

Captions for “Note to Judges” portions of the entry form

Photo story/essay

Afghan Military Women

p06-afghanmilitarywomen-01

Former members of the Afghan Female Tactical Platoon, partners to U.S. Special Operations forces that served as a covert unit on combat missions against the Taliban, are making new homes for themselves in Blacksburg, after fleeing to save their lives when the Taliban regained control of their country in 2021.

p06-afghanmilitarywomen-02

Sima Gul walks to the grocery store from her Blacksburg apartment with her son, Amir Mazlom Yar, in his stroller on January 18.

p06-afghanmilitarywomen-03

Sima Gul (center), holds her son, Amir Mazlom Yar, as Azizgul Ahmadi, right, reaches for him during a gathering at her home, welcoming Gul to Blacksburg on December 9, 2022. The two served together on the Afghan Female Tactical Platoon along with Soraiya Nazari (left), holding her daughter, Victoria Elham. Becca Moss, with Sisters of Service (far left) and Rebekah Edmondson (bottom right), program manager of the Afghan Rescue and Resettlement Program sponsored by the PenFed Foundation.

p06-afghanmilitarywomen-04

A frame in Sima Gul's living room, shows a collage of images. Gul (right), in her Afghan military uniform, and her husband in his (left), with their son (center). Gul met her husband while serving with the Afghan Female Tactical Platoon. He was killed during a battle with the Taliban shortly after they were married and when she was pregnant with their son.

p06-afghanmilitarywomen-05

Azizgul Ahmadi, 29, makes sandwiches at Sub Station II in downtown Blacksburg on November 8. Just over two years ago she fled the fall of Afghanistan with her younger sister. In Afghanistan, Ahmadi was fighting the Taliban. She was a member of the elite Female Tactical Platoon, working shoulder to shoulder with the U.S. Special Forces.

p06-afghanmilitarywomen-06

Anne Abbott (left), board member with Blacksburg Refugee Partnership, works with Sima Gul on February 9, during an English class offered four days a week for Afghan refugees. “I want to learn English so I can stand on my own two feet,” Gul said.

p06-afghanmilitarywomen-07

Azizgul Ahmadi (center left), with her sister, Shah Pari, celebrates Pari's 17th birthday party in their Blacksburg apartment on February 19. Ahmadi hosted volunteers from Blacksburg Refugee Partnership, and fellow Afghan refugees for the party. "I am happy to live here with my neighbors all FTP too," Ahmadi said about the women she served with on the Female Tactical Platoon in Afghanistan.

p06-afghanmilitarywomen-08

Shah Pari Ahmadi, 17, takes boxing classes at Blacksburg Boxing and Fitness on September 30. Since coming to Blacksburg in Fall 2021, Ahmadi has embraced her new home in a new country. She is an 11th-grader at Blacksburg High School, works at Walmart in Christiansburg, studies English, and is involved in multiple activities, including boxing and soccer.

p06-afghanmilitarywomen-09

Sima Gul looks for apple juice drink boxes in an aisle lined with beverage options at the grocery store on January 18.

p06-afghanmilitarywomen-10

Sima Gul prays in her bedroom with her son Amir Mazlom Yar on March 25.

p06-afghanmilitarywomen-11

Sima Gul Alizada shares a moment with her son, Amir in their Blacksburg apartment on February 9. "Amir is the only precious thing I have from my husband," Alizadal said. She and her husband served in the Afghan military and her husband died fighting the Taliban shortly after they were married. Alizada is among a group of woman who served with the U.S. Special Forces as part of the Female Tactical Platoon and are making new homes for themselves in Blacksburg, after the Taliban regained control of their country in 2021.