

Veterans Day parade is a victory lap for recovering Abita Springs veteran



Abita Springs veteran, mom to join parade

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November 13, 2013

“From my stomach to my knees, I was a pile of goo for a little while” MATTHEW KING

When the America’s Parade comes down New York’s Fifth Avenue on Monday to celebrate Veterans Day, Matthew King, of Abita Springs, and his mother, Lisa, will be marching as representatives of Operation Mend, a privately funded program that has helped King and other service members wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan cope with their physical and mental wounds.

For King, 28, the 1.4-mile route might seem short compared with the Carnival parades he grew up with. But he’s been on a much longer and harder march since he was wounded by a rocket-propelled grenade in Afghanistan in 2005.

That road has included 24 surgeries, the most recent of them performed in January through the auspices of [Operation Mend](#), a joint venture between Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center in

Los Angeles, the Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio and the Veterans Affairs-Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System.

He credits the work of orthopedic surgeons at UCLA who reconstructed his hip with restoring 30 percent to 40 percent of his range of motion and reducing his pain by 90 percent.

Clinical psychologists with the program also helped him cope with less visible scars, he said recently.

King, who joined the Army right after graduation from St. Paul's Catholic School, was hit when his unit was sent to pull out scouts and special forces who were under heavy attack in a small river valley in Afghanistan.

A gun team leader with the 173rd Airborne Brigade, King was ambushed by an enemy soldier hiding in an irrigation ditch who fired a rocket-propelled grenade to take out King's gun.

The grenade didn't detonate, but the rocket hit the then-19-year-old King in the left thigh, ripping away two-thirds of his hamstring and a quarter of his quad. He had to strip off some of his heavy gear and walk to safety, despite his badly mauled leg.

"While I was walking I got shot in the right leg," he said matter-of-factly. "The left leg hurt way worse. The right leg felt like a bee sting."

What he recalls from the hours after the attack is not so much the physical agony but his desperate wish to stay in Afghanistan and his concern about his buddies still in the firefight. No one in his unit died in the attack, but King said he struggled with survivor's guilt.

Fortunately for the young soldier, he didn't lose his leg, although he came close.

He ticks off the many procedures he has undergone: irrigation and debridement, dead tissue removal, scar tissue removal, skin grafts, reconstructive surgery. "From my stomach to my knees, I was a pile of goo for a little while," he said.

Most of the surgeries were at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio in the first couple of years after his injury, when his treatment was similar to a burn victim's. It was also at Brooke that an advocate suggested he might be a candidate for Operation Mend.

That program, which began in 2007, has treated 94 patients.

It initially focused mainly on soldiers who had suffered burns and needed facial reconstructive surgery, said Melanie Gideon, manager of Operation Mend. Now, drawing on the specialties available at UCLA, Operation Mend is also treating veterans with brain injuries and those, such as King, who suffered orthopedic injuries.

Besides the damage to his muscles, King's leg was shoved into his pelvis, causing bone spurs and other damage that surgeons with Operation Mend were able to clean up, he said.

The treatment for service members can be long and expensive — up to \$500,000 for some patients, Gideon said.

Operation Mend also works with the families of the wounded veterans, allowing patients to bring as many family members as they want to be with them.

Operation Mend gives them what Gideon described as “VIP service,” picking them up at the airport and putting them up at suites in a hotel. Support for the family is a critical part of the program. “An injury like this affects the whole family,” Gideon said.

King and his mother, who went with him to UCLA, agree that’s important. He and his family gained a better understanding “of why I act the way I do; it helped my mom and I get an understanding of why I have a short fuse or a put-my-foot-down attitude,” he said.

She said the main change in her son is that he is “less easygoing, more determined.”

The psychologists also provided tools for coping with post-traumatic stress disorder, King said, including focusing on positives such as a supportive family.

King clearly embraces that approach. He said he is determined “not to be another statistic.”

He’s taken potential negatives, such as the hyper-vigilance that can follow a trauma, and turned them into positives, such as by doing private security work. He’s working in construction at the new Veterans Affairs hospital being built in New Orleans.

“My mom isn’t going to let me lie around and waste away,” he said.

King considers himself lucky to have survived his wounds and to have kept his leg.

“This would have killed me in Vietnam, or even the first Gulf war,” he said.

That’s true of many of the wounded soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan, Gideon said, and the better, faster attention to battlefield injuries means that doctors are seeing injuries they would never have confronted in the past.

“The only victor in war is medicine,” she said.

Those medical victories mean that King will be marching in New York, along with about 10 other soldiers treated by Operation Mend.

Thanks to treatment, he said, he is able to walk, run and be physically active.

And he’s excited about the opportunity to raise awareness about Operation Mend as part of the oldest veterans parade in the country, one that draws 600,000 spectators and that King described as a pretty big deal in New York.

“I think it’s awesome,” he said.