Leroy Bailey had just turned 21. He was one of seven kids from a broken family in Maine. He had been in the infantry in Vietnam only one month.

Then the rocket tore through the roof of his tent while he was sleeping and exploded in his face.

He was alive when the medics pulled him out. But he was blind. And his face was gone. It's the simplest way to describe it: He no longer had a face.

That was in the spring of 1968. He went to an Army hospital, was discharged and shipped to Hines VA Hospital, west of Chicago.

After three years and much surgery, they told him there was little more they could do for him. He still had no face.

Now Bailey spends most of his life in the basement of his brother's home La Grange. The brother moved here from the East to be near him while he was hospitalized.

He knits wool hats, which a friend sells for him. He listens to the radio or to a tape player.

Because of his terrible wound, most of the goals and pleasures of men his age will always be denied him.

BUT THERE IS ONETHING he would like to be able to do someday. It isn't much, because most of us take it for granted.

He would like to eat solid foods.

Since 1968, he has eaten nothing but liquids. He uses a large syringe to squirt liquid foods down his throat.

Last year, through some friends of his brother, Bailey met a doctor who specializes in facial surgery.

The doctor, Charles Janda of Oak Brook, said he believed he could construct Bailey's face so that he could eat solid foods.

But it would require a series of at least six separate operations, possibly more. Bailey eagerly agreed, and the first operation was performed at Mercy Hospital.

Then Dr. Janda and the hospital sent their bills to the Veteran's Administration.

They did this because Bailey and his brother were under the impression that the VA would pay for any treatment he needed that wasn't available in the VA.

THE VA REFUSES TO PAY the bills. The reason was explained in a remarkable letter sent to Bailey by a VA official. (The italics are mine.)

“Dear Mr. Bailey:

Reference is made to the enclosed invoice for services given to you about selective plastic surgery done on Sept. 22, 1972.

It is regrettable that payment on the above cannot be approved, since the treatment was for a condition other than that of your service-connected disability.

Outpatient treatment and/or medication may only be authorized for the treatment of a disability which has been adjudicated by the Veterans Administration as incurred in or aggravated by military service.

Any expense involved for this condition must be a personal transaction between you and the doctor.”
It is astonishing, I know, but the VA actually told him that he was being treated for something “other than that of your service-connected disability.”

I can’t even begin to comprehend what they can be talking about. Until he was hit by a rocket, he had teeth. Now he has none. He had eyes. Now he has none. He had eyes. Now he has none. He had a nose. Now he has none. People could look at him. Now most of them turn away.

SO HOW CAN THIS SURGERY be for anything else but his “service-connected disability”?

I read through his medical records. He could have received 100-per cent disability rating for any of four separate reasons. He could have received and 80-per cent disability rating for another reason, and a 30-per cent rating for still another.

The medical report uses language as “scars, disfiguring… exceptional repugnant deformity… entire midface is missing … massive facial injury.”

Bailey believes that the VA thinks he wants the surgery just to look better, that it is “cosmetic” surgery.

Even if that were so, then why in the hell not? If we can afford $5 million to make the San Clemente property prettier, we can do whatever is humanly possible for this man’s face.

But Bailey insists it isn’t his appearance that concerns him. He knows it will never be normal.

He explains his feelings in an appeal he filed months ago with the VA:

“The only thing I am asking for is the ability to chew and swallow my food.

“This was the purpose for the whole series of painful and unsuccessful operations I underwent in Hines Hospital between the day of my injury on May 6, 1968, and my eventual discharge from the hospital in 1971.

“At this time, I was told the very depressing new that nothing further could be done.

“I will never be able to accept this decision…”

IN SOME BUREAUCRAT’S FILE CABINET is Bailey’s appeal. It has been there for many months. Every day that it sits there, Bailey takes his syringe and squirts liquid nourishment down his throat.

If his appeal is turned down, he will spend the rest of his life doing that. Not even once will he be able to sit down and eat at the dinner table with his brother’s family, before going back down to the basement to knit.

“Lost his face in Vietnam, but not his heart” by E.A. Torriero
Printed May 26, 2008 in the Chicago Tribune

VALPARAISO, Ind. — Leroy Bailey has two words for soldiers returning from Iraq with wounded faces: “Don’t quit.”

“Don’t stop fighting for what you need,” he said. “If you don’t, who will?”

Bailey knows that firsthand. Forty years ago this month, a mortar ripped through a tent in a jungle in Vietnam, shearing off much of Bailey’s face.

Bailey, now 62, came home to a checkered maze of federal care, mainly at Hines VA Hospital west of Chicago. Later, a suburban plastic surgeon made some improvements to his face.

But the federal government wouldn’t pay for it, deeming the surgery not part of his “service-connected disability.” So his family contacted renowned columnist Mike Royko.


The column stirred a national outcry. President Richard Nixon ordered the government to pay the expense. It did -- though Bailey doesn’t recall the amount.

A few years later, Bailey’s family moved him to a single-story house in woods outside Valparaiso. He has spent much of the last 40 years there, often doing the same thing every day: cooking himself small meals and chatting with CB buddies, his lifeline to the outside world.

He has no wife, no children -- only some family nearby. He survives on a $70,000 annual government disability.

His two eyes are plastic. So he reads the Bible in Braille. He still knits, as he did when Royko found him living in the basement of a brother’s La Grange home.

He stirs a bit when he thinks of hundreds of American soldiers returning with severe facial wounds.

“It’s terrible,” he said. “But that’s what it is.”

On his front door, someone posted a sticker. It says: “Pray for our troops.”

And he does, often, because he says he knows what terrible things can happen when a man loses his face in war.