This Is a Face of War

JOEY PAULK WAS SEVERELY BURNED WHEN HIS HUMVEE HIT A BOMB IN AFGHANISTAN. THIS IS THE STORY OF HOW SCIENCE—AND RESILIENCE—HELPED HIM HEAL. BY JAMES DAO

AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT:

A scar is a mark left by an injury. As you read, think about how a scar can be both visible and invisible.
NARRATIVE NONFICTION
Reads like fiction—but it’s all true

TURN THE PAGE to read more.
Three weeks after he was burned nearly to death in Afghanistan, Army Specialist Joey Paulk awoke from a coma in a Texas hospital. Wrapped in bandages from head almost to toe, he immediately saw his girlfriend and his mother, and felt comforted. Then he glanced at his hands, two balls of white gauze, and realized that he had no fingers.

So it began: the shock of recognition. Next came what burn doctors call “the mirror test.” As he was shuffling along a hallway at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, he passed a large mirror. He steeled himself and looked at his reflection.

His swollen lower lip hung below his gums. His left lower eyelid drooped hound-dog like, revealing a scarlet crescent of raw tissue. His nostrils were squeezed shut, his chin had disappeared, and the top of one ear was gone. Skin grafts crisscrossed his face like lines on a map. “This is who I am now,” he told himself.

Every severe injury is disfiguring in its own way. But there is something uniquely devastating about having one’s face burned beyond recognition. Many burn victims do not just gain lifelong scars. They also lose noses and ears, fingers and hands. The very shape of their faces is altered.

“It’s your military uniform, and you can’t take it off,” Paulk says about burns on a soldier’s face.

Engulfed in Flames

Paulk joined the Army in 2004, a year after graduating from high school. He thought the experience might help him get a job in law

Since 2001, more than 900 American service members have suffered severe burns in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to the military, the majority of the injuries are caused by roadside bombs. Most of the victims receive extraordinary care at Brooke’s state-of-the-art burn center. But few will ever have their faces restored.

Paulk, however, has come close.

Roadside bombs, or “improvised explosive devices,” have killed or injured more than 30,000 American soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq.
enforcement one day. On his first deployment, in eastern Afghanistan in 2007, he was in a Humvee when it struck a buried mine.

The mine ignited the fuel tank, killing his team leader instantly. Paulk was thrown from the truck and lost consciousness. When he woke up, he was 20 feet away, engulfed in flames.

After the fire was extinguished, Paulk—in searing pain and shivering despite the 90-degree heat—waited to be evacuated. As he lay there, an odd question popped into his head: Do I still have hair?

Yes, another soldier said; his helmet had saved it. “Maybe the burns aren’t so bad, and I’ll still look like me,” Paulk thought.

That was not to be.

When he awoke in San Antonio from a medically induced coma, he had already had several operations. Surgeons had patched his charred face, arms, and legs with skin grafts—a type of transplant in which healthy skin is sewn onto damaged flesh. All his fingers had been removed, because they were burned to the bone and likely to become infected. He had lost 50 pounds in four weeks.

**Surgery Fatigue**

Over the next 18 months, Paulk slowly regained strength. But after nearly 30 operations in 18 months, he began to resign himself to his appearance, suffering from what his doctors called “surgery fatigue.”

“Everyone has a limit,” says Dr. Evan Renz, the director of the burn unit at Brooke and the person who saved his life. “You get to a point where you go: ‘Hold it, I’ve got to go through anesthesia again?’” explains Dr. Renz.

In December 2008, Paulk met with a representative from a program called Operation Mend, at UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles. The rep explained that Operation Mend provided free cosmetic surgery for severely burned veterans like Paulk. It had already treated dozens of patients.

Paulk was skeptical. How could anyone make him look good again?

He decided not to pursue treatment.

**Operation Mend Begins**

Operation Mend began in late 2006 when wealthy philanthropist Ronald A. Katz was watching a news story about a badly burned Marine. Katz’s wife, Maddie, was charmed by the Marine but appalled by his wounds.

“You have to do something!” she said to her husband.

The Department of Veterans Affairs provides healthcare to military personnel. The focus of military healthcare is on saving lives and getting wounded veterans back on their feet. So the department does not provide reconstructive surgery unless it is medically necessary—and making someone look better isn’t considered medically necessary.

So what about those whose facial injuries are so severe that they don’t want to leave the house?
Katz knew that he could help them. Over the next year, he worked with UCLA Medical Center and a surgeon named Dr. Timothy Miller, a veteran of the Vietnam War. Katz also met with General Peter W. Chiarelli, who embraced Katz’s idea for Operation Mend. “Buddy families” were recruited to meet patients and their loved ones at the airport and go with them to the hospital.

Since treating its first patient in 2007, Operation Mend has been a wild success. It spends about $500,000 on each patient, and has treated more than 65 veterans. In addition to facial reconstruction, it now offers other services to veterans, including prosthetic ears and limbs.

**A Remarkable Difference**

In 2009, Paulk returned home to Vista, California, and became something of a recluse. His mouth and eye were still deformed. He rarely went out. When he did, he hid beneath hooded sweatshirts, baseball caps, and dark glasses.

A rep from Operation Mend contacted Paulk again, but he still did not believe they could help him. Eventually, though, the smaller indignities of his injuries made him reconsider.

Paulk could not open his mouth wide enough to eat a hamburger. Could Dr. Miller fix that? And what about his misshapen lips, which made it impossible for him to pronounce his own name? Dr. Miller promised he could have Paulk whistling and chowing down double cheeseburgers again.

Finally, Paulk agreed to give Operation Mend a try.

With the first surgery, Dr. Miller removed some of Paulk’s scar tissue, raising his eyelid and lower lip. With the second and third operations, he improved the alignment of Paulk’s eyes and lips by replacing scars with healthy tissue. A fourth surgery implanted a material called silicone that added definition to his chin.

The difference was remarkable. “The surgery changed so much on my face that it completely changed my whole outlook on life,” Paulk says.

The surgeries restored not only a part of Paulk’s former appearance, but also his confidence. He has started venturing out again, to parties, beaches, and ball games. On Veterans Day last year, he rode in the lead car of the New York City parade, his head bare for tens of thousands to see. At a recent checkup in Dr. Miller’s office, Paulk admired his new profile in the mirror. “From a distance, you can’t tell I was injured,” he says.

There are still uncomfortable moments. He was taunted about his looks at a baseball game. He still feels self-conscious about his hands, tucking his palms under his armpits if he catches anyone staring at him. But he has learned how to function: to put on socks, pull up zippers, and tie shoes. He can send text messages and drive. He can’t play baseball—his favorite sport—and video games are a challenge. But he manages to catch a football and spike a volleyball with his palms. He can even hold a drink.

Sometimes I’ll hold my cup against my body so I can talk with my hands, and I’ll maneuver and pick it up and everyone thinks it’s so intriguing,” he says. “But I’m just doing what I’m doing to survive.”

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**POEM**

A poet imagines what it’s like to come home after war.

**Let Me Tell You Things by Rebecca Kai Dotlich**

*That moon wasn’t this moon; that moon haunted the skies, and even the stars.*

And even the stars that followed me home are broken.

Even the stars.

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With Help From a Friend
How an amazing service dog saved a veteran’s life

BY RACHEL MORRIS

The service vest Millie wears as she trots through the mall is a tip-off that she isn’t a pet, but chances are most shoppers don’t realize just how special this yellow Labrador is. That is, except her owner, retired Army Ranger Richard Ruffert, who will proudly tell you how Millie saved his life.

Ruffert has post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a debilitating mental illness that had cast a dark shadow over his life, making it impossible for him to move past everything he had experienced. All war is traumatic, but sometimes the violence of what a soldier must see or do is so horrifying, the mind cannot deal with it. That is what happened to Ruffert. Up to 20 percent of veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have PTSD. They have nightmares, anger, and difficulty concentrating. Often, they feel disconnected from loved ones. They may have flashbacks—sudden memories in which they relive their worst experiences in vivid detail—and episodes of intense anxiety, or panic attacks.

PTSD wasn’t diagnosed as a mental illness until the 1970s, but soldiers have always suffered from it. It has been called many names over the centuries: shell shock, battle fatigue, soldier’s heart. Today, PTSD is treated with therapy and medication, but treatment doesn’t always work.

After Ruffert returned from Afghanistan in 2007, his PTSD was so severe that he didn’t leave his house for two years. Then he heard about K9s for Warriors, an organization in Florida that provides service dogs to veterans with PTSD. The program paired him with Millie. They trained together for three weeks, forming a deep bond.

Service dogs offer companionship and unconditional love that can be extremely effective in helping PTSD victims. These dogs also learn special skills to soothe anxieties. Millie, for example, senses when Ruffert is feeling fear or distress, and calms him by nudging him gently.

Thanks to Millie, Ruffert is no longer afraid to go outside. He is living his life again. Twice a month, he mentors other combat soldiers with PTSD. This winter, he’ll become certified to train other service dogs.

“Millie and I were meant to be together,” he says. “Thanks to her, I found my purpose, and I’m living my life to the fullest.”

CONTEST

Making Connections What do the articles about Joey Paulk and Richard Ruffert, as well as the poem “Let Me Tell You Things,” tell us about what soldiers sacrifice in service to their country? How have Paulk and Ruffert started to heal from the scars left by the war in Afghanistan? Send your answer to VETERANS CONTEST. Five winners will each receive a copy of Soldier’s Heart by Gary Paulsen. See page 2 for details.