

UCLA's Operation Mend reconstructs lives for servicemen and women

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Army Sgt. Jason March was shot in the right jaw by a sniper in Fallujah, Iraq, in 2006. After scores of surgeries, he was directed to Operation Mend because he wanted to be able to smile again. Left, he is seen before he was shot. Right, March shows the half a smile he was able to achieve.

The sniper's bullet bored into the right side of Army Sgt. Jason March's jaw on an August afternoon in 2006.

He'd been standing in the gun turret of a Bradley Fighting Vehicle, leading a platoon near a hot zone in Fallujah, Iraq in search of snipers. But the enemy found March first.

The bullet shattered jawbone and teeth, ripped through muscle and flesh, then exited. It was never found.

Knocked off his feet and unconscious, March was rushed to a hospital in Germany. In flight, he suffered two strokes and was paralyzed on the left side of his body. By the time he reached Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, surgeons removed the cap of his skull to allow his swollen brain to shrink back to normal. That took several months. They used his third rib to replace his mandible.

"They did all the bone reconstruction on my face, but I could not move one side," said March, 42, a Sacramento native who now lives in San Antonio. "That was due to the severed nerve on my right side."

March credits the surgeons at Brooke for reconstructing his face and head, but even they admitted they couldn't do the fine tuning. March spent two years at Brooke. He had felt worn down by so many surgeries, he almost abandoned the idea of more procedures. But March wanted something back that the sniper had almost wiped from his face: his smile.

He was, he said, always the guy who liked being in photos.

So he was referred to a program called Operation Mend, based at UCLA.

"I went to Operation Mend and the doctors asked, 'What can we do?'" March said. "I told them I'd love to be able to smile again."

For the last six years, veterans have trickled in to Operation Mend, a collaborative effort with cosmetic surgeons from UCLA who see servicemen and women in need of advanced facial and hand surgery among other services.

The team receives badly scarred and burned veterans, many from Brooke, who were disfigured by improvised explosive devices and other realities of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

So far, 88 veterans including seven women, have come through the program. Some veterans require up to 50 surgeries to repair the fragile nerves in hands, or reconstruct a cheek, nose or chin.

But in the last few years, many veterans released from military hospitals have suffered from surgery fatigue, and either don't want to continue with treatment or else don't know about the program. Some already have undergone 60 surgeries by the time they reach UCLA. In some cases, some veterans feel they don't deserve it.

That's troubling to hand



Dr. Christopher Crisera, a plastic surgeon with Operation Mend at UCLA, talks about more surgery for retired U.S. Army Sgt. Jason March who was shot in the jaw by a sniper in Fallujah, Iraq, in 2006. (Photo courtesy of UCLA Operation Mend)

surgeon, Dr. Kody Azari, who co-directs Operation Mend with plastic surgeon Dr. Christopher Crisera. The physicians said the program is ready to see more patients and can help veterans come full circle in their treatment. Besides surgery, the program offers travel fare, accommodations and counseling.

"Some of the patients either no longer want to go further and they are living with injuries, or they believe they are not worth it," Azari said. "They'll say I don't need help, but that veteran over there deserves it."

More than 50,000 U.S. troops have been wounded in action during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Both Azar and Crisera say they believe among them are those who live in small towns and may not realize there is a free program out there for them.

Established in 2007, Operation Mend was founded by Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center Board and Executive Committee member Ron A. Katz and his wife Maddie.

It is funded through an existing grant from the Iraq Afghanistan Deployment Impact Fund (IADIF) via the California Community Foundation, along with private donor support. Although it began as a program focused on facial reconstruction, it now includes everything from the repair of orthopedic surgery to prosthetic ears.

Azari and Crisera say the program has evolved to tailor the needs of each veterans.

"We want to let people know we're here," Azari said. "We're providing care to those who have difficult issues, but don't know where to turn, Our goal is to heal their external scars, which helps them heal their internal scars."

Though the program demands that servicemen and women stay in Los Angeles with their families for a long period of time, Crisera said the veterans never complain.

"They are the most upbeat human beings I have ever met," he said. "They are the easiest patients to care for."

To help March, doctors took a nerve from his left calf and connected it to the left side of his face and ran that over his lip, a quarter inch below his nose. They removed the dead cheek muscle from the right side of his face and found a similar size muscle near his groin area.

After about a year, the right side of his face moved one day as he looked into the mirror. He could smile at himself.

"I ran out and hugged my wife and I showed her," March said. "It was just amazing. Dreams do come true."

March lives in San Antonio, where he visits with veterans at the Brooke Army Medical Center. He said he promotes Operation Mend to those who think they can't get any better. After undergoing 80 surgeries to his face, March said he understands why veterans may hesitate. But the sacrifice is worth it, he tells them.

"Operation Mend gave me back my morale, my confidence and I'm able to do something I always wanted to do," March said.

"The first impression to anybody is your face. This organization started a whole new world for soldiers."



Left, Army Spec. Joseph (Joey) Paulk was injured on July 5, 2007 in Afghanistan when his tactical vehicle was hit by three anti-tank mines, flipping it over and igniting the fuel tank. Joey suffered burns to 40 percent of his body and face, smoke inhalation, paralysis of his vocal cords and amputation of all 10 fingers. He had to re-learn how to walk, talk, swallow, and cope without the use of his hands. **Center**, Air Force Tech. Sgt. Israel Del Toro was severely injured while on tour of duty in Afghanistan in 2005. His job was to call in air strikes, but in December 2005, his Humvee hit a massive IED. Del Toro was burned over 80 percent of his body. Doctors gave Del Toro a 20 percent chance of survival. He has undergone more than 100 surgeries since his accident. Israel's positive outlook on life continues to inspire everyone that has the pleasure of meeting him. **Right**, In July 2005, Marine Staff Sgt. Octavio Sanchez was the victim of a makeshift roadside bomb in Ramadi and suffered third-degree burns over 70 percent of his face and body. Before arriving at the V.A.-Greater Los Angeles, he was told there was nothing more that could be done for him. Dr. Timothy A. Miller was able to construct a nose, using skin from Sgt. Sanchez's forehead. He has undergone several surgeries.