



# Soldier Heals With Operation Mend

Updated: Wednesday, 25 Nov 2009, 1:04 PM CST

Published : Tuesday, 24 Nov 2009, 5:03 PM CST

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HOUSTON - There is a place where pain is a constant and suffering pushes the boundaries of what is bearable.

A place where the hour by hour decision to live on, can become an act of courage. A place where in order to heal, you must first hurt and where the sheer will of men and women to get better, leave those fresh to witness, in breathless disbelief.

It was in this place, the burn unit of Brooke Army Medical Center, that a young Marine, moved from comrade to comrade, delivering quiet encouragement.

His credentials - a face absent flesh, charred in a flash beyond salvage, proof beyond question to the newly burned that he's been where they've been and can help lead where they need to go.

"Yea man this sucks, but what am I going to with it ? Where am I going to go with it ? Where am I going to take it ? How is this going to effect me ? That's my choice, that's up to me," said the Marine.

His name is Aaron Mankin, a corporal from Arkansas who took Hollywood good looks and love of country on patrol in Al Anbhar province where his vehicle was struck by a road side bomb.

While Mankin's deep sense of duty made it home, some of him did not. His face, arms and back were badly burned, leaving him profoundly disfigured.

"Those dreams, all those aspirations that I have, I had to reel back in, take everything back inside and re-dream my life all over again and each day and each accomplishment is a new start, is a new beginning," said Mankin in an interview with Fox 26 news in October of 2006.

In the three years since, Mankin has endured enormous physical and emotional agony in pursuit of strength and mending.

"In my life I've come to understand pain is the price of everything precious in life and so I must have a lot more precious things to pay for than others and for that I am a blessed man," Mankin explained from his west San Antonio home.

In this relentless, very personal pursuit of progress, Mankin has been gifted with a partner, a civilian surgeon of extraordinary skill at UCLA Medical Center willing to attempt the seemingly impossible - rebuild from scratch what an explosive had burned away.

Renowned plastic surgeon Timothy Miller's talent is at the core of an outreach called "Operation Mend." Mankin became the first wounded military member to receive pioneering procedures.

For the reconstruction of features, Miller harvested healthy tissue from Aaron's own face, ears and skull. The intricate process of cutting, grafting and healing would demand dozens of operations over two long years.

"Every time I lay on the hospital bed before I go into the operating room I essentially have to make peace that I may not wake up," says Mankin whose survived more than sixty surgeries.

It is how Mankin still serves, both himself and the blasted and burned who will follow.

What he's received in return is what Dr. Miller describes as the daily reality of "appearing more human".

"There's no way you can't be moved in every way by what they've done for me. This isn't just a nose, this is my life, this is the rest of my life," says Mankin while pointing to his reconstructed face.

It is a life that has and will continue to see it's share of loss. Somewhere between surgery 45 and 53, the wife who once promised for better or for worse, walked away. Aaron handled the heartache, by again looking ahead, finding the positive within the pain.

"I've redirected that passion, that fire and that love, all of that has been transferred, transposed onto my kids. If anything I think it's made me a better father," he says.

These days he's a single-father, raising 3-year-old daughter Madeline and 1-year-old son Hunter, mostly alone. Mankin sees this chance to truly nurture and protect as yet another way of fighting back.

"I felt like if I didn't accomplish these things than I was handing victory over to an individual who in the the middle of the night picked up a shovel and buried a bomb. He intended to take my life and failed, but if he changed who I was or how I approached life he was essentially killing that Aaron that was there doing that mission. I can't wake up everyday and give him that victory," Mankin explain, his voice deadly serious.

As for the scars that remain, Mankin hopes they too will serve a higher purpose.

"This is something people need to see. People need to see wounded veterans. People need to be reminded of why they get to wake up in a warm bed everyday."

It's a message Aaron Mankin is looking to share with any American willing to hear.

On the Web: UCLA Operation Mend -- <http://operationmend.ucla.edu/>