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## BEVERLY HILLS DENTIST SINKS HIS TEETH INTO HELPING 'IRAQ STARS'

by Steve Lopez

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The press release struck me as Hollywood hokum rather than heartland patriotism, but surprisingly enough, it turned out to be a little of both.

A PR firm called the Professional Image was pitching a story on a Beverly Hills cosmetic "dentist to the stars" who would be fixing the teeth of "a different type of star; an Iraq star!"

Namely, Marine Staff Sgt. Tony Lino of San Clemente, who was badly injured by a roadside bomb last year on his second tour of duty in Iraq.

"We invite you to . . . witness his new dental restoration," said the press release, noting that Sgt. Lino would have his bridge and crowns replaced and his damaged gum tissue repaired.

"Working to help Tony's smile is the least I can do for an American soldier who served for our country in Iraq," Dr. Laurence Rifkin was quoted as saying.

I'm in my car heading west, wondering if I really want to witness a dental restoration. More importantly, I'm wondering why a soldier injured in battle hasn't gotten all the medical attention he needed from military doctors. Not that I'm surprised.

If the war in Iraq is hard to relate to, given our distance

from the action and the fact that relatively few of us have loved ones in the fight, it seems even more distant in Beverly Hills, where the Hummers are looking for valets rather than insurgents. And although cosmetic surgery patients make up a vast army here, they don't usually own fatigues.

Dr. Rifkin's office isn't much more than a block from the Rodeo Drive Walk of Style, which honors the likes of Giorgio Armani and Gianni

Dr. Rifkin gives me a friendly handshake and takes me back to talk about Lino's dental repair job. Rifkin, a sculptor whose artwork fills his office, is a former Lakers team dentist, but he says he doesn't like to talk about his movie star clients, and he isn't looking for any glory regarding his free treatment of Sgt. Lino.

He heard about the soldier from Maggie Lockridge, an Air Force Nurse Corps vet and retired Rancho Mirage resident



*Dr Rifkins Xrays of the gap left from Lino's injuries; the temporary bridge*

Versace. In other words, it's a long way from the Khyber Pass in Afghanistan, where Lino did one tour of duty, and Iraq, where he has done two.

I take the elevator to the penthouse floor of Rifkin's building and walk into an office with a stunning view of Beverly Hills and its swaying palms, with the Hollywood Hills in the sun-washed distance.

who once owned a cosmetic and reconstructive surgery recovery center in Beverly Hills. Lockridge now runs Iraq Star, which hooks up military patients like Lino with doctors and dentists willing to work for free. (She's the one who was looking to publicize the cause, and Rifkin was happy to help).

Dr. Rifkin says he gladly took in Lino to inspire more

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*Sgt. Lino's  
looking forward  
to a new smile*

civilian dentists and doctors to do what military doctors can't or won't do. Whether you support the war or not, he says, not volunteering his own position, few would disagree that injured soldiers deserve first-rate medical attention.

Rifkin won't say it, so I will. Sending soldiers into combat with substandard armor and equipment, as we have done at times, is unconscionable, and so is the failure to provide comprehensive follow-up medical and mental health services in timely fashion.

In Lino's case, he had to wait several months to have his teeth fixed after initial emergency treatment, and although the job was adequate, it left a little to be desired.

"He had some shrapnel go through a cheek and break out a tooth," Rifkin says, showing me a photo of Lino's scars, which include a nasty gash over his left eye. He's almost blind in that eye and has been referred to Beverly Hills surgeon Michael Groth for work on the scar.

Rifkin says of Lino's photo:

"It's not him. It's not the

way he used to look."

Lino, 28, arrives and takes my hand firmly. I notice that his right arm is peppered with shrapnel scars.

He was clearing roadside bombs when one exploded about 6 feet away last September, he says, and he was evacuated to Germany for treatment and was blind for 12 days. Back in San Diego, after a wait of months, he wasn't satisfied with his military dentist's efforts or his attitude.

"I don't really want to bash the military, if you don't mind," Lino said, reminding me that he's still on active duty.

Lockridge would later tell me it was a Camp Pendleton social worker who referred Lino to her. She has a spot on [www.IraqStar.org](http://www.IraqStar.org) for active duty soldiers and vets to register for help with "terrible scarring from shrapnel, burns, and wound trauma," as the website says.

I assumed Lino was done with combat, given his vision loss and other injuries, but he said he can't wait to go back to Iraq and hopes to get the call in

February.

"It's more about the guys," he says, telling me he's a field leader who isn't ready to sit around polishing his medals. "I think the war itself is a good cause, and as long as the president tells us we need to be there, we need to be there."

Well, it's not the time or place for a debate, and Lino isn't here to hear my views, anyway.

"We're most definitely making progress," he adds, saying that despite his injury, he was finding fewer roadside bombs to clear and he was encouraged by Iraqi uprisings against insurgents.

When I ask, Lino says yes, it seems a little strange to now find himself in the office of the dentist to the stars.

"God, I hate that name," says Rifkin.

Lino says he just figured that if he's in Beverly Hills, Rifkin must be pretty good.

I decide to take a pass on witnessing the beginning of Lino's dental restoration, which will require several visits. Before I leave, Rifkin turns to me and says, "I just want to say that I'm honored to be working on Tony."



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