Mankin told ABC News' Bob Woodruff he avoided mirrors.

"I would walk right out the door," he said.

Burn therapy has no equal, as healing skin must be painfully re-stretched. While at the Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC) in San Antonio, he learned improvement comes in inches, but sometimes an inch is enough.

"There are some things you just can't burn away, and that's what's on the inside," he said.

Then came "Operation Mend." The military UCLA Medical Center named Mankin the first severely wounded Iraq-Afghanistan service member to get additional reconstructive treatment.

"Aaron was the epitome of the Marines," said Lisa Gustafson of Operation Mend. "He was the first; he was ready to go. His injuries were at a point that it was the perfect timing for him."

Former Army surgeon Tim Miller became Mankin's doctor at UCLA.

"He gave me a lot by being where he was in Iraq, and this is just my way of paying him back," Miller said.

Fifty-plus surgeries after the explosion, Mankin -- now retired from the Corps -- returned to BAMC with his kids, saying hello to old faces and showing off his new one.

There are more surgeries ahead for Mankin, but the staff agrees he has already come a long way.

"Just about every day at some point. you've got to yell at him and say, 'Whoa there, I'm still human,'" Mankin said while visiting with his physical therapist, Scott Dewey.

"It's a tough love and you really get close to these individuals as they go through their recovery," Dewey said.

They are a tight group and consider Mankin's success their own, and it's not over yet. There are major changes and construction under way at Fort Sam Houston. They are changes that when completed, will make San Antonio the center for military medicine worldwide.

All the services are coming, bringing the latest techniques for saving and healing fighting men and women. Patients can't wait, neither can the staff.

"When you walk in a patient's room and you've been treating them for awhile and you look at them and look at their family and they say, 'Look doc, I'm ready to go home,'" said Lt. Col. Booker King, with the BAMC.

For Mankin, life gets better every day with his two kids. He still speaks out for and to wounded warriors. His message is to look inside yourself.

"You can choose the life that you live," he said. "We just often fall short in living the life that we choose, and that's a decision that I have tried to make every day."

Several dozen soldiers and Marines have now joined Mankin in receiving treatment through Operation Mend. The organization does accept donations.

**Add another comment**