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War without end

FOR SEVERELY WOUNDED SOLDIERS LIKE SGT. MICHAEL BUYAS, IT'S A LONG BATTLE BACK TO WHAT PASSES FOR 'NORMAL' LIFE. LEARNING TO LIVE IN A NEW BODY TAKES ENORMOUS TIME AND ENERGY. PSYCHOLOGICAL DEMONS CAN HAUNT SOLDIERS' NIGHTS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS. AND AFTER MONTHS IN THE HOSPITAL COMES A WHOLE NEW CHALLENGE — GOING HOME.



MICHAEL MACOR / The Chronicle

Sgt. Michael Buyas (right) greets a fellow double amputee, National Guardsman Kevin Pannell, at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. Michael had just returned from a 30-day home visit and had fallen behind on physical therapy. He wondered when he'd be walking as naturally as Pannell.

[THE SERIES]

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

TODAY 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.

STORY BY JOAN RYAN ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL MACOR

CHELAN COUNTY, Wash. — Sgt. Michael Buyas returned home from the war on a sunny Sunday morning in May. He and his wife, Carrie, flew from Washington, D.C., into the Wenatchee airport in central Washington state, emerging from the plane into a cheering crowd of family, friends and a hundred or so locals who had heard about the homecoming on KOZI-AM out of Lake Chelan. Hundreds of bikers from the Wenatchee Harley club lined the tarmac three and four deep, engines roaring, American flags flapping.

As Michael rolled down the ramp in a wheelchair, in his wraparound sunglasses and low-riding baseball cap, with the empty bottoms of his jeans tucked under his stumps, he spotted his three little boys shouting and waving. He saw his in-laws, his brother, Charles, his mother, in from Portland, Ore., all dolled up in a black silk

wrap. He saw three soldiers in uniform and two in street clothes, all friends from his training base in Fort Lewis, lined up at the bottom of the ramp, hands behind their backs, eyes straight ahead, as if waiting for a visiting dignitary.

All for him. This wasn't how he imagined he would become famous.

Before the babies and the Army, Michael dreamed of being a rock star. He played the guitar and wore his hair long. He always had a stash of weed and charmed the girls with love songs he wrote himself. His jobs cleaning out horse stalls and septic tanks, even the well-paying job later at the aluminum foundry, were marking time until fate came rolling up Highway 97 through the apple orchards and processing plants and swept him away from Chelan



PODCAST: REPORTER JOAN RYAN TALKS ABOUT THE STORY BEHIND THE SERIES.

SLIDESHOWS: DOZENS OF ADDITIONAL PHOTOS BY DEANNE FITZMAURICE AND MICHAEL MACOR ARE ONLINE.

VIDEO: STARTING WEDNESDAY, AN UPDATE ON HOW BRENT AND MICHAEL ARE DOING FROM VIDEOGRAPHER JIM IRWIN.

PREVIOUS CHAPTER: TO SEE SUNDAY'S STORY AND PHOTOS, GO TO SFGATE.COM/WARWITHOUTEND/.



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County, Wash.

He believed in the dream the way a person slapping a dollar on the counter of a 7-Eleven believes in a lottery ticket. It was like a twig in the doorjamb, keeping open the possibility of something amazing. Someday maybe the door would swing open and the klieg lights would be waiting for him.

Instead, Michael got his 17-year-old girlfriend pregnant in 1995, married her two years later when she was eight months pregnant with their second child and, shortly after the birth of their third, joined the Army to earn a steady paycheck. He became a Ranger with the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, out of Fort Lewis, Wash., and left for Iraq in October 2004.

Nine weeks later, two days before Christmas, fate did finally arrive. A bomb hidden on a dirt road outside Mosul blew up the armored Stryker in which Michael was riding.

It took both his legs and turned the 30-year-old into a war hero, the most famous person in central Washington since Hugh Herndon and Clyde Pangborn landed at the Wenatchee airport in 1931 after the first nonstop flight across the Pacific. Michael was the topic of radio shows and newspaper articles back home, where before his injury almost no one had heard of him beyond the bar crowd at the Log Cabin in Entiat (Home of 99 Beers). People donated money to build him a house. They paid \$20 for magnetic blue ribbons that bore Michael's face and name. He was the unanimous choice of the Lake Chelan town council to serve as grand marshal of the Memorial Day parade, and the local riding club wanted him as grand marshal of the summer rodeo.

Michael took to the role as if he'd been studying a script. He never complained in public. He mused about running for public office as a way of repaying the blessings this great country had given him. People he met walked away dazzled, and relieved, by his pluck.

Before Michael reached the bottom of the airplane ramp, his boys threw themselves at him. They had not seen him since a trip to the hospital several months earlier. They were, as most children who visited the amputee ward seemed to be, more curious than scared by their father's missing limbs. Will new ones grow back? Do your feet get cold? Can you get electrocuted by your robot legs?

As the boys swarmed Michael, the local newspaper and television station zoomed in for the shots that would lead



Photos by MICHAEL MACOR/The Chronicle

Hundreds of well-wishers welcomed Michael home at the Wenatchee, Wash., airport in June. His son Justin, 8, wouldn't leave his side. Sgt. Gerardo Avila (right) was in Michael's unit and nearly lost his eye in an explosion.

the nighttime newscast and be on the front page the next day. Inside the terminal, folks from the local VFW and Military Officers Association of America and a hundred other well-wishers broke into "God Bless America." They shook Michael's hand as he passed. Someone handed Carrie a bouquet of yellow roses.

Out front, airport officials had set up a lectern in front of a huge sign welcoming Michael home. The president of the Harley club announced that his group had answered the radio station's call, raising more than \$20,000 toward building Michael a house. A state representa-

tive gave Michael a flag that had flown over the state Capitol, and the Military Officers Association of America presented another check. Then Charles, Michael's broad-shouldered brother, stepped up to the microphone.

He shifted from one pointed cowboy boot to the other, his eyes on the wrinkled sheets of yellow paper in his hands. He read from them, explaining how he and Michael were born minutes apart, two boys in a set of triplets, and how, when their mother and third brother moved from their home in Oregon to Alaska, Charlie and Michael struck out

together at age 17 for Washington. He talked, too, about how hard Michael had worked to get through Army Ranger school.

"I want to tell my brother how very proud I am of you," he said, looking up to talk directly to Michael. His voice caught in his throat.

Michael wiped a tear. They weren't the kind of brothers who shared much of themselves with each other. But that first week at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, when a breathing tube prevented Michael from speaking, Charles chattered at his bedside, delivering all the

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news from home. And it was Charles who pushed the morphine button for him precisely every eight minutes to dull the pain.

From the podium at the airport, Charles took a breath, trying to get out the last words on his yellow paper. "I honor you as a real hero," he said. "My brother, Sgt. Michael Buys, I love you."

They hugged, and then Michael rolled up to the lectern and took the microphone in his hand.

"Now I know how a rock star feels," he said.

■ ■ ■

The next morning, Carrie pulled out the plug that was recharging the lithium-ion batteries in Michael's prosthetic legs. She had let them recharge overnight in the dining room of the double-wide mobile home where she, Michael and the three boys were staying with her parents. Michael, like nearly all of the soldiers with an amputation above the knee, had a prosthesis called a C-Leg. Instead of the leg swinging forward using body weight, the way it does in older models, the C-Leg has magnetic sensors and microprocessors that collect and send feedback between the foot and the knee. An internal computer controls hydraulic valves that automatically adjust to the user's movements, allowing for a more natural gait. Computer software customizes the settings to fit the user's unique walking patterns.

Still, for all the technological advances, artificial legs required months of training to use effectively and without pain. Michael didn't like wearing them. When Carrie walked into the den with the legs in her arms, Michael didn't look up. He was relaxing in the La-Z-Boy, drinking coffee. His hair was still wet from the shower, which he took sitting on the bathtub floor and dousing himself with a detachable shower head.

"Dad, you need your robot legs now?" asked Jaiden, his 4-year-old.

Michael had not worn his shrink stockings to bed, so his stumps had swollen. He knew his prosthetics would be too tight, giving him an excuse not to wear them. It wasn't his favorite thing, learning to walk again. His stumps would hurt from the weight, particularly the skin grafts that were still tender, and the demands on his muscles left him exhausted. He knew it would get easier; he had seen amputees at Walter Reed walking all day and even running. But that was a long way off, and now that he was home, he wanted to enjoy himself, not struggle with his artificial legs.

But Carrie wasn't giving him a choice. She propped the legs against the chair. Michael decided not to argue. He

scouted to the edge of the chair, rubbed his stumps with Secret Platinum antiperspirant to keep them from sweating, and pulled on the rubber linings that kept his skin from scraping against the prosthetics' sockets. He pulled the right leg on with little trouble, but the socket on the left wouldn't budge.

"You *have* to wear the shrinkers at night," Carrie said. She lifted the sneakered foot at the end of the left prosthetic as Michael leaned back in the chair. Carrie pushed on the bottom of the sneaker, shoving the prosthetic over the swollen stump.

"God!" Carrie said, grunting with each push. Michael grimaced but said nothing.

When it was on, Carrie crouched next to the chair. Michael put his arm around her shoulder and propelled himself to his feet, almost leaping. But as he straightened up, he lost his balance. Carrie grabbed him with her free arm, yanking him toward her. Jaiden gasped, eyes wide.

"OK, OK," Carrie said. "You got it?"

■ ■ ■

Michael and Carrie drove to the Apple Cup restaurant in Lake Chelan, a quaint resort town across the Columbia River from Carrie's parents.

Diners stole quick glances when Michael hobbled in with his canes, but no one approached him, perhaps unsure that he was the double amputee they had seen on TV and in the newspaper.

"I'd break up with her," Michael said after they had settled into a booth, talking about their courtship, "and Carrie would show back up a few days later as if nothing happened. She wouldn't let me break up with her."

Carrie laughed, nodding. "It's true," she said.

"She was mental," Michael said.

The waitress refilled their coffee cups. Michael fished around his leather fanny pack. His legs were starting to hurt. He needed to take his midday pills, among which were the painkillers that would soothe his legs.

"I forgot my pills," he said. "I need to go home. I forgot my socks, too."

He needed the socks so that as the swelling in his stumps subsided during the day, the extra socks kept the sockets snug. Carrie sighed but said nothing.

"What?" Michael said.

"Nothing," she said. "They had planned to run errands. Instead Carrie drove the 20 miles back home, where Michael took off his legs and went to bed. 'My legs are killing me,' he said, taking a painkilling Percocet."

"You've got to get them fixed," Carrie said, referring to the ill-fitting sockets. Rogue bone growth, called heterotopic ossification, or HO, had made Michael's

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stumps lumpy, so the sockets needed to be remade. But she knew he wasn't likely to do it when he returned to D.C. after this 30-day home leave. She wasn't returning with him. She needed to give her mother a break from the kids. And, frankly, she needed a break from Michael.

Their last few weeks in D.C. had been the worst. They fought constantly. Michael had been on a tear about donations from listeners of KOZI, the local radio station, where Carrie's sister Jacky New delivered updates on Michael's progress. Hometowns all over the country were welcoming their wounded sons and daughters back with bake sales and walk-a-thons and pledges of money to help them get their lives restarted. The Lake Chelan community decided the money ought to go to building Michael and his family a house. Carrie and her parents had opened a bank account so they could write checks for supplies and workers. Michael went ballistic. Wasn't this his money? Why was everyone but him deciding how to spend it? He screamed at Carrie that her family was stealing his money.

"Michael, it's for the house," Carrie would tell him.

"I didn't ask for a house," he complained. "Nobody asked me."

He wanted to pay off their debt. They had run up bills on 10 credit cards before

Michael was deployed to Iraq. Carrie told her parents to put the house on hold, and slowly they paid off their debt. Then Michael moved on to ranting about the blueprints. He wanted a loft in the house. When Carrie's father and brother concluded that a loft wouldn't work, Michael blew up.

"The only thing I want and they can't do it!" he said.

The house had become a stand-in for everything he resented about his life now, everything that was out of his control. He railed at Carrie until she stormed out of their room of the Mologne House, the outpatient hotel at Walter Reed, and called her mother or one of her sisters, telling them she didn't know how much more she could take.

Michael had refused to get counseling at the hospital, so Carrie quietly had urged one of his doctors to get him some help. Michael set up a weekly appointment with a psychiatrist, but he showed up at just three over the next several months, declaring them a waste of time. Michael even had begun skipping some of his twice-daily physical therapy appointments, saying he needed to rest.

"Get off my back," Michael told Carrie. "I know my body better than they do."

She learned that if she pressed him, they would end up in a fight, and she had lost her energy for fighting. But during

their first days back home, Michael seemed more relaxed. They were getting along better than they had in weeks.

One afternoon while Michael was taking a nap, Carrie stubbed out her cigarette in an ashtray on the picnic table outside and walked over to her car. She returned with a cassette tape marked "Smilin' Dude."

"It was the first song he wrote," Carrie said, holding the tape between her hands. "I had him record it for me before he left for Iraq." He also taped another one of his songs, called "Through Barred Eyes."

"That song is so awesome," Carrie said, smiling. "Every time I'd go somewhere in the car with the kids, we'd crank it up. We played it so much, it broke."

Michael was playing the guitar the first time she saw him, when she was 15 and he was 19. He was sitting outside a camper on the grounds of the stables where he worked with his brother. "He gave me the chills," Carrie said. She fell hard and never recovered.

■ ■ ■
"Hey," Michael said. He had just woken from his nap and was sitting in his wheelchair in the open doorway of the mobile home.

His hair stood up in a dozen directions. His eyes squinted in the sunlight. He rolled down the ramp and joined

Carrie for a smoke at the picnic table, where someone had left the morning's Seattle Times. Three more soldiers from Fort Lewis had been killed in Iraq. Michael's Stryker brigade was from Fort Lewis, the Army's major installation in the Pacific Northwest. It had been his home for five years before he shipped out to Iraq.

Michael pushed himself through the dusty, rutted ground to a quiet spot behind the house and buried his head in the paper. The story said 60 soldiers from Fort Lewis had died since the war began. He shook his head.

"It's crazy, you know," he said. "Just sad."

Michael said he had no regrets about serving in the Army. It had given his life purpose. To the surprise of his family and friends, he was an exceptional soldier. He had found focus and order in the rigid rules. He lit a cigarette and took a drag.

"That's how you start to see yourself when you're in the Army, as a soldier. That's who you are. And all of a sudden, that's not who I am anymore."

He exhaled a thin stream of smoke.

"I was worried that I'd be less of a man," he said. He shifted in his chair and looked over his shoulder at his sons pushing each other in a wheelbarrow.

"I cried a little about it," he said. "About 30 seconds. Then I said, 'Well, that's enough feeling sorry for yourself.'"

He sounded as if he were talking about a character he was creating, and maybe that's what he was doing: shaping himself, through words, into the man he wanted to be.

"It doesn't take legs to be a man," he said. "A man provides for his family, takes care of his children, works through things with his wife. It has nothing to do with strength. There are men out there who can do many things and don't take care of their children or their wife. I'm a great person. I don't need legs to make me a great person."

He watched Carrie walk across the driveway and pick up Jaiden from another tumble onto the dirt. "I realized through this how much I really love Carrie, how she stuck by me," he said. "She would not let me go. I believe you have a soul mate in life, and maybe she didn't call it that, but I think she always felt it about me. It was like she always knew."

■ ■ ■
As the days passed and the excitement of his homecoming faded, Michael grew irritable again, as he had back in D.C., with the day-to-day struggle of getting from the bedroom to the bathroom, of enduring the pain of his prosthetic legs, of telling his sons that he couldn't take them fishing yet,



Carrie began to get exasperated with having to remind Michael to take his pills. He would also forget his "shrinker" stockings, and his legs would swell so much that his artificial legs wouldn't fit. All of the boys — including their nephew, Jonathan Crockett (right), and son Justin — fought over who got to ride in Michael's wheelchair.

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of having to crawl from room to room the day Carrie left home not realizing his wheelchair was in the car.

The novelty of being famous — talking at schools, greeting well-wishers at restaurants and stores — was wearing off. He was coming to the conclusion that people's fawning was as much about assuaging their own feelings of grief or guilt or repulsion as about honoring his service. The gap between what people expected of him and what he had to give was growing wider. Michael was running out of hero.

The low point came at his brother Charles' wedding in early June.

He had taken his prosthetic legs off after serving as best man at the ceremony. Carrie was pushing him in his wheelchair across the lawn, where the reception had begun. She hit a bump and Michael huddled out of the chair. He instinctively threw his legs out to stop his fall. He landed hard on his left stump, sending him into convulsions of pain. Michael curled into a fetal position, moaning and snapping at everyone to stay away from him. He writhed on the ground, angry, embarrassed and in pain as people gathered around him, wondering what to do. Carrie sat beside him and cried.

Percolating beneath Michael's crankiness was a rising anxiety about returning to Walter Reed alone. He hadn't been doing his exercises and had stopped wearing his prosthetic legs.

"How do the doctors know what I need to do?" he'd say.

Without Carrie reminding him, he wasn't even taking his daily cocktails of pills — propranolol for hypertension, Coumadin to prevent blood clots, Neurontin and Gabitril to prevent seizures, Zoloft for depression, Cenazof as a stool softener, Celebrex, melhadone and Percocet for pain, Ambien for sleep and quietapine to prevent hallucinations and hostility.

On the day before he was to leave, he and Carrie headed down the dirt road

leading from Carrie's parents' mobile home to a smaller one she rented from them while Michael was in Iraq. They were going to sort through clothes and household items to sell at a yard sale Carrie planned to hold after Michael left. A wooden North Pole sign still dangled from the eaves of the mobile home, untouched since the phone call from the Army came on Christmas Eve.

Michael and Carrie stopped at the bottom of the four steps leading up to the porch. They stared for a minute. Four steps. The former Army Ranger couldn't reach his own front door.

"OK," Carrie said. "Maybe you can hang on."

She crouched in front of Michael, and he hugged her neck. Carrie bent forward, lifting Michael's 130 pounds onto her back piggyback style. She grasped the handrail and climbed one step, two, three, four, grimacing under the weight. She slowly duck-walked to the front door, Michael squeezing his thighs around her hips, his arms looped around her shoulders and neck. She pushed the key in the lock. It didn't fit.

"Wrong key!" she said, bursting out laughing.

Michael hung on as Carrie fumbled, finally opening the door. She carried him over the threshold and deposited him on the couch. Then she went back outside to retrieve his chair. How, Carrie worried, would Michael manage in D.C.? He had survived Ranger school, faced enemy combatants. But he seemed so vulnerable. She feared he might sink into depression and fall behind in his rehab. She knew from talking to other wives at Walter Reed how easily that can happen.

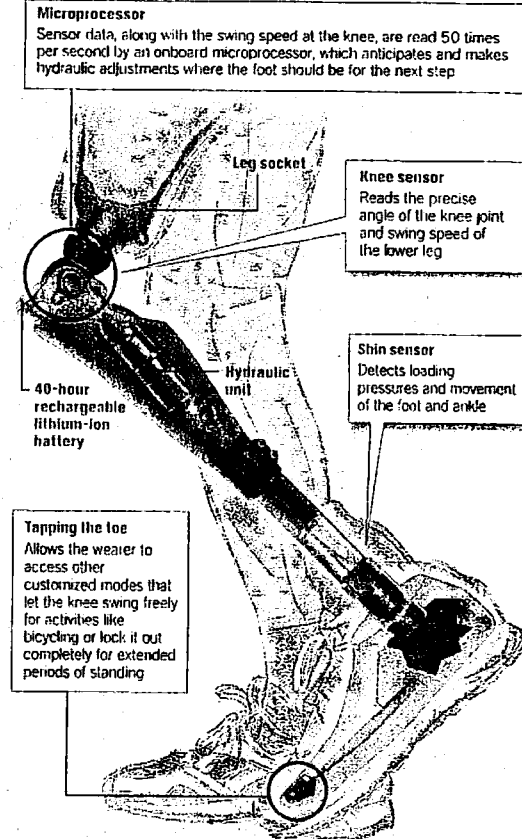
But she also believed that only by being on his own would he figure out, as he once did through the Army, a way to transform himself.

Michael's phone rang around 1:30 p.m. on his first day back in D.C. in June 2005.

"You haven't left your room yet?" Carrie asked. "Did you eat at least?"

Getting out of the chair

The modern above-knee prosthesis, called the C-Leg, is a microprocessor-controlled marvel of metal and plastic. Introduced in the United States in 1999, this prosthesis is a vast improvement over earlier artificial legs, enhancing comfort, security and freedom and the ability to continue with an active lifestyle.



Source: Otto Bock Healthcare

JOHN BLANCHARD / The Chronicle

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On the floor next to Michael's bed, his black suitcase lay open, still packed. He couldn't lift it onto the bed, so he leaned over in his chair, gripping the armrest with one hand and lifting a shirt and a pair of shorts with the other. He dressed and rolled down the hall and through the back glass doors to have a cigarette outside the Mologne House. Soldiers walked past or rolled by in wheelchairs on their way to the hospital. Michael bummed cigarettes off anyone who had them. He had run out and forgotten to get some from Carrie before boarding the plane.

"One minute I'm out there with my buddies helping them," Michael said, tapping ashes onto the grass. "The next minute I'm here with no legs, feeling like I failed them and failed myself. . . . I couldn't take care of myself. I had to rely on everybody else from the minute I got blown up. It was a weird time. I was learning how to be me again. Me without my legs."

He talked in a rush of loosely connected thoughts. He rubbed his left knee as if trying to squeeze the soreness from it. He looked at his watch, then dug into his leather pouch. He had forgotten to take his noon meds. He dropped a handful of pills into his mouth. Then he suddenly rolled to a nearby garbage can and spit them out. Wrong pills. He found the right ones and gulped them down.

He headed across the Walter Reed campus to catch a bus then the subway to an optical store in Silver Spring to get his glasses fixed. He emerged from the subway to face the long hill up to Georgia Avenue. Michael's biceps bulged as he leaned into the hill, straining to turn the wheels. Carrie had always pushed him up the hill when they came to Silver Spring. He returned to Walter Reed 90 minutes later, exhausted, and spent the rest of the day in bed.

That night he couldn't sleep. He called Carrie half a dozen times, saying he was freaked out by a horror movie he was watching. She told him to turn it off. He asked her to come be with him. He was lonely.

He had been away from her for one day.

She said Jaiden, their youngest, would be heartbroken if she left again. She said her mother needed a rest from the kids. "Just for a little while," Michael pleaded.

Carrie understood it wasn't the horror movie that was scaring Michael. It was being out in the world with no legs, feeling trapped and vulnerable and overwhelmed. She said she would be there in two days.

■ ■ ■

The next morning, Michael showed up an hour late to the Wednesday amputee clinic on the third floor of Walter Reed. Six months after the explosion, Michael still had pain in his legs, back and scalp. He received electric nerve-stimulation therapy to blunt the sensitivity on the scar across his scalp and the pain in his back, which became stiff from sitting in his chair for so many hours a day. The ends of his stumps always seemed sore from the prostheses. In an office off the waiting room, Michael's doctor checked his amputation sites and renewed his many prescriptions.

Michael left the clinic and headed down the hall to physical therapy. He hadn't done any exercises since he left a month earlier. When he struggled to do sit-ups holding a large rubber ball, he sighed.

"I'm too fat for this!" he said.
He quit after 10 minutes.

When Michael told Carrie on the phone about his therapy session, he could hear the frustration in her voice. "You've got to do this," she said. "You keep telling me you're going to do it, going to do it. If you're going to slack off, you're going to be there longer than you should."

She thought by staying with him for a week, maybe two, she could get him back on track.

■ ■ ■

On his third day in Washington, D.C., Michael woke up in a cranky mood in the early afternoon. He had missed his dentist's appointment by 3½ hours. His suitcase was still unpacked.

"This chair sucks," he said, sitting in his wheelchair. "I tried to get all my clothes out, but the chair couldn't get around the bag." He pulled out some clothes and, lying on his back on the bed, slipped his pants over his stumps, then thrust his hips into the air as he yanked the pants up to his waist. He rolled outside for a smoke. He had heard that Congress had passed a bill to pay injured soldiers up to \$100,000 as compensation for their losses. He could expect his payment early in 2006.

"They're paying me for my legs, which is great, but they can't pay for my legs to come back," he said. "But if I'da stayed in the military, I'd have 14 more years at least to get 50 percent of my base

pay (in pension payments). I'd have to get another job when I got out just to live.

"Now I've shaved off 14 years and get 100 percent — and even more — of my pay. And way more benefits than people who don't get hurt. And my family gets a house, and I'll be home. If I think about it, I come out ahead, getting all this money and stuff, all the attention."

He stopped and looked at a soldier wheeling himself into the guesthouse.

"But over the years," Michael said, "\$100,000's not going to pay for what I got to do. I can never turn over in bed (without waking first). I had visions of my sons being wrestlers and me teaching them what I know. I can't play tennis or basketball with them. I guess I can shoot hoops, but it won't be the same. We were at the playground and I wanted to help Jaiden down the slide and I couldn't. I had to watch someone else do it."

Now that he'd had a few nights' sleep, he questioned his decision to ask Carrie to fly out. She ought to stay with the boys. He should learn to be more independent. But not having her by his side was almost like missing another limb. Just as he was figuring out how to function without legs, he had to figure out how to function without Carrie. He wanted to be her husband again, not her patient or her ward. But he didn't know yet how to be without her.

"I took a lot out on Carrie," he said. "I

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was always feeling mean and crabby, and it's easier to yell at someone you love than a stranger. Then she'd lay on my chest and tell me everything was OK. She did deal with it all. The way she dealt with it was she loved me through it all."

He thought about what Carrie had said about stacking off, about being stuck at Walter Reed longer than he ought to be. "I'm going to work out every single day till I get home," he said. "Starting tomorrow."

■ ■ ■

When Michael showed up in the PT room the next day, his therapist arched an eyebrow toward him.

"Still remember how to wear those?" teased the therapist, a cheery man named Bob Bahr, as Michael unpacked his artificial legs from their carrying case.

Michael smiled. He rolled a thick rubber sock over his left stump for his C-Leg, the one that includes a microprocessor knee. He pulled on both legs but wasn't eager to stand. He knew his stumps would hurt. He pushed himself up with a cane in one hand, then grabbed the second cane from Bahr's hand. Michael winced. The legs were tight. He had forgotten again to wear his shrinkers to bed. Bahr looped a wide belt around Michael's waist. As Michael walked, Bahr held the belt to make sure he didn't fall.

He guided Michael toward the stairwell down the hall. The two walked slowly up one flight. Michael looked like a robot trying to simulate human movement.

Bahr led Michael outside to a grassy slope. He wanted Michael to test himself on uneven terrain. Michael put one foot in front of the other. Carrie was arriving later in the day. He wanted to be able to tell her he was working hard.

And in October, four months away, Michael knew he would put on his dress greens for a ball at the Tacoma convention center near Fort Lewis. His battalion was scheduled to return from its year-long tour in Iraq; the ball was to celebrate its homecoming. For almost six years, since he enlisted in 1999, Michael had defined himself by his uniform. He had grown into the type of soldier people admired, someone they could count on. Whenever his self-doubts surfaced, Michael had looked into the eyes of his battalion mates. He would see, reflected back at him, respect and trust.

He didn't know what he would do if he saw pity.

Tuesday: Brent is eager to get back into the bar scene.

E-mail Joan Ryan at joanryan@sfrchronicle.com.

[BACK STORY]

Chronicle reporter Joan Ryan and photographer Deanne Fitzmaurice began documenting "War Without End" during an April 2005 visit to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., where they met Sgts. Michael Buyas and Brent Bretz.

In the subsequent months, Ryan and Fitzmaurice — later joined by photographer Michael Macor — followed the treatment and recovery of the soldiers, including traveling to Washington state for Michael's first trip home from the hospital.

In most cases, direct quotes used in this story were heard by the reporter. In some cases, when scenes were reconstructed based on interviews, direct quotes were provided by interview subjects.

All but two of the scenes in Washington state were witnessed by Ryan and photographer Macor.

The argument between Carrie and Michael about how to use the money donated through KOZI radio was recreated through interviews with Carrie and Michael, as was the scene at Charles' wedding.

All of the scenes in Washington, D.C., were witnessed by Ryan and Macor.