

## Finding his bearings

### Mike Trauner lost his legs in Afghanistan

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Ten weeks after Master Cpl. Mike Trauner lay on an Afghan road, struggling to breathe through the dust created by an explosion that took both his legs, he walked for the first time.

"They put your legs on and it makes you feel human again," he said from his room in the Ottawa Hospital Rehabilitation Centre. "It feels great to walk again."

The 29-year-old soldier, who grew up in Sudbury, had been working as a crew commander in Afghanistan for nearly three months before the explosion.

On Dec. 5, Trauner was on foot patrol in the Zhari district with his section doing "all around defence security." Shortly after other platoons pushed past, the group formed an "extended file," which involves placing roughly five metres of space between each person.

As they began walking, an improvised explosive device (IED) that was buried in the ground exploded. The force of the blast propelled Trauner 20 feet.

"I landed on my right shoulder and there was a lot of dust and smoke and my mouth was filled with dirt and my eyes were filled with dirt and I was just trying to clean myself off," he said. "I was pretty rattled, my head

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was shaken up a lot from the blast and I couldn't really see anyone because the smoke was too bad, but I heard a lot of people yelling and screaming."

Trauner said he didn't realize at first that he lost his leg because the smoke was too thick to see. He did, however, notice severe injuries to his left arm.

Members of Trauner's platoon rushed to his side and started tying tourniquets and applying bandages to his body in an attempt to stop the bleeding.

"For the most part I stayed calm through the whole thing because if you panic you can bleed yourself out," he said.

Trauner, though, died and was resuscitated twice along the journey to a German hospital for treatment.

He lost both legs -- one above the knee, one below -- and had multiple fractures in his hand and forearm.

The shrapnel embedded in his hands and legs has been slowly coming to the surface, he said, and the doctors have been helping him remove it.

"Emotionally, some days are hard, some days are good," he said. "Just like anybody else, some days you feel down because you've got to sit in bed and let yourself heal."

Despite the severity of his injuries, Trauner said he is "not negative about this at all."

In the beginning, doctors were unsure if he would be able to keep his arm. However, Trauner said he was "quite optimistic and happy" after surgeons in Ottawa told him the arm would heal.

Trauner was raised in Sudbury and attended St. Charles College before entering a stationary engineering program at Cambrian College.

He had planned to follow in his father's footsteps and perhaps work for a mining company, but when he graduated, there weren't any jobs available.

It was then, at age 18, that Trauner visited a recruiting office and joined the Canadian Forces.

His parents, Gerry and Leona Trauner, supported his decision to enter the military and said they always instilled a sense of work ethic in their children.

"As parents, you try to guide your children as best you can with what they want to do, but always have options," said Gerry. "He knew from working hard, something good would come out of it. He never gives up, he's a fighter."

The couple said they are proud of everything their son has accomplished.

The exterior of their Lively home is adorned with yellow ribbons meant to signify support for the troops. Their living rooms walls are checkered with framed family photos and Trauner's mother

proudly gestured to each picture of her two children and grandchildren.

Gerry, who has worked at Vale Inco's Copper Cliff smelter for 34 years, described the morning he found out about his son's injuries as "the worst day of my life."

"When he went there, we knew the dangers, we knew there was the possibility, but you don't think about it," he said. "You send your kids off and you always figure they're going to come back."

Through their journey to Germany, both said they were astounded by the amount of kindness shown to them by both military personnel and regular people they met along the way.

Neither had a passport -- due to Leona's admitted fear of flying -- so before they could travel to Germany to see their son, they visited a Toronto passport office.

"People who didn't even know Michael, signed a card for him at the passport office," said Leona. "Every plane we were on, people knew why we were on there."

Although they expected to stay in Germany for a few weeks, Trauner's recovery was so fast that all of them were flown back to Canada three days later.

Gerry credits the support of the Canadian Forces caregivers with saving his son's life.

"They really take care of our soldiers. If it wasn't for them we probably would have lost our boy," he said. "You don't hear about this. You see nothing but bad stuff and you don't hear about experiences like ours."

Trauner's parents speak with him on a regular basis and said they would expect nothing less than a full recovery.

"Michael's tough. He's not going to sit there in a wheelchair," said his mother. "He's got a very good attitude."

Trauner's fiancé, Leah Cuffe, also said the support they have received has been overwhelming.

"The military has an amazing support system, and if anyone complained about it I would challenge them," she said. "It's incredible how everyone pulls together."

The couple got engaged over Valentine's Day weekend and Trauner said he counts it as one of the good things to emerge from the trauma.

Cuffe, who manages a furniture store in Petawawa, rarely leaves Trauner's side, staying at the hospital five or six days a week.

She remembers the exact time a military official called to tell her of Trauner's injuries.

"I got a call at 3:46 in the morning ... She told me there was an incident and they were on their way to my house and to please get up and dressed and I did. They knocked on my door minutes later," she said.

At first, Cuffe said she didn't believe them.

Now, she said she is looking forward to "just getting him home."

Trauner will be in rehabilitation until late spring, early summer. In the months leading up to his release, Cuffe said a major stress will be to find a new home.

They built a house in Petawawa two years ago, but now need special facilities to accommodate Trauner's challenges.

"There are days that are really hard and there are days that are very rewarding," said Cuffe. "On Feb. 12, when he took his first steps it was amazing. In just 10 weeks he has come so far. I'm very proud of him."

Trauner was unable to discuss the details of his role in Afghanistan, and would only say the soldiers "did what had to be done."

While he was unable to discuss his missions, Trauner said the "good part" of their job involved distributing food and toys to local children.

He recalled the children's fondness towards Pop Tarts and how the reactions of the "reserved adults" eventually changed.

"They're very quiet and they don't wave like they would here. It's a different type of culture," he said. "But, as soon as we started giving (the kids) toys and gifts and a little bit of hope, you would see a little bit of smiles in the parents and eventually they would start waving back at us."

If he was able, Trauner said he would like to return to Afghanistan.

"As a leader, you don't ever want to leave or abandon anybody," he said.

Currently, Trauner participates in occupational therapy twice a day at the Ottawa Hospital Rehabilitation Centre. The sessions are designed to help him regain use of his hand. The broken bones have healed, but Trauner said it is necessary to repair the damaged nerves and loosen stiff joints.

His primary goal, however, is to strengthen his body enough to stand on prosthetic legs so he can walk down the aisle during his wedding next year.

"My main goal right now is to be able to walk down the aisle at my wedding and have our first dance," he said. "If I can make it through that and sit back in my wheelchair, I'm content."

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