

A Faceless Man's Plea

1 Leroy Bailey had just turned 26. He was one of seven kids from a broken family in Connecticut. He had been in the infantry in Vietnam only one month.

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

3 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.

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

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

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

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

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

9 BUT THERE IS ONE THING he would like to be able to do some day. It isn't much, because most of us take it for granted.)

10 He would like to eat solid foods.

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

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

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

14 But it would require a series of at least six separate operations, possibly more.

15 Bailey eagerly agreed, and the first operation was performed at Mercy Hospital.

16 Then Dr. Janda and the hospital sent their bills to the Veterans Administration.

17 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.

18 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.)

19 "Dear Mr. Bailey:

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

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

article by Mike Royko 1973 Chicago News

22 "Outpatient treatment and/or medication may or [redacted] authorized for the treatment of a disability which has been adjudicated by the Veterans Administration as incurred in or aggravated by military service.

23 "Any expense involved for this condition must be a personal transaction between you and the doctor."

24 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."

25 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 a nose. Now he has none. People could look at him. Now most of them turn away.

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

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

28 The medical report uses such language as "scars, disfiguring . . . exceptional repugnant deformity . . . entire midface is missing . . . massive facial injury."

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

30 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.

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

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

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

34 "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.

35 "At the time, I was told the very depressing news that nothing further could be done.

36 "I will never be able to accept this decision . . ."

37 IN SOME BUREAUCRAT'S FILE CABINET is Bailey's appeal. It has been there for many months.

38 Every day that it sits there, Bailey takes his syringe and squirts liquid nourishment down his throat.

39 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 hats.

The VA Does a Fast Reversal

December 11, 1973

A year after giving the brush-off to blind, faceless Leroy Bailey, the Veterans Administration has reversed itself in almost a matter of minutes. Monday, after I wrote about Bailey's case, the VA bureaucrats suddenly found new energy, compassion, and ability to make a decision.

The VA says it now has decided to pay the medical bills Bailey incurred in trying to get his face rebuilt enough to eat solid foods.

It was an interesting study of a governmental bureaucracy in action.

Late in the morning, we were called by Don Monico, a VA public relations man.

He couldn't answer questions, but he said we should talk to Vern Rogers, a bigger VA public relations man.

Mr. Rogers, in turn, said that he was not speaking for himself. He was speaking for Alton Pruitt, director of the West Side VA hospital.

(In a bureaucracy, it is usually done like this, if possible. That way, nobody is actually speaking, since Mr. Rogers is not speaking for himself, and Mr. Pruitt isn't really speaking.)

Anyway, Rogers-speaking-for-Pruitt said the whole matter was being referred immediately to some mucky-muck board in Washington.

"It will go to Washington for an administrative review. And whether or not payment will be made will have to be determined by a board of medical examiners."

This, of course, was laughable. Why was a big review needed to make the decision to let Bailey chew food?

Rogers-speaking-for-Pruitt wasn't sure about that.

But a moment later he said that Mr. Pruitt would actually come on the phone and speak for himself. Which he did.

"I was just on the line to Washington," Mr. Pruitt said. "The VA is going to go ahead and pay. We also are going to ask him to come in so we can make a complete assessment of his needs."

Just like that. It shows how efficient a government agency can be—a year late—if its inefficiency is suddenly splashed across a newspaper.

But that still doesn't explain why the VA originally wrote Bailey that his facial surgery "was for a condition other than that of your service-connected disability."

I tried to get an answer.

That letter had come from Jack Pierce, chief of the medical administration service at the West Side VA.

But it wasn't signed by Mr. Pierce. It was signed by a J. Funches "FOR" Mr. Pierce.

Mr. Pierce wasn't available to discuss it. So we contacted Josephine Funches, who signs letters for Mr. Pierce.

She didn't remember too much about the case. "I think I may have read an article about him in the paper," she said.

But you wrote a letter to him.

"I may have signed a letter, but that letter was just sent out over my signature, that's all."

Do you follow this procedure? Mrs. Funches signed the letter for Mr. Pierce. But she says the letter was somebody else's creation.

So we tried the public relations man again, Rogers-who-speaks-for-Pruitt.

"That [the letter] was an error on the part of the Veterans Administration," said Mr. Rogers.

Any idiot can see that. The question is, who made the error?

"A clerk made the mistake," said Rogers.

There's your bureaucracy. If what Mr. Rogers says is true, a clerk decided that Bailey's terrible injury wasn't the result of the war. And he typed Mr. Pierce's name. And Mrs. Funches signed the letter for Mr. Pierce.

If that is the way they do things, there must be a lot more Leroy Baileys out there.