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War without end

THE ARMY GAVE SGTS. MICHAEL BUYAS AND BRENT BRETZ DIRECTION AND SELF-RESPECT. AFTER THEY WERE WOUNDED, THEY FOUGHT A SECOND WAR TO REBUILD THEIR BROKEN BODIES AND RECONNECT WITH THEIR FAMILIES. BUT ONE BIG PIECE HAD BEEN MISSING — GETTING TOGETHER WITH THEIR BATTALION TO SEE WHETHER THEY WOULD STILL FIND THE ESTEEM THEY HAD KNOWN ONLY WITH FELLOW SOLDIERS.



DEANNE FITZMAURICE / The Chronicle

Sgt. Brent Bretz reunited with a girlfriend, Ashley Andren, after coming home from Iraq. As a double amputee, he had to figure out all over again what it meant to be a man. Heading off to a homecoming ball for his battalion last fall in Tacoma, Wash., he especially wondered about his identity as a soldier.

[THE SERIES]

SUNDAY 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.

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

STORY BY JOAN RYAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DEANNE FITZMAURICE AND MICHAEL MACOR

TACOMA, Wash. — Inside the second-floor ballroom of the Greater Tacoma Convention & Trade Center, a banner stretched above the dance floor: "Welcome Home 1-5 Bobcats — Operation Iraqi Freedom — We Are So Proud of Our Heroes!" Balloons floated above linen-draped tables decorated with orchids and miniature American flags.

Outside, in the warm October evening, soldiers in dress greens and dress blues, each jacket studded with ribbons and pins, spilled from their cars. They greeted each other by last names the way soldiers do. They hugged, slapped backs, traded barbs. Wives and girlfriends, their beauty-salon hair curled over their shoulders, teetered on high heels and smoothed the wrinkles from their gowns.

The men of the 1st Battalion, 5th In-

fantry Regiment out of Fort Lewis — a few miles from Tacoma — had returned 10 days earlier from their year-long tour of duty in Iraq. The ball was an Army tradition, celebrating a battalion's homecoming from war.

Two soldiers had been looking forward to the gathering with heightened anticipation.

Thirty-year-old Michael Buyas and 23-year-old Brent Bretz were sergeants in the 1-5's Charlie Company. In December 2004, within four days of each other, bombs blew off their legs. As the company fought together in Iraq for another 10 months, Michael and Brent — like so many of the more than 17,000 American soldiers wounded in Iraq — slipped off alone to their own private wars, inside hospital rooms and phys-



SFGate.com

PODCAST: Reporter Joan Ryan talks about the story behind the series.

PREVIOUS CHAPTERS: To see earlier stories and photos, go to SFGate.com/warwithoutend/.

SLIDESHOWS: Dozens of additional photos by Deanne Fitzmaurice and Michael Macor are online.

VIDEO: An update on how Brent and Michael are doing from videographer James Irwin is also available.

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ical therapy clinics, inside the intricate circles of their families, inside their own heads.

Michael and Brent had found, at least early on, that they grieved nearly as much for the lost camaraderie and the lost sense of purpose as for their lost limbs. The shared experience of war had forged a bond among them and their fellow soldiers that they shared with no one else. They missed their tribe.

There was something else, too. Michael and Brent felt they had been their best in the Army, Michael as a vehicle commander and Army Ranger, Brent as a sniper. They had been excellent soldiers. For the first time in their lives, they had been leaders, men who could be depended upon. Their injuries took all that away and, in many ways, sent them back to the years before they enlisted, to that crease of time between childhood and adulthood when they were trying to figure out what it meant to be men. Their injuries were forcing them to figure it out all over.

For this one night they would be back with the tribe, with guys who spoke in military shorthand and understood the inside jokes from Iraq about the flies and the warm Pepsi and the Red Bull and Gatorade cocktails. Brent and Michael would wear their uniforms like everyone else. The ball meant that despite everything, for at least these few hours, they were soldiers again.

Brent pulled on his suspenders, con-torting himself in his chair to affix the clips to the back of his slacks. It was a few hours before the ball. Five of his Army buddies had converged on his friend Phil Becker's apartment to put on their dress blues or dress greens before climbing into a limo to pick up their dates.

"They got me the gayest suspenders," Brent said, studying the black pair he had received from the Army a day earlier. Everyone else seemed to have white. He rolled himself to a full-length mirror in the living room. He had a Rolling Rock beer tucked between his legs.

"No problem, dude," said Kevin Kryder, a broad, shaved-head soldier who doted on his friends like a den mother. He flipped open his cell phone and called a friend who apparently had access to white suspenders. He'd bring them to the ball.

The last time Brent wore his dress blues, six months earlier, he was in a room at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Washington, D.C., for an Armed Forces Foundation dinner. He needed his mother, his sister, a nurse and the nurse's boyfriend to maneuver his arms and legs into the uniform.

This time Brent had left his mother, Kathy Pearce, behind at the Sheraton next to the Tacoma convention center. The Army had invited her to the ball in appreciation of her devoting herself so completely to Brent's recovery. Brent was not happy she had come, much less

that he had to share a room with her, as they had for all those months at the guesthouse at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio.

Their relationship was still strained from Kathy asking Brent to move out of her home in Mesa, Ariz. She could no longer watch him go out drinking every night while he was still on heavy medications, taking what she believed were serious risks with a body that was still so fragile. But Brent knew she also couldn't let go. She called him often on his cell phone, checking in, though she could hear the annoyance in her son's clipped answers.

Being back at Fort Lewis only reinforced Brent's need to break from his mother. Surrounded by his Army buddies at Phil's apartment, he felt more like himself than he had since he lost his legs. He was going to the ball with his new girlfriend, Ashley Andren, a young woman he had dated casually before shipping out to Iraq.

Brent slipped on the white shirt Kevin had ironed for him, but he couldn't button the cuffs. "Can you do this for me?" he asked Phil. Phil had been his closest friend when they lived at Fort Lewis. While the battalion was in Iraq, Phil's wife moved into an apartment accessible only by stairs. But when Phil returned, he relocated them to a ground-floor unit so Brent would have easy access when he visited.

Brent undraped his blue jacket from the hanger on the doorknob and leaned almost off the wheelchair to coax his rigid left arm into the sleeve. The blue



At the battalion ball, Sgt. Michael Buyas got his first chance to talk at length with the soldiers who were with him when a bomb was detonated under their Stryker. "You were propped up on your elbows talking to me," one told him. "Until I noticed your legs, I didn't think you were hurt at all."

[THE BATTALION'S LOSSES]

By the time the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment returned from Iraq, five soldiers had been killed and 150 wounded — 35 seriously enough to be evacuated. Brent and Michael lost both legs, three others lost one leg, and another lost a foot. One lieutenant lost an eye.

At the battalion's homecoming ball in October, an empty table by the front stage was set for five in remembrance of the soldiers who were killed.

One, Staff Sgt. Julian Melo, had been in Charlie Company with Brent and Michael before transferring to Headquarters Company. He was killed by a suicide bomber minutes after Michael had chatted with him in the mess hall at the battalion's headquarters in Mosul. The attack on Dec. 21, 2004 — two days after Brent's injury and two days before Michael's — killed 22 people and wounded 69. Melo was 47 and the father of two.

[A BRIGADE'S IMPACT]

The 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, in which Michael and Brent's unit was one of three infantry battalions, recently was awarded the Valorous Unit Award, the equivalent to a Silver Star. The commander of the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry Regiment, Lt. Col. Todd McCaffrey, said he is proud of the brigade's work during its yearlong tour in Iraq.

In the Tigris River Valley near Mosul, McCaffrey said, the brigade rebuilt the local police force from 300 to more than 9,000. It helped train Iraqi recruits, expanding the Iraqi army in the area from 700 to 12,800. It medically screened more than 2,000 Iraqi children and worked on 415 projects to improve schools, hospitals, clinics, bridges, roads, water and sewers.

The brigade rescued nine kidnap victims, found 233 enemy caches, detained 3,070 suspected insurgents and killed 550. It faced 3,056 enemy attacks, including 1,335 by improvised explosive devices and 84 by suicide bombers. It uncovered and disabled 439 IEDs.

Mosul "certainly has a long way to go," McCaffrey said. "However, Mike and Brent, along with their fellow soldiers, made a huge difference for the good in northern Iraq. My hope is that, despite their sacrifice, they and others wounded beside them take away some sense of accomplishment for their service."

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plastic brace on his arm finally was gone, replaced by an elastic bandage. But the rogue bone growth that plagued most amputees returning from Iraq had now engulfed Brent's elbow joint, cementing it in place. The joint was useless. Doctors talked to Brent about breaking the elbow and resetting it at an angle that at least would allow Brent to reach his hand to his pants pocket. His shoulder joint and his hand still worked, so even without a bending elbow, he could push the wheels of his chair. That was another change in recent weeks: He had traded in his electric chair for a manual one so he wouldn't look, in his words, like an old man.

He expected to have his last leg surgeries in the beginning of November. He figured he'd be at Brooke for three weeks in recovery then be up on prosthetic legs by Christmas.

As he dressed in Phil's living room, Brent noticed a light bruise just above the elbow. He thought it might be the beginnings of an infection but figured he would deal with it when he went to Brooke in a couple weeks. He seemed to be pretending he wasn't wounded, as if the damage to his body existed only if he allowed himself to think about it. He put the bruise out of his mind. He buttoned his jacket and pulled at the wings of his bow tie. He looked at himself in

the mirror and cocked his familiar half-smile.

From across the room, Phil watched his friend watch himself. "Lookin' good, legs," he cracked, coining a new nickname.

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At 6:15, a quarter-hour after the pre-dinner reception had begun, Michael and his wife, Carrie, pulled their van into a handicapped parking space by the side entrance to the Sheraton. They had dropped off their three sons at a friend's apartment for the night and had been caught in traffic on Interstate 5 on the way back. They still had to shower and dress.

It was typical Michael, moving at his own pace, running late. But he also was different from the man who, during the summer, seemed incapable of functioning without his wife at his side. Carrie had been with him at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., for the first six months of his recovery, but she returned to their Washington state home in the summer. Michael was on his own just one day when he called her in a panic. He couldn't do this by himself, he said. Carrie flew back and stayed for a week. But their three young sons needed her. She had to leave. He'd have to go it alone.

In the quiet of Carrie's absence, Mi-

chael had to face the nightmares and self-loathing that tore at him and his marriage. He had been able to bury the most difficult questions — What did he want of his life? What kind man was he going to be? — beneath the bravado of the returning hero. Now Carrie wasn't around to prop him up, to allow him to play the hero's role though he was the first to admit he hadn't earned the title: What had he done except have the bad luck to be blown up? Michael knew he had reached a crossroads. He had to choose between the loser and the hero, the drifter he was before he enlisted and the leader he had become after. He had to decide which man would return to Carrie.

Michael found himself working harder in physical therapy. He finally made an appointment to be fitted for a socket on his prosthesis that would more evenly distribute his weight on the end of his stump and cause less pain. One day he walked half a mile from his room at the Mologne House, a guesthouse on the grounds of Walter Reed, to the hospital. A few days later, he walked both ways. Soon, he was walking around the shops and restaurants in the nearby Maryland city of Silver Spring. If he had to, he could tolerate his prostheses for up to eight hours, four times longer than he could during the summer.

Michael also had weaned himself from methadone, the synthetic opiate commonly prescribed for heroin addicts trying to kick their habit, which he had been taking for pain. It took three weeks of intermittent chills and hot flashes, of sleeping for long stretches or not sleeping at all. Without the drug, he felt more energetic. He took lower doses, too, of Percocet for pain, Gabitril for anxiety, Zocor for cholesterol and Zoloft for depression. But he still needed sleeping pills to quell the nightmares. The Mologne House had given Michael a roommate when Carrie left, but after two nights of Michael's screams, the roommate left and Michael didn't get another one.

Back home without Michael, Carrie was undergoing changes of her own. She was cultivating an independence she had never known. She was making decisions about the construction of a new house financed by donations solicited by a local radio station. Before Michael's injury, she would have deferred to him, afraid of making a mistake. She was becoming more Michael's partner than his underling, a role she had willingly filled since falling in love with him at the age of 15.

Still, when she was faced with driving four hours with the children to meet Michael in Tacoma for the ball,

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she balked. She wanted Michael to fly home and drive with her. But in the end, she made the trip on her own. Michael flew directly from D.C. to Tacoma.

As the couple waited now in the hotel lobby for the elevator, Michael checked his watch as the elevator doors opened. They would have to hurry. The ball's opening ceremony, in which he and other wounded soldiers would be honored, was scheduled to begin in just 45 minutes.

Brent slid himself from the backseat of the limo into his wheelchair on the sidewalk outside the convention center. He watched his date, Ashley, emerge in a red satin halter dress. They had rekindled their pre-Iraq romance when Ashley visited him in Arizona over the summer. She had seemed relieved that he was the same Brent, partying and joking the way he always had. He counted her with the same charm that had won her over at Fort Lewis. He handed her a rose in the limousine on the ride over.

Brent was happy to have a striking young woman at his side as he wheeled himself through the throngs of soldiers and their dates drinking cocktails from the cash bar inside the convention center. Every few feet someone rushed up to shake his hand and lean in for a hug, saying how great it was to see him. Brent knew the soldiers meant what they said. They were effusive. But there was no mistaking the look in their eyes. They couldn't imagine themselves in his place.

When Brent and Ashley made their way to Table 44, Brent's mother was already there. Two soldiers from the battalion had met her at 6 sharp in the lobby of the Sheraton with a single yellow rose wrapped in cellophane and had escorted her to the convention center a block away. Brent barely acknowledged her when he rolled up to the table. When she leaned over to straighten his tie, he gently pushed her hand away.

Capt. Mickey Traugutt was up on stage talking about the wounded from their battalion.

"These heroes' sacrifices helped each one of us return home safely," he said.

He began to introduce the wounded soldiers, starting with those from Alpha Company, then Bravo and finally to Michael and Brent's company, Charlie. The two chairs next to Kathy, reserved for Michael and Carrie, were still empty.

"Sgt. Brent Bretzl!" Traugutt boomed from the stage.

Brent's buddies around the room, especially Phil and Kevin and his friends from the limo, hooted and screamed. Brent tried to stay cool, but he broke into a full-faced, wide-eyed smile. At that moment, he looked almost radiant, the way young men and women do in photos from graduations or weddings.

He had that look of utter happiness, not only for having arrived at this point but also for having arrived with people who were absolutely, unwaveringly crazy about him. Any doubts Brent harbored about his place in the tribe disappeared into the cheers and applause.

Traugutt moved on to the next name in the alphabetical list. "Sgt. Michael Buyas!"

Cheers went up. Traugutt's eyes scanned the tables. Several soldiers craned their necks, trying to spot Michael.

At that moment, at the far end of the ballroom, a side door burst open. A soldier appeared in the rectangle of light from the lobby. He was tall and broad-shouldered. He leaned on a cane. Some in the crowd stood up to see Sgt. Buyas? But Buyas had no legs. This soldier was walking.

Michael moved into the room, slowly but confidently, walking on his prosthetic legs with only a slight limp, as if he had a sore foot. With the applause rising in his ears, Michael waved and smiled, stopping every few yards to accept the hugs and handshakes of soldiers he had not seen since Iraq.

Carrie walked at his side in a silky, single-strap dress. She held her husband's arm lightly. She saw the looks on the faces of the soldiers who rushed up to greet him. They seemed truly to love him. In their eyes she saw the reflection of the strong, solid man she had kissed

goodbye at Fort Lewis a year earlier, when the battalion left for Iraq. She never doubted, even when Michael himself did, that the man she had fallen in love with as a teenager was still inside that broken body.

Michael seemed to see it, too. There was something different about him from the last time he had received a hero's welcome, at the Wenatchee airport the previous May. He wasn't playing a role this time. In his mind then, he had done nothing heroic. Now he knew that his heroism had been earned in the last few months at Walter Reed, when he pushed his aching, burning muscles to climb another flight of stairs and finish another round of sit-ups.

When Michael reached Table 44, he was so engulfed in well-wishers he didn't see Brent two chairs away. But Brent was watching him. He saw Michael lift his pant leg to show off the chrome-colored prostheses that allowed him to shed his wheelchair. The other soldiers marveled at the machinery. Some snapped photos. They couldn't believe how well he walked. No one would ever know he was missing both legs, they said.

Brent said nothing.

Col. Robert Brown, the brigade commander and highest-ranking officer at the ball, left his own table to join the knot of admirers. "You're a great inspiration," he said, pumping Michael's hand.

When Michael sat down, Carrie rested her chin on his shoulder. He looked

as handsome as she had ever seen him. His face had filled out. His arms had bulked up from all those months pushing the wheels of his chair. She noticed Brent watching him. Brent was so different from the last time she and Michael had seen him, in the physical therapy room and cafeteria six months earlier at Walter Reed. Brent had been slow-talking and foggy from heavy medication and as helpless as a child, wholly dependent on his mother.

Michael reached behind Kathy's chair to shake Brent's hand.

"So you walked all the way over here?" Brent asked. He wasn't even close to getting mechanical prostheses, much less walking a city block from the Sheraton to the convention center and back again. Brent was still facing major surgery in two weeks at Brooke to remove the bony growths from his stumps. Doctors told him his legs would have to be sewn together for three weeks to allow the skin graft from one leg to regenerate on the other. He would need several months before his legs were strong enough again to tolerate prostheses.

Carrie stood to snap a photo of Michael with Brent. They both looked dashing in their uniforms. Carrie told them to smile. Kathy leaned to one side to get out of the frame.

The brigade commander had spoken from the stage about the courage, nobility and strength of the war wound-



Jason Jones, Brent's cousin, became his constant companion in Arizona when they moved in together. Jason also has tried to step into the role that Brent's mother had played: caretaker and protector. After Brent fell ill at dinner one night two weeks ago, Jason helps him into the hospital in Tempe, Ariz.

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ed, as if those words had the same meaning in each injured soldier's ripped-up life. Michael and Brent, side by side in Carrie's photo, seemed like an emblem for the thousands of men and women who returned from Iraq scarred and burned, without hands or feet, without eyes or legs, or with such damage to their brains they would never live independently again.

They rebuilt their lives in their own ways, depending on their character traits, the nature of their families, the complexity of their injuries. But war wounded shared something with each other that the rest of the soldiers did not. They carried the war home in their bodies. For Michael and Brent, the war was in their bones and skin, at the ends of their stumps.

Michael hobbled out at 9:30, before the dancing had begun. His legs were sore from wearing his dress shoes, which didn't give his legs as much support as sneakers. He had to get back to the hotel to take the prostheses off and rest. Brent left with his friends about an hour later. They were going to cruise up to Seattle and hit some bars. But getting in and out of the limo proved to be tiring for Brent, and everyone agreed just to go back to Phil's.

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When Brent returned to Arizona, the bruise on his arm turned out to be trouble after all. He was diagnosed with an infection, landing him in the hospital in Phoenix and delaying his leg surgery at Brooke Army Medical Center. He transferred to Brooke in mid-November. It turned out he didn't have an infection after all. He underwent surgery to remove heterotopic ossification, or HO, from his left leg on December 2. He flew home for Christmas then returned to Brooke in mid-January, hoping to complete one final surgery to remove the HO in his right leg and replace the skin graft on the stump.

cle to cover the HO or leave the stump as it is and see whether it can tolerate the prosthesis.

"I don't worry about it too much," Brent said earlier in the month, before this latest setback. "I take it day to day. It's easier to handle that way."

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Michael is still at Walter Reed, waiting for final word on the date of his discharge from the military. He expects to be notified this week, which means he should be home for good early next month.

During the fall, Michael traveled between Walter Reed and his home near Lake Chelan, Wash. He saw the roof go up on his new house and the floors and windows installed. The donations through KOZI radio reached about \$100,000 by the year's end.

Michael has been back at Walter Reed since Dec. 28. He has been show-

ing up semi-regularly to physical therapy. Mostly, he has been working on his "med boards," the elaborate process of paperwork and interviews that precedes a medical discharge and determines a soldier's monthly benefits. He no longer pleads with Carrie to visit, though he tattooed her name in script on his ring finger.

He plans to take a year off to spend with Carrie and the boys and to finish the house. Then maybe, he said, he'll go to school or help his brother Charlie with shoeing horses. He seemed in no hurry to make a concrete plan. Maybe he'll become, as some small-town heroes do, a professional celebrity, cutting ribbons, talking to Rotary groups, judging the apple pie bake-off.

For all his independence now, the vulnerability of having no legs is never likely to disappear, as he was reminded one afternoon in mid-February. He was wearing a new leg that works by hydraulics

Doctors had already decided not to sew his legs together. They had another plan to provide a cushioned cover for the HO on the right stump. They wanted to use Brent's left biceps. Brent resisted. Losing his biceps meant losing the use of the arm forever, even if an acceptable elbow replacement were developed in the future. He couldn't operate an artificial elbow without his biceps muscle.

But the decision about surgery was put off when doctors found an infection in the elbow. The bone was so infected that some of it looked like cottage cheese. Doctors scraped it out and removed all the pins and brackets that seemed to aggravate the frequent infections.

Brent went home to Arizona in early February with an IV bag pumping antibiotics into his body 24 hours a day for six weeks. By then, Brent was beginning to consider using his biceps to cover his right stump. Using the biceps meant doctors could leave the HO as it was, avoiding the risk of shortening his leg as they cut away the rogue bone growth. He still hasn't made a decision because two weeks ago the infection in his arm worsened.

Brent became ill at a restaurant one night, and his cousin Jason Jones rushed him to the emergency room. He had a 102½-degree temperature. He could barely hold his head up. He was admitted to the hospital in Tempe, then transferred to Brooke in San Antonio. Doctors there performed surgery on the elbow to remove antibiotic "beads," which had been implanted months ago and had run their course. Brent is still being tested to pinpoint the source of the new infection and to determine how to treat it.

Brent's mother, Kathy, said Tuesday that they hoped to have answers in the next day or so. They expect, in any case, that Brent will be on intravenous antibiotics for six more weeks. In the meantime, he will be fitted for a prosthesis on his left leg in the next few weeks. And Brent will decide what he wants to do about the right leg — use his biceps mus-

rather than a microprocessor; he can wear it hunting and fishing without worrying about water and dirt damaging high-tech mechanisms. But it doesn't adjust as automatically to unexpected movements as the computerized C-Leg does.

When Michael stepped off a curb outside the Mologne House at lunchtime, he came down harder on his foot than he had intended. The new leg snapped off from its socket at the knee. Michael fell backward, landing on his tailbone.

"First time anything like that ever happened," he said, trying to laugh it off, insisting he wasn't hurt.

A Chronicle photographer helped him to his feet and back into his room, where he strapped on his C-Leg and walked back out to the curb.

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In the 15 months since Michael and Brent lost their legs, about 6,500 more

American men and women have been wounded and about 990 killed, according to statistics compiled through Department of Defense and other reports.

Since the beginning of the war, 454 have returned home without hands or feet or arms or legs. At least 62 have lost more than one limb.

Somewhere at this moment, a soldier or Marine is driving down a road in Iraq, and an IED is waiting, and another name will appear on the list of the war wounded. Then a new war will begin, fought in private, beyond the headlines, destroying some things and, in unexpected ways, delivering others.

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