Mark Reinhardt had been flirting with death long before his Humvee was hit by Taliban insurgents in early August. Lt. Reinhardt was hit by a road mine explosion.

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As a tactical adviser to the Afghan National Army, the 26-year-old Princeton University graduate spent the last five months training Afghan soldiers in combat strategy and warfare technique.

But nothing could have prepared Lt. Reinhardt for the fateful morning he was blasted by a road mine explosion — and hurled some 20 feet in the air.

"He kept saying there's no scientific reason why I should be here — other than it being a miracle," his mother, May Reinhardt, said.

Lt. Reinhardt was lucky. He escaped with seven broken ribs and a one-way ticket to a hospital in Germany. A fellow Marine, Gunnery Sgt. Theodore Clark, was killed upon impact.

"Had he not been thrown out, he would have been minced meat," Ms. Reinhardt said. "That bomb was so powerful."

Before transferring to Afghanistan, Lt. Reinhardt served in Iraq as a forward artillery observer with the First Marine Division. Later, he helped protect supply convoys in the Sunni Triangle, and he was counted among the first American soldiers to enter Saddam Hussein's palace in Tikrit.

But it was on his most recent mission, holed up in the Afghan highlands, where Lt. Reinhardt felt particularly connected to the cause he was fighting for.

As Ms. Reinhardt put it, "He wanted to help a young country get on its feet. This was nation-building he wanted to do."

Lt. Reinhardt's father, Uwe, elaborated.

"He said, 'The only way for us to get out of these places is for us to train these guys," Mr. Reinhardt said. "To train these Afghan troops to control their own country, and not have it controlled by the Taliban and al-Qaida.'"

But instituting such discipline in Afghanistan — a nation ravaged by instability and tribal conflict — proved no easy task.

"These guys are very tough fighters," Mr. Reinhardt said, describing the Afghan soldiers his son aided. "On the other hand, they are a bit like 14-year-olds — they've never been in a formal military unit.

"It's an uphill struggle," Mr. Reinhardt said.

In addition to providing military training, Lt. Reinhardt had been working to create the beginnings of infrastructure in the remote Paktika Province.

"He had been running weekly meetings with village elders," Ms. Reinhardt said. "He was trying to build a government center with a medical clinic, school, customs office, voting office.

"He believed in working by winning the hearts and minds of the Afghans," she said.

Such idealism, however, came at a high price for the ambitious lieutenant.

"It was extremely challenging and dangerous," Mr. Reinhardt said. "He was living in the mountains, sleeping in open air."

"Life there was pretty rugged," Mr. Reinhardt said.

Princeton, on the other hand, where Lt. Reinhardt grew up, was anything but.

A graduate of The Lawrenceville School, Lt. Reinhardt went on to attend Princeton University.

"He was an economics major," Mr. Reinhardt, an economics and public policy professor at the university himself, said. "He was former president of the Ivy Club.

"This happy-go-lucky college kid has become a very seasoned warrior," Mr. Reinhardt said.

That transformation took root after Lt. Reinhardt enlisted in summer boot camp in his junior year.

"He wanted to do something other than Princeton, law school, business school or Wall Street," Mr. Reinhardt said.

"He said, 'I want to learn how to lead men,'" Mr. Reinhardt recalled.

Now stationed at a California Army base, Lt. Reinhardt is receiving medical treatment for internal injuries.

As for whether or not he'll return to combat, Mr. and Mrs. Reinhardt say they aren't sure.

"We're obviously a little worn down — three years of combat will do that," Mr. Reinhardt said. "But our son has always been boots on the ground. He's fearless."