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# War without end

THE WAR IN IRAQ ARRIVES ON AMERICA'S SHORES BY GURNEY. MORE THAN 17,000 U.S. SOLDIERS HAVE BEEN WOUNDED — AT LEAST 450 HAVE LOST ARMS, LEGS, HANDS OR FEET. EACH INJURY RIPPLES THROUGH LIVES WITH ITS OWN PATTERN AND FORCE. AND AS TWO SOLDIERS AND THEIR FAMILIES ARE DISCOVERING, THE WAR WILL BE WITH THEM FOREVER.



Michael Macor / The Chronicle

Sgt. Michael Buyas, with sons Jaiden (left) and Justin, says that in his dreams he still has legs. In waking moments, he worries about how he'll teach his three boys wrestling, his favorite sport in high school. Michael's legs were blown off by an improvised explosive device just before Christmas 2004 in Iraq.

STORY BY JOAN RYAN ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY DEANNE FITZMAURICE AND MICHAEL MACOR

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Army Sgt. Michael Buyas stared at the new guy in the physical therapy room at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. He looked bad, even for this place, where everyone was hacked up and missing legs, arms, hands, feet. Michael was used to the room now, but at first it seemed like a self-human body shop, where broken people came for patching and rebuilding. The newest arrivals wore hospital gowns, their wounds sometimes still raw and gaping. Most, though, looked like men stopping at the gym on the way home from work, except no one had a complete body. They walked the treadmills on their spindly titanium legs or shifted from their wheelchairs onto weightlifting machines, trading insults the way young men do.

There was something so familiar about the new guy. Michael was sure he knew

him and almost could hear himself saying his name. But it kept slipping away, as a dream does when you wake up. The guy couldn't be too new because he was wearing shorts and a T-shirt. But he was gaunt and blank-eyed. His shoulders seemed barely thicker than a coat hanger. His hands were all bones and scabs. His left arm, encased in a blue plastic brace, rested on a pillow.

From his left ear down across his cheekbone ran a thin scar the dark gray color of a rifle barrel, evidence of shrapnel embedded in the skin. He had a bald patch on the back of his head, the telltale sign of months in bed.

He was sitting on one of the padded tables in the center of the room. He had one amputation above the knee and one below, same as Michael. He was lifting small plastic cones from a stack on his right and placing them atop a stack on

his left, an exercise, Michael knew, to teach him how to keep his balance now that his center of gravity had changed.

Michael had done the exercise himself early on in his stay at Walter Reed, the stately campus of brick buildings in Washington, D.C., where the Army sends its most seriously injured soldiers. It was April 2005, more than four months since an improvised explosive device blew up the 16-ton armored Stryker in which Michael was riding.

He was 30 years old, the father of three young boys. He couldn't fathom, when he first saw the flat sheet where his legs should have been, how he would walk again. Now he looked down at his legs, the stumps tucked into the sockets of his prostheses, one a \$50,000 model with computer chips that made adjustments 50 times a second to replicate as closely as

## [ THE SERIES ]

**TODAY** Walter Reed Army Medical Center is where many of the war's most damaged soldiers start their agonizing recoveries.

**MONDAY** Being a hero in central Washington state is a thrill, but for Michael, the challenges of having a young family, no career and no legs can be overwhelming.

**TUESDAY** Brent finds that, in plunging back into the bar scene at home in Arizona, his relationship with his mother strains to the breaking point.

**WEDNESDAY** Perhaps the biggest milestone is joining fellow soldiers and remembering how, even without legs, to stand tall.

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possible his natural gait. His sneakers looked enormous, like clown feet, at the ends of the thin titanium rods that served as his calves. He held a cane in each hand, steadying himself as he took one careful step after another. His physical therapist walked by his side.

"How's that?" the therapist asked.

The left leg's electronic knee had been vibrating and locking up. The therapist had just finished hooking it to his laptop and tapping in new commands to adjust the microprocessor.

"It seems OK now," Michael said, stopping at the metal folding chair where his wife, Carrie, sat.

She was 26, blond, pale-skinned and slight. She wore a T-shirt, capri pants and flip-flops. In the purse she clutched on her lap were her survival tools: her cell phone and her Marlboro Lights. She was up to a pack and a half a day. As soon as she had received the call on Christmas Eve, she dropped her boys off at her parents' mobile home up the road from hers and flew from the tiny Wenatchee airport in central Washington state directly to Washington, D.C.

She found out later that her husband had been conscious after the improvised explosive device blew him out of the Stryker. He was on his back, propped on his elbows, yelling for help. The Stryker's 19-year-old driver, bleeding but not seriously wounded, rushed to Michael. He couldn't be injured too seriously, the young soldier thought, if he was awake and talking. Then he saw Michael's legs.

Michael's first memory after the blast was of seeing Carrie standing over him. He wondered why she was in Iraq. His legs felt as if they were on fire. There were tubes snaking from his arms and an oxygen mask over his mouth. Every part of his body hurt, and later he would learn that the explosion had broken every rib on his left side, ruptured his spleen, collapsed his lungs, burned his hands and torso and cracked open his skull.

Carrie told him he was in Washington, D.C., at Walter Reed. He had been in a coma for 12 days. He tried to say "pain," but he couldn't speak. He fell back to sleep.

When he woke again, he saw his father. He was in his red beret and Army jacket, the left sleeve loose over his atrophied arm. The elbow had been shattered in Vietnam. Michael thought he

was dreaming. He couldn't feel his toes. He pulled the mask from his mouth.

"Are my legs OK?" he rasped.

"You're going to be fine."

When his father left and Carrie returned, he asked her the same question. Carrie saw no reason to lie.

"Your legs are gone."

■ ■ ■

Carrie had returned home to her boys just once in the four months since Michael was wounded. She had lived by herself at the Mologne House, a hotel for families and outpatients on the grounds of Walter Reed. Now she shared the room with Michael. Carrie missed the kids — who were 8, 7 and 3 when Michael got injured — but she knew they were safe and happy with her parents, and that Michael needed her more. At Walter Reed, she fell easily into the quiet, supportive role she had always played with Michael, from the time they began dating more than 10 years ago.

She was just 14 and fell hard for the skinny, square-jawed guy with Peter Dinklage hair playing the guitar on the front steps of a friend's house. This was in Chelan County, in the rolling hills of Washington's apple country. Carrie had dropped out of high school by then, having finished about half of ninth grade. Her parents couldn't understand what their daughter saw in Michael. He was a dooper who once spent the couple's last \$5 on a bag of pot. When he was between jobs, he slept past noon, irritating Carrie's father, who worked long hours in the apple sheds.

But Carrie had decided this was the man she loved, even when Michael, balking at the responsibility of fatherhood, left after their first child was born when she was 18. He finally proposed when she was seven months pregnant with their second. At their wedding reception at a pizza parlor, they received three gifts: two identical knife sets from Target and a \$50 check from Carrie's parents.

Even as she juggled the needs of their three young boys, Carrie catered to Michael. He was the man of the house, the decision-maker. She didn't get her driver's license until she was almost 22 because Michael always drove.

Michael enlisted five months before Sept. 11, before any talk of war. He had been laid off from the aluminum foundry in Chelan. When his unemployment checks ran out, he had moved with Carrie and the three boys into his in-laws' dou-

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Courtesy of Brent Bretz

Brent Bretz was known around Fort Lewis, Wash., as a ladies' man who took great pride in qualifying as a sniper. On Dec. 19, 2004, at the Army base near Mosul, he happened to be standing nearby when his platoon sergeant needed a driver to pick up mail and laundry at the airport 30 minutes away. Halfway there, a bomb blew up the truck.



Courtesy of Buyas family

Michael Buyas joined the service when he lost his job at a central Washington aluminum foundry. No one thought he'd last through basic training, but he thrived on the structure and found a sense of purpose. Four days after Brent's injury, Michael was blown from the gunner's hatch of a Stryker during a search for insurgents near Mosul.

ble-wide mobile home. That's how he happened to answer the phone when the recruiter called looking for Carrie's teenage brother.

No one imagined Michael in the Army. Not even his mother believed he'd last through basic training. Only Carrie believed. She had always seen something special in Michael. No one could write love songs the way he did without a noble soul.

The Army did exactly what the recruiter had promised on the phone: It gave Michael discipline and purpose. He was still too bossy with Carrie, but he had stopped smoking dope, stayed home with the family at night and ran every morning. He found a determination he hadn't seen in himself since his high school wrestling days. He persevered through Ranger school, refusing to give up after failing the grueling training course.

In October 2004, he left for Iraq with the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, out of Fort Lewis, Wash.

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Carrie surprised herself with how easi-

ly she accepted Michael's amputations.

"I thought when I seen him I'd bawl," she said later. "I never cried one time. It's weird because I'm a very emotional person. I remember my sister handing me tissues, and I never needed them."

She didn't have to force herself to touch his stumps, as some wives and girlfriends did. Doctors and nurses at Walter Reed have dozens of stories of wives taking one look at their disfigured husbands and disappearing forever. Carrie was squeamish about many things, freaking out whenever one of her boys fell off a bike or scraped a knee. But without flinching, she had changed Michael's bloody bandages, bathed him, helped him on and off the toilet, cleaned him when he was done.

"I do believe you have such love for somebody you just make it work," she told friends.

Now, though, in their fourth month together at Walter Reed, she was chafing at his frequent bursts of anger, his criticism of how she scheduled his appointments and how she pushed him to

get to physical therapy on time. He didn't want her to open her mouth about anything, snapping at her once simply for telling the plastic surgeon that he was taking the blood-thinner Coumadin.

But he wouldn't go for psychological counseling. He was fine. He was better than fine. He was a hero now. He heard the word 10, 20 times a day. Wherever he and Carrie went — to the mall in nearby Silver Spring, Md., or to lunch at Macaroni Grill — people looked at his missing legs and his U.S. Army baseball cap and stopped to shake his hand. Strangers pressed money into his hand and picked up his check at restaurants. One woman gave him the ring off her finger when he had remarked on its beauty.

"I take every day and use it as a blessing," he told people in his soft, steady voice.

And: "The price of freedom isn't free."

Carrie raised her eyebrows sometimes when Michael talked about how Iraq was no big deal and how he was

moving on with his life. His stoic words never betrayed the grief and self-loathing that strafed his nights.

She'd wake up to find him crying from another dark dream he couldn't, or wouldn't, talk about. He'd stare at his scarred, misshapen stumps and be convinced she was repulsed by him. How could she love half a man, a man who couldn't lift his own sons onto a jungle gym, shovel snow from the driveway, fix the water heater? He couldn't make love yet without pain. She reassured him that she loved him, that she would always love him. But his grief and fear, his rage at how vulnerable he felt without legs, was a storm she couldn't calm.

She knew Michael felt more like her child sometimes than her husband, relying on her for almost all his needs. He responded by picking fights, snapping at her for the smallest slights, often driving her from the room in tears. He missed physical therapy sessions, slept through doctors' appointments. He seemed to be buckling under the enormity of his loss and the exhaustive work of rebuilding a new life and body.

They were about to return to Chelan for the first time; Michael was due for a month of home leave. It was there that Michael would have to start figuring out who he was going to be, what he was going to do. Carrie couldn't wait to get home. Maybe there, in the place they fell in love, she could get him to look past his scars and missing legs, to see what she still saw: the man who sent shivers down her back the first time they met.

■ ■ ■

In the physical therapy room — the PT room, everyone called it — Carrie watched her husband hobbling toward her and wondered whether Michael's public and private selves were much different from the lives of the other wounded soldiers there. She couldn't tell. She had learned early on, as all the family members do, that there is an unspoken code of behavior at Walter Reed, or at least in the PT room. Everyone bucks up. There's no grieving, no complaining.

"Not going to make your leg grow back," the soldiers say.

The steady banter is punctured only by the occasional grunts and yelps of pain from behind the curtains along the right wall, where physical therapists — physical terrorists, the soldiers call them — push patients to the breaking point, stretching muscles that haven't moved in months, manipulating limbs still gouged and raw. But soldiers who

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end up here consider themselves the lucky ones. Others are still in comas or so severely brain damaged they will never recognize their own children. Plenty never made it home at all. If you were missing a leg, there was someone nearby missing both. If you were missing two legs, there was someone missing an arm, too. The injuries at Walter Reed were so profound that a single amputation below the knee was often dismissed as an inconvenience.

"There's always someone worse," the soldiers say.

For Michael, on this day, that someone was the sickly new guy. As he leaned on his two caues, standing next to Carrie, Michael noticed the ends of the young man's mangled stumps. They were misshapen and lumpy, like heads of cauliflower. Michael recognized the rogue bone growth — HO, they called it, for heterotopic ossification. Michael had it on his stumps, too. Almost every amputee did. But this guy's HO was like nothing Michael had seen. It seemed to be pushing up through his skin grafts.

Michael looked again at the young man's face. Suddenly, his stomach dropped. The frail, battered soldier was from his own unit in Iraq.

Michael remembered everything.

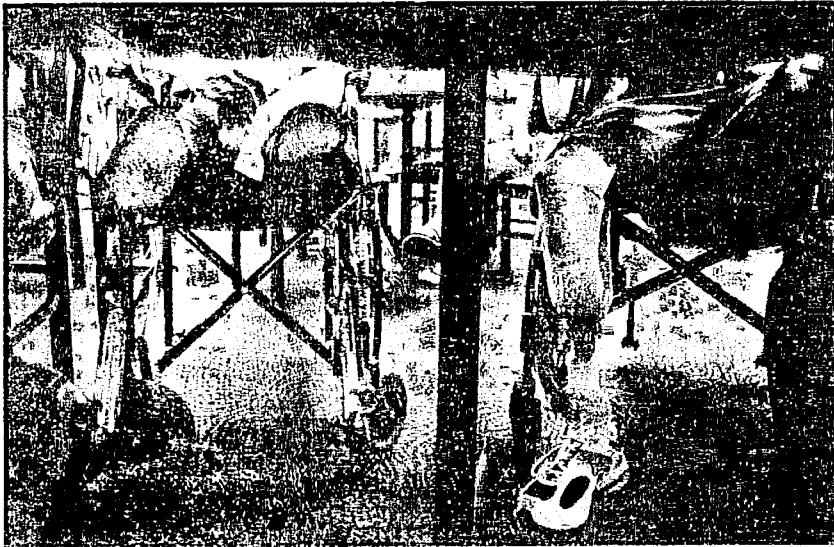
He had heard a blast from the battalion's forward operating base in northern Iraq, a spot near Mosul. He barreled across the desert with the rest of his unit to the site of the explosion. The charred truck looked like an open wound, the metal pecked back like skin. Michael was supposed to be securing the eastern perimeter; whoever had detonated the improvised explosive device — the scourge of this war — could attack again. But he had to see who had been hit.

He rotated the gun and its telescopic lens toward the truck's crumpled cab, though he knew he'd catch hell for pointing a gun at his own men. It was December 2004, six days before Christmas. Wrapped packages from home waited under their bunks. Michael had been in Iraq nine weeks. He had already come to hate the place. He had even joked with a friend in his unit about what injuries they'd be willing to sustain to get shipped home. Michael had cracked he'd be willing to lose a foot if it meant going home for good.

Through the scope, Michael could see the driver being pulled from the truck. His legs looked like wet strings of red and black. He trained the lens on the soldier's burnt and bleeding face. It was Sgt. Brent Bretz, from Michael's Charlie Company.

■ ■ ■

Brent was a good-looking, wise-cracking ladies' man Michael had gotten to know during their training at Fort Lewis. Michael remembered watching Brent and his buddies, with their gelled hair and swaggers, heading off base most nights to pick up girls at Drake's and Julian's in Tacoma. They'd roar off in Brent's Ford F-150 truck with its 38-



Photos by DEANNE FITZMAURICE / The Chronicle

"Here, everybody's a train wreck," Michael (right) said of Walter Reed. In the hospital cafeteria, he struggled to bond with Brent, who was on heavy painkillers and deaf in one ear from the explosion that took his legs. Already walking for short periods on prosthetic legs, Michael found out that Brent still couldn't maneuver his own wheelchair.

inch tractor tires and ridiculous 13-inch lifts, a vehicle as eye-catching and audacious as the young sergeant himself. Michael figured he couldn't be more than 21 or 22 and was impressed that he was a sniper and a team leader, someone competent and responsible enough to take charge of other men.

Michael tried to reconcile that image with the diminished man he saw across the PT room. He watched as Brent's physical therapist rolled a thick sock over his bony right leg in preparation for strapping on a prosthesis. He could see that the skin covering the ends of Brent's stumps was paper thin. Ideally, an amputee's stump is covered with muscle and skin that has been flipped up from the calf, providing a resilient cushion for the bone. But the explosion left Brent's calf muscles unusable, so doctors took skin grafts from his thighs. There was no fat or muscle, so Brent's thighbone rubbed directly against the skin.

And now knobby clumps of bone — HO — were pushing against the grafts on both legs and on his mangled left arm. The HO was showing up in almost all the amputees and was driving doctors in U.S. military hospitals crazy. They are still not certain why it happens, though cases among the war wounded date back at least to World War I. HO most often occurs when a traumatic injury — commonly one that requires amputation — is combined with a head injury. The body's healing response becomes confused. The brain sends signals to manufacture bone instead of scar tissue. Spongy bone starts to grow, sometimes sprouting from oth-

er bone, sometimes forming independently, like tumors, within tendons and muscle.

Brent's HO was among the worst that doctors at Walter Reed had seen. It seemed to have declared war on him, mounting incursions, seizing what new territory it could claim. The HO in his arm had already dislocated his elbow and torn a tendon. It had invaded his joint capsule and was threatening to envelop the nerve artery going into his hand. Radiation treatment, commonly used to stop the growth, had no effect. Operating on the HO can stimulate more growth, so doctors told Brent they would have to wait until it stopped growing, which could take a year or more. Even then some of the HO might be impossible to remove without causing greater damage. Doctors were worried they might have to cut away more of Brent's legs to remove the HO. And they worried that the HO might be so rooted inside his arm that he might lose his elbow — and, as a result, use of the arm. In the meantime, the brace on his arm was causing pressure sores that left patches of skin raw and burning.

The good news, doctors had told Brent, was that he had sustained no permanent brain damage. His slow responses were the result of his heavy pain medication.

In the PT room, Brent's therapist finished rolling the socks on his stumps, and she and Brent's mother, Kathy, slid him from the padded table into his wheelchair. Brent was light — he weighed about 90 pounds, down from about 165. But moving him was not easy; there were few spots on his body that could be

touched without hurting him. The skin grafts and burns on his thighs, abdomen and back were still painful.

Despite the plastic cast and painkillers, his left arm hurt all the time; the bomb blew out most of the muscle and skin and broke bones in multiple places. The arm was held together now with three plates, 22 screws, a skin graft from his left thigh and a muscle from his back. When the muscle was touched, he still felt the sensation in his back, and later, when he began to rehab the arm, he had to think about flexing his back in order to flex the arm.

■ ■ ■

Kathy Pearce was an attractive 52-year-old bookkeeper and mother of five. Brent was her youngest, and she was proud of his commitment to fight for his country. She was as patriotic as she was religious, the daughter of a long line of Mormons who settled in Mesa, Ariz., in the 1880s. When Brent left for Iraq in October 2004, she bought a second clock for her Mesa kitchen and set it to Iraq time. She liked to look at it and imagine what Brent might be doing: sleeping, going out on patrol, opening her weekly care packages. She looked at the clock when she returned home from dinner one night; it was a week before Christmas in 2004. She checked her e-mail as she always did, and found a note from Brent. He didn't have much news: He had decorated a tree but it didn't feel much like Christmas; he would be elevated to the next pay grade in January; could she send more PowerBars?

"So he's OK," Kathy said to herself as she readied for bed, thanking God and

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the Holy Spirit for watching over her son. The phone woke her a little after 8 o'clock the next morning. It was the Department of the Army calling from Virginia. Her son was in a hospital in Germany. Kathy packed and bolted so fast she left her suitcase on the bed and had to buy new clothes in Germany. When she saw Brent, she broke down. He looked as if everything strong and alive in him had been sprayed into the Iraqi sky and the husk had been sent to Germany.

He was so damaged that the only safe place for her to touch was a tiny patch of skin on his right shoulder. His face was the color of rice paper and flecked with dark gray dots Kathy later learned were shrapnel. His forehead and left cheek, bone were fractured. His head was wrapped in thick gauze with a cranial pressure gauge sticking from the top of his skull. The left side of his body and face had second-degree burns. Both arms were encased in metal bars and suspended from hanging slings. He was hooked to a ventilator because both lungs had collapsed. Foul smelling greenish fluids drained through tubes from his arms, abdomen and stumps of his legs. Already doctors had pumped 40 units of blood into him, three times the volume in the human body. He was in a medically induced coma to keep his swollen brain from becoming agitated.

In his coma, Brent dreamed. In one dream, he sat inside a Stryker. His commanding officer yelled at him over and over to get out, but Brent couldn't move. In another dream, a hazel-eyed girl stood on one side of him and a soldier stood on the other. All three carried heavy duffel bags. The soldier kept telling Brent they were leaving, that he needed to hurry. But Brent told him he didn't want to go. He wasn't ready.

Once he was stable, 10 days after the explosion, Brent was transferred to the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., because the intensive care unit at Walter Reed was full of casualties of the suicide bomber who, two days after Brent's explosion, infiltrated the mess hall near the Mosul airport, killing 14 soldiers and wounding 44.

Kathy's other four children had traveled with her to Germany and now, back at home, were helping to pay the mortgage and manage the upkeep on her three-bedroom house while she stayed in Bethesda with Brent. Coming up with the money wasn't easy — Shilo Sessions sold real estate part-time, Russell Bretz framed houses, Melany Merkley was a stay-at-home mom and Marie Ekren a school nurse. The strained finances sometimes created tension. But they were a close family and drew strength from their faith in God. They knew Kathy's place was at Brent's side, no matter what the sacrifice. Kathy slept in Brent's room at Bethesda every night. She left him only to dash to the store for supplies, to take a shower back at her room in a guesthouse, and, early on, to walk around the hospital grounds while she cried. Only her daughter Marie's

wedding pulled her away, and just for a few days.

The self-possessed, irreverent son Kathy knew emerged for brief periods. Once, a psychiatrist sat by Brent's bed for 20 minutes talking about depression and nightmares and post-traumatic stress. He then asked Brent whether there was anything he wanted to share with him. Kathy covered the tracheal opening on Brent's ventilator so he could talk.

"Tell the nurses to quit waking me up for stupid s—," he said.  
Kathy laughed. "Oh, he's back," she thought.

Kathy managed every detail of Brent's life now, from his medical care to his diet and clothes. She bought a portable sewing machine to tailor his T-shirts to accommodate his damaged left arm. She kept a journal that she posted online for friends and family. She marveled that, even by April, when he was well enough to start physical therapy at Walter Reed, he had yet to show many outward signs of grief over the loss of his legs and the prospect of a life so different from the one he had always known. He had been such a physical being, someone who lived in his body more than his head. Brent had been a handful as a child, particularly for a single mother. He was one of those restless kids who needed always to be moving, and so school wasn't his favorite place. But he was a charmer, making Kathy laugh even as she scolded him. When he was arrested as a teenager for shoplifting a 30-pack box of beer at Safeway, Kathy's brother, a local judge, helped Brent transfer to a military high school for high-risk kids.

Soon after high school, Brent's girlfriend became pregnant and gave birth to a daughter. He got married and enlisted. The marriage didn't last, but Brent found a home in the Army. "Finally gave him something to do with all that energy," his sister Melany joked.

Yet he seemed to accept his confinement to bed and then a wheelchair with remarkable calm. Kathy guessed the heavy medication slowed his brain's understanding of his new circumstances. Maybe there is only so much the mind can hold, so the scope of his body's transformation arrived in installments, softening the blow. His oldest sister, Shilo, credited the Mormon priests who gave him blessings at the hospitals in Iraq, Germany and Bethesda. "His mind has been wiped clean," she said.

His sister Marie worried sometimes that he was too calm. She said to him over the phone one day in March that he sounded down. She asked if he was having a bad day.

"No," he said. "I'm OK."  
"You know, you're allowed to have them."

"If I have one," Brent said, "I'll keep having them."

Brent's face showed no emotion in

the P1 room as Michael watched him in his wheelchair. It seemed as if his body and mind were in different places. Brent's therapist strapped a prosthesis to Brent's right stump, where the HO was growing in rounded clumps and could tolerate a well-padded socket. The HO in his left leg was pointer and more painful. The therapist wheeled him between a set of waist-high parallel bars. She and another therapist stood on either side as spotters.

"Ready to give it a try?" she asked.  
"OK, scoot forward."

He wriggled to the end of his chair. It was just the second time he had worn the prosthesis.

"One-two-three-up!" the therapist said.

Brent didn't move.  
"OK, one-two-three-up!"  
Brent pushed up on the bar with his one good arm. The therapists lifted. Brent inched up, the weight of his body pressing on the right prosthetic leg, his left stump dangling. His eyebrows wrinkled. His mouth fell open. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

"You're doing great!" Kathy said. Her voice was cheerful, almost musical, as it always was. She had become a favorite among the therapists and nurses. "How is it?"

"It feels all right," Brent said.  
"Fifteen more seconds," the therapist said. "That will break your record."  
Brent waited a few moments. Then, exhausted, he began the slow descent back into his chair. But as his body moved, the prosthesis didn't. Brent's face twisted in pain.

"Ow! Ow! Ow!"  
The skin on his stump had become caught on something inside the prosthetic leg's socket. The therapist quickly slid the prosthetic foot forward, freeing the skin, and Brent sank into the chair. He covered his face with his long hand and didn't move. Kathy rubbed his back.

"That was almost a full minute standing," the therapist said, breaking the silence. "Want to try one more time?"  
"No," Brent said, his voice barely audible.

By the next week, the HO had grown so fast that the socket no longer fit.

Across the room, Michael had been walking and watching. He lowered himself into the chair next to Carrie and told her about responding to Brent's explosion, how he couldn't believe this was the same guy.

"To see him and to see me," he told Carrie in a low voice, "I feel very fortunate. That vehicle, it was a piece of charred metal."

Brent's therapist wheeled him to a weight machine with a handle and a wheel that he rotated with his right hand like a bicycle.

Michael remembered watching Brent's legless body disappear into the medevac helicopter. He felt guilty all over again for thinking what he did: I'm glad it's not me.

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He couldn't have known that just four days later his own legs would be blown off.

A thought suddenly occurred to him as he stood in the PT room. The soldiers who had watched his own mangled body disappear into the helicopter probably were thinking the same thing: I'm glad it's not me.

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When Brent finished with his arm exercise, Michael rose and walked toward him, clumping his canes with each mechanical step. Brent didn't look up until Michael spoke. He told Brent who he was, and that he was in Charlie Company and had responded to the explosion that took Brent's legs. Brent showed no sign of recognition. He nodded and shook Michael's hand.

Kathy invited Michael and Carrie to join them for lunch downstairs.

In the vast cafeteria, doctors in white coats and soldiers in fatigues sat among the wounded: young men and women with huge Erector-set braces affixed by screws to their shattered arms and legs, with plastic masks over their burned faces, with hooks at the ends of their arms.

Michael and Brent sat side by side at a table with Kathy and Brent's sister Shilo, who had flown in for the weekend on donated frequent-flyer miles to give Kathy a respite. Carrie set Michael's tray in front of him, then, seeing there was no room at the table, ate lunch at an adjacent one with a hospital employee. Michael didn't seem to notice.

"You got a messed-up arm," Michael said, nodding to the plastic brace that hung immobile at Brent's side. "How do you push your chair?"

"I don't," Brent said. Shilo squeezed a packet of ketchup on Brent's cheeseburger.

"Oh," Michael said. Then: "That's messed up."

Michael asked Brent what he first thought about when he regained consciousness. No answer. Shilo repeated the question. The explosion had left Brent deaf in his left ear (and, Kathy liked to joke, with selective hearing in his right).

Brent said he didn't know.

"Were you looking for your weapon?" Michael asked. It had been his first thought. The biggest sin in the Army was losing your weapon.

"Actually, I was," Brent said, seeming to perk up. Michael waited to hear more, but Brent said nothing.

Shilo wanted to know whether Brent still had his legs when Michael found him.

Michael said he thought so. "There were tourniquets all over," he said. "We told them not to tourniquet his neck."

Kathy laughed. "Thanks for that."

Brent closed his eyes as Shilo rubbed the aching muscles in his shoulder. Over the weekend, he was supposed to be transferred to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio to be closer to the rest of his family. But first he would be attending a gala dinner for the Armed

## [ CONTACT ]

Contact Brent Bretz through this Web site: [www2.caringbridge.org/az/bretz/](http://www2.caringbridge.org/az/bretz/)

Contact Michael Buyas through e-mail: [buyas@msn.com](mailto:buyas@msn.com)

## [ U.S. CASUALTIES ]

From March 19, 2003 to March 22, 2006

Dead: 2,319

Wounded: 17,269

Amputees: 454

Amputees who have lost more than one limb: 62

Sources: Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Brookings Institution, Department of Defense

## [ THE HEALTH CARE ]

As permanently and fully disabled veterans, Michael and Brent are eligible for a minimum of \$2,393 from the Department of Veterans Affairs each month. Monthly allowances for a spouse range from \$-10 to \$135 and for each dependent child from \$27 to \$91. Additional amounts are provided for each child, and there is a higher scale for children in school after age 18.

Wounded soldiers receive free health care for the rest of their lives, plus vocational rehabilitation, prosthetic services, life insurance, pension, education benefits, grants for specially adapted housing and automobiles, and survivor and burial benefits.

Veterans do not pay taxes on the money they receive from the VA.

Michael Buyas expects to receive about \$4,000 per month from the VA and \$1,900 from Social Security. This annual income of about \$70,000, tax-free, is nearly \$30,000 more than he earned while he served in Iraq. As a deployed soldier, he earned \$3,450 per month (including \$500 a month in hardship pay and \$150 a month in separation pay), amounting to \$41,400 per year. While deployed, he was not required to pay taxes on his military income.

Brent Bretz has not been discharged and therefore is not yet eligible for VA disability benefits. Until then, he receives about \$2,400 a month after taxes.

Like all completely disabled soldiers from the war in Iraq, Michael and Brent received one-time payments from the government of \$100,000 in January.

Sources: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; Sgt. Michael Buyas, Sgt. Brent Bretz

Forces Foundation at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Washington, D.C. He was one of the guests of honor.

Michael positioned his canes on either side of his feet and pushed himself up.

"Take care, buddy," he said, shaking Brent's hand.

He hobbled out, Carrie trailing behind, pushing his empty chair. He wasn't yet able to walk back to their room at the Mologne House. So Carrie had to be ready with the chair when he got tired. Outside the hospital, they stopped to light cigarettes. Michael was scheduled in about a month to go home to Washington state for the first time. He already was thinking how different it would be from living on the grounds of Walter Reed.

"I go home and I'm not like other people," he said, exhaling a long stream of smoke. "Here, no one's infatuated with the train wreck. Here, everybody's a train wreck."

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The next night, inside a room at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, Brent submitted to his mother, sister, nurse and the nurse's boyfriend pulling, zipping and buttoning him into his dress blues for the gala downstairs. He was like a doll in a game of dress-up.

But for a moment that night, the swaggering soldier emerged from the fog of painkillers.

As they were leaving the room for the dinner downstairs, Kathy stopped at the full-length mirror so Brent could get a good look at himself in his uniform. He stared for several long moments at the medals on his chest. He asked his sister for a Q-tip. He carefully rubbed each medal with the cotton swab, cleaning off every smudge.

When Shilo made a crack about his neatness, Brent fixed her with a stare.

"It's about pride," he said.

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By summer, Brent and Michael would be back home for the first time, Michael at his in-laws' mobile home in central Washington, Brent in Arizona at his mother's house with his beloved truck. They would find the Christmas decorations were still up, as if time had stood still since the phone calls to their families four days apart in December. But of course time did not stand still. Everyone had moved forward without them.

There was no road map from the battlefield back into the lives they had left behind. They were grappling with the big questions — how to come to terms with what they'd lost, how to figure out who they were now. But Michael and Brent found themselves using variables and calculations that would lead to different answers.

Monday: Michael returns home.

E-mail Joan Ryan at [joanryan@sfbchronicle.com](mailto:joanryan@sfbchronicle.com).