

STRANGER BECOMES NEIGHBOR - EPISODE 3: Sisterhood of Embroidery and Artillery

Andrea Smardon: This episode contains descriptions of violence, war and trauma. Please take care when listening.

[TENSE MUSIC]

Andrea Smardon: A small-25 year-old woman glances nervously at her mother and her toddler son squeezed with her in the back seat of the taxi when the car comes to a standstill. They need to make it to the Kabul Airport by sunrise. They've been inching their way through traffic when they're stopped on the road by Taliban soldiers at a checkpoint. One of them motions to the driver to roll down the window. Her 18-year-old nephew sits in the front passenger seat. The soldier is asking where they're going, 'who are these people in the car?' She lets her nephew do the talking, keeps her gaze down, not making eye contact. She's erased all the photos from her phone that might hint at what she does for work. If they discover who she is, she's terrified of what they might do.

They have no idea that this woman, whose face is partially concealed with a head scarf, was part of a secret, elite unit of Afghan fighters working with American special forces. From a country where women and girls risk being killed just for going to school, this is a soldier who dropped out of helicopters, carried an M4 carbine and stood up to the Taliban.

Her comrades in arms, the American women who trained and served with her will be the ones to make sure she escapes this perilous situation. But the struggle doesn't end there. She's going to need an army of women to make it as a single mother in the US.

From KSL Podcasts, I'm Andrea Smardon, and this is Stranger Becomes Neighbor. Episode 3: Sisterhood of Embroidery and Artillery.

[THEME MUSIC ENDS]

Andrea Smardon: I'm not sure what I pictured when I imagined a woman in the Afghan Army, but I would never guess it about Sima. She doesn't want to use her last name to protect her family still in Afghanistan. When I met Sima in the fall of 2021, she had been living in a hotel south of Salt Lake City on the edge of a strip mall for several weeks, along with her son and nephew. She was wearing a mustard yellow head scarf draped loosely around her slight shoulders. She has a way of casting her dark eyes down and to the side; the word that comes to mind is demure. She tells her story while her one and a half-year-old son sleeps in a bed behind her.

Sima was born in 1996 just a few years before the Americans invaded Afghanistan. She has no memory of the Taliban being in power. Her parents were not well educated, her mother never learned to read or write, but as part of a new generation liberated from the

Taliban, Sima and her siblings were encouraged to go to school. She wanted to study art.

Translator for Sima: I was interested in enrolling in fine arts and if not, my second choice was in the military.

Andrea Smardon: Based on her test scores, she got her second choice - and joined the Afghan army. Her mother supported her decision and was proud of her. Sima's father, who died of a heart attack when she was young, had served in the military. She trained in Turkey for 6 months, where she found out about an opportunity to work with American special forces.

Translator for Sima: When I went to the Special Military Forces, I was very interested and loved my task.

Andrea Smardon: Sima became a member of an elite unit of specially trained Afghan women soldiers known as the Female Tactical Platoon.

Translator for Sima: We had night operations where we went with American forces and our own Afghan forces.

Andrea Smardon: These operations involved dropping into enemy territory usually targets like the Taliban under cover of darkness, approaching homes or compounds in secret, and separating the men from the women and children.

Translator for Sima: Our duty was to search for Taliban women, and separate them, investigate them.

Andrea Smardon: In Afghanistan, because of cultural and religious norms, there are taboos around men and women touching each other or being in mixed company, so checking a woman for weapons poses a challenge. Male soldiers just entering a room of women risked scaring and offending them. So the military started employing women for these missions

The missions were inherently dangerous. Approaching the enemy in their homes could turn deadly if targets decided to fight back. And anyone could be hiding weapons or suicide vests. But Sima says it was also risky if your neighbor found out what you did for work.

Translator fo Sima: We could not tell anyone that we are soldiers.

Andrea Smardon: In some provinces, she heard that women soldiers were assassinated. After she came to the US, she heard about one colleague who did not make it out during the evacuation.

Translator for Sima: we saw on Facebook that a female soldier was shot in Ghor Province while that woman was eight months pregnant and had a two-year-old child.

Andrea Smardon: I looked this up later. I did find several articles about a woman who was 8 months pregnant killed in her home in front of her child. The articles identified her as a police officer. There was no mention of military service, but that part may not have been publicly known, since those working for Americans tried to keep it a secret.

I asked Sima why she would want to be in the military if it's so dangerous.

Translator for Sima: We were doing our duty with great interest and enthusiasm, not knowing that this system would fail one day. We were trying to serve our people and country.

Andrea Smardon: Sima loved her work, she was proud to be fighting for her country. While she was on the job, she also fell in love with a fellow Afghan soldier. In a photo together, his arm is draped over her shoulder, Sima wears big white rimmed sunglasses, he gazes into the camera with dark, sensitive eyes the two of them look glamorous, young unstoppable. In the summer of 2019, they were married. Just a few weeks later, they found out she was pregnant.

But even as the couple looked forward to their new life with a baby, violence was growing.

In September 2019, peace talks between the US and the Taliban were stalled as elections approached.

The Taliban warned that campaign events and polling stations would be targets of attacks. It was enough to scare many people away from voting.

After Sima found out she was pregnant, she stopped going on dangerous missions, but her husband continued to work.

(Sima speaking Dari, crying)

Translator for Sima: When we went to carry out operations during our duty, we saw many young people being killed in front of our eyes and we said that they have their own families, wives, and children, what will happen to them.

Not knowing that one day I will lose the dearest person in my life.

Andrea Smardon: Her husband was killed in an explosion. He never got to meet his son.

Sima was on her own, responsible for supporting her family, She continued to work with the US military on less dangerous missions. She worked on training other recruits and administrative tasks. When the Taliban suddenly took control in August 2021, Sima's baby was more than a year old.

Translator for Sima: We received a message at night that you should arrive at the airport gate at sunrise.

Andrea Smardon: US soldiers on the other side of the world were frantically making calls and texts to people on the ground, to get Sima out. She hoped to escape with her son and her mother, but she also brought her 18-year-old nephew to the airport, so the Taliban wouldn't question or harass her for traveling without male supervision.

Translator for Sima: When we went and arrived at the gate at sunrise, they didn't let us in because it was so crowded.

We suffered a lot. We would approach the gate; they would shoot in the air and throw tear gas.

I was afraid that my son will lose his hearing and develop nerve problems, because he was too young. We were sitting on the ground, and they were shooting in the air. I was holding my son's ears, so that the loud noise could not endanger his ears and his brain.

Andrea Smardon: But her comrades from the US military were persistent. After two days of waiting, in the early morning hours, an American soldier appeared at the gate, and signaled to Sima to let them through.

Translator for Sima: We entered the gate, but the other American soldiers did not understand that we were soldiers. They thought we were just like other normal people who had forced their way in, so they kicked us out of the other gate.

Andrea Smardon: After all that, they were spit out again, only to fight through the crowds the wrong direction.

Translator for Sima: As much as we struggled to enter the field, we struggled twice as much to get out.

Andrea Smardon: They had more waiting to do, and Sima did not dare let herself sleep.

Translator for Sima: I didn't sleep for two days and nights. My son was sleeping in my arms, and I was thirsty. I was afraid that if I fell asleep, my son would fall from my arms.

Andrea Smardon: Sima heard again from her US contacts. Someone would escort them at the gate. She went with some of her female colleagues, her son and her nephew, but her mother could not go on.

Translator for Sima: I asked her to move to the gate, but she refused and told me that she can't go, because she will get trampled in the crowd.

Andrea Smardon: Sima made it inside the airport with her nephew and son. She waited for her mother hoping she would join them.

Translator for Sima: Maybe she could go through the gate, but because she was alone and sick, it was hard for her.

Unfortunately, she could not get in.

Andrea Smardon: That's when a bomb detonated outside the airport.

[BOMB SOUND]

Andrea Smardon: Sima's mother was not close enough to the bomb for it to kill her, but she was knocked to the ground. Whether it was from the blast itself or the panicked crowds, it's not clear. She took a taxi to a hospital and was treated for her injuries to her legs. She would be OK.

But on the airport tarmac, Sima had to make the difficult decision to get on the plane without her mother.

while others celebrated, Sima says, she felt a great loss.

Translator for Sima: I loved Afghanistan a lot and I miss Afghanistan very much. When I left Afghanistan, I was very sad, unlike many who were happy.

Andrea Smardon: Sima had proudly served her country for six years. She did not want to abandon it.

Translator for Sima: But I had to leave Afghanistan.

Andrea Smardon: As the plane lifted, she handed her son to her nephew and was finally able to sleep.

From Kabul, they went to Qatar, to Washington, to Dallas, to a military base in Virginia where they stayed for a month. Sima was asked where she would like to live. She wanted to stay in Virginia, where there were other people in the military that she knew. But the state department had another idea.

Translator for Sima: They said that we have chosen Utah for you.

Andrea Smardon: Sima knew nothing about Utah, didn't know a soul that lived there. But as it turns out, someone was looking out for Sima from afar.

An athletic blonde-haired, blue-eyed young woman, Becca Moss graduated from high school in St Louis, Missouri, knowing she wanted to make a difference in the world. The question was should she choose the Peace Corps or the military?

Becca Moss: And I was like, Well, probably the military can make a bigger difference, because they have a lot more power and money.

Andrea Smardon: It didn't hurt that the military also helped pay her way through college. She chose to focus on field artillery but she was looking for something beyond cannons, rockets, and missiles.

Becca Moss: it was a cool, different thing to do for a woman and like, there weren't a lot of women in it. I knew I could excel being a woman in it.

And it was a good learning experience, but it wasn't necessarily like what I'd signed up for the military to do.

Andrea Smardon: So when Becca found out about something called the Cultural Support Team she jumped at the chance.

Becca Moss: Doing cultural support team was like the best thing I could have done.

Andrea Smardon: Members of the Cultural Support Team or CST's are female officers who work with the Army's Special Forces. It's a program created because the military recognized that it could be more effective if women were interacting with women on dangerous missions in Afghanistan. Becca knew a little about it, at least as much as you can glean from a book.

Becca Moss: I read Ashley's war, which is a book about a CST that was killed over in Afghanistan. It was a very impactful book.

Andrea Smardon: Reading Ashley's War gave me some insight into Becca's experience. These women trained hard, at an accelerated pace to be part of an elite unit going on missions previously open only to men. It was heartbreaking, even knowing ahead of time that the protagonist in the book, Ashley, was going to die. She hid the risks from her parents, so they didn't see it coming. She was young, ambitious, and tenacious, eager to break new ground just like Becca. For these women in the armed forces, it was a rare chance to go on special operations in the field, and push themselves to the limit.

Most of us reading this book would focus on the loss of a young woman's life, but Becca homed in on something else. She saw a way she could make a difference.

Becca Moss: The selection process was really hard. Like, it wasn't fun, which was great, because I wanted to challenge

Andrea Smardon: CST's are the American counterpart to the Female Tactical Platoon the Afghan women working with US Special Forces. That was the role Sima was playing. They worked closely together. Becca says they were from different worlds, with different reasons for being there, and at first, it was a challenge. But Becca was in it for the challenge.

Becca Moss: what I expected is different from what they expected. You know, we're just different cultures for different people.

so being able to work with those women specifically who are like, in a third world country who are generally seen as oppressed that are kicking ass was like the coolest thing ever.

Andrea Smardon: when you say kicking ass like what like what were they doing?

Becca Moss: I mean, like these girls are 100 pounds sopping wet and they're running in full combat load which is 20 to 50 pounds and carrying guns and like, you know, kicking down doors and doing very hard scary things and especially for them like they're in their own country. They don't want al Qaeda or Taliban or the Haqqani or whatever terrorist organization is coming, like they want a free Afghanistan and they're willing to, fight for it, which is pretty amazing. I don't think any of us can even understand that. Like, I don't think I can understand that. Because I've never had to fight for freedom in my life, like ever. But I think it's really cool to see women who are generally seen as a little less than equal, just defy the norm and do awesome things.

Andrea Smardon: And she says she got to know her colleagues on another level when they let their hair down. Becca remembers a moment shortly after she arrived. It was February 2020, Valentine's Day.

Becca Moss: just being a woman, I think is like, super powerful. Because you can go to their dance parties, and they all take their hijabs off. And everyone just like, you know, is dancing and drinking lemonade and celebrating Valentine's Day. Which is, you know, We're all females, Special Operations soldiers at this time, and then we're dancing to Mushda and throwing hearts in the air, which is kind of fun.

Andrea Smardon: By the time Becca was deployed in Afghanistan, Sima was pregnant, and Becca met her while training Afghan women; Sima helped out with role playing exercises. They worked together during the day but at night, they slept in separate places.

Becca Moss: at night, I'd sit there and watch movies and make friendship bracelets like I'm 26 in Afghanistan, making friendship bracelets for my Afghan female soldiers that I'm training, but everybody wants a friendship bracelet so...

Andrea Smardon: When Sima moved to the US, Becca would use that same friendship bracelet thread to embroider colorful designs onto handkerchiefs, stitch Sima's initials onto them and send them in the mail.

For Becca, it was the relationships with her colleagues like Sima that made the experience meaningful. She says bonds forged in the military are for life.

Becca Moss: I mean, the military is a family, no matter how you spin it. They serve right side by side doing the same things.

Andrea Smardon: Becca was one member of an unusual family that very few people knew about or could understand. They call themselves Sisters of Service, and the threads that bound these sisters in arms would be crucial when the Americans withdrew and Afghanistan abruptly fell back into the hands of the Taliban. CST's like Becca were some of the only people who knew just how much danger their Afghan sisters were in. The story of this remarkable sisterhood was a secret until now.

Ellie: It really hasn't been until this past year and knowing that the majority of these women were in the US and were safe, that their story could begin to be told.

Andrea Smardon: It's a story best told by two women, still serving active duty in the military, who took on a leadership role when they realized people like Sima needed them.

Ellie: I'll go ahead and go by Ellie,

Andrea Smardon: Ellie asked that I not use her real name.

Ellie: we created this organization in response to our partner sisters, and just for their safety and for our own, and just the the nature of our work, we would like to keep our names removed.

Leah: I'll go by Leah.

Andrea Smardon: The fact that Ellie and Leah don't want their real names used underscores that what they're doing to help their fellow soldiers is entirely a volunteer effort. All the time they have put into this is outside their official duties in the military.

The omission of names also reflects just how much danger the Afghan soldiers and their families face.

Ellie: While we were there, the majority of the women would have to show up on post or to the military base in their civilian clothes, and lie to their neighbors about what exactly it was that they were doing.

Ellie: just a woman working in the military in Afghanistan itself was progressive, but they had to ultimately be willing to sacrifice everything to do this position. Like they knew they will always be in danger from not only the Taliban or ISIS, but really from just regular people in Afghanistan that don't agree with women working outside of the home, let alone working in an elite unit, working alongside American soldiers. That drive is pretty unexplainable. And it's just so inspiring you can't walk away and leave something behind like that. We will forever care about these women.

Andrea Smardon: Ellie and Leah were back home in the US, when they started hearing talk from American leaders about pulling out of Afghanistan. As part of peace

negotiations between The US and the Taliban in 2019 and 2020, President Trump reduced troop levels in Afghanistan by 7,000.

Ellie: as peace talks, increased and the rhetoric of the United States military leaving Afghanistan increased, the Afghan women who we worked alongside, started reaching back to whatever CSTs it was that they worked with, because many of them continued to keep in contact with us after we left Afghanistan, to just say, like, Hey, Sister, what's going on, like, what's gonna happen if the United States leaves Afghanistan?

Andrea Smardon: Members of the cultural support team didn't know what to tell them. In February 2020, just when Becca and Sima were working together to train the latest recruits, the Trump administration made an agreement with the Taliban to fully withdraw US troops by May 1, 2021.

President Trump: "If the Taliban and the government live up to their commitments, and they may or they may not, and I think we have a lot of reason why they will I think they will, that means that the longest war in American history by far, it's not even close, will be over."

Andrea Smardon: Over the course of the Trump administration, troop levels were reduced from 13,000 to 2500. While Americans were coming home, Ellie, Leah and the CST's were starting to realize there was no pathway for the women they had served with to escape.

Ellie: the only option available at that time if these women needed to evacuate or leave the country was through the special immigration visa. And now that was only open to interpreters. Even though the female Special Operation Afghan unit was directly stood up to assist the US military, they were not hired by the US government. And so they would not qualify for these immigration visas. And therefore, there really was no option for them at that time.

Andrea Smardon: While these Afghan soldiers were working with and *for* Americans, they were technically part of the Afghan Army. The Cultural Support Team realized that those in power the government and the US military didn't have a plan in place to protect this secret unit of Afghan women that was hidden from the world. Very few people knew the stakes.

Ellie: a few of us came together and applied for it anyway, and started lobbying to our Congress members that these women have done more in combat than the majority of the Special Operation US military. And we must continue to stand by their side and say that we'll protect them.

Andrea Smardon: In July 2021, President Biden announced at a press conference his plan to follow through on the agreement made under the Trump administration to completely withdraw US troops.

President Biden: “We’re ending America’s longest war.”

News Reporter: Mr President, Is the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan now inevitable?”

President Biden: No it is not.”

Andrea Smardon: Ellie and Leah understood that Americans were leaving, but they did not know that almost overnight, their fellow soldiers would be stranded with the Taliban in power.

Ellie: No one anticipated the speed of the withdrawal as it occurred. And so really, the day it started occurring, a chat group stood up of a group of us cultural support team members, just figuring out how do we get these women to the airport, who do we have to reach out to in the military at the airport on the ground, to get these women out of Afghanistan right now.

Andrea Smardon: So Ellie and Leah, along with other CST’s feeling the weight of the responsibility for a unit of highly threatened soldiers did what they had to do.

Ellie: We were working full time jobs staying up all night on these group chats kind of subbing out, like hey, you got a couple hours, I'm gonna step in and talk to this woman and lead her to the airport.

Andrea Smardon: There were doing everything they could think of, but after a week and a half, they were exhausted.

Ellie: Leah and I came together one night, and we're just like this, this is getting out of control. Like we are trying, we're working through a group chat to a translator to an Afghan woman to tell them to get to this spot, and then figuring out when they get on a flight and it was a logistical nightmare, trying to realize, literally, where in the world are these women like they would get on these flights not knowing where they would be landing, they just knew they were getting out of Afghanistan. And then we would get a text message that says it's really hot here. I'm in Qatar and a whole bunch of like fire emojis and we're like, alright, well, we found Nafiza.

Andrea Smardon: By this point, Leah says they were already burned out. They couldn't keep up this pace.

Ellie: we just kept saying like, we are currently in the spring of this but this is a marathon and life doesn't start getting easy when they reach American soil. Like it's really just begun, where our organization will start.

Andrea Smardon: Somehow, they succeeded in evacuating 43 FTP’s and 100 of their family members. But as Ellie says, there was no time to celebrate. That was only the beginning.

Ellie: And then we find out the first woman lands in Washington DC, like, Hey, sister, I'm in Washington, like, spelled totally wrong. We're mad gabbing trying to guess like, what, where is she actually like, What is she saying that she then sent us a photo, like, what town are you in? I think the message was like, Hey, I think I'm in America. Like, where? Where can we come get you like, what happens next. And still, no one knew. Kind of in these continued unknowns is when Leah and I came together and realize the answers aren't coming anytime soon, like, we need to just show these women that we will continue to be at their side amidst all this uncertainty. Because really, that's, that's the only thing we can promise right now is that no matter what happens, we're going to be there.

Andrea Smardon: And so it was amidst the uncertainty, these volunteers, working outside their official capacity in the military, sat down together at Leah's kitchen table to plan their own special operation here on US soil.

49:34

Leah: And we were like okay what next like these women are gonna need help, you know, we thought the best way to do it would be to match one American woman with one Afghan woman.

Andrea Smardon: The Sisters of Service paired up all the Afghan women of the Female Tactical Platoon with American counterparts. But the match-ups were made while the FTP's were staying at temporary military camps, before anyone knew where they would end up. Sima was the first one to arrive at her destination in Salt Lake City. But her advocate Becca was living 2000 miles away in Georgia.

Becca Moss: So she was the first one to resettle out of all of our group of everyone which I was like oh, crap like you know, of course it's Sima, the girl that has a two year old and this nephew and she's in Salt Lake City and I was like, Who the heck no one knows anyone in Salt Lake City, like everyone I'm friends with is on the east coast all the girls we work with her all East Coast. So, it was a little bit of concern because I knew nothing.

I was like I know there's no there's a lot of Mormons out there. That's all I know about Salt Lake City! (laughing)

Andrea Smardon: Becca was texting with Sima every other day, and she contacted her case worker at the resettlement agency.

Becca Moss: you know, let them know who I am and be like, you know, I'm her friend, I'm just trying to make sure she's okay. I'm not gonna leave you alone. So you might as well just accept that I'm gonna be in your life. So I just wanted to make sure she was okay. You know, like the first night she was here. I don't think they like got her food. So I like ordered her Indian food from a restaurant. I was like, well, I'll just order you a bunch of rice. And you can eat it for the next few days, I guess.

Andrea Smardon: The first priority was finding a babysitter so Sima could attend English classes. Someone in the Sisters of Service had a niece with a friend who had a friend whose name was Annie Pond. So Becca looked over her resume and tried to vet her over a video call.

Becca Moss: Hopefully you're safe. You sound like a real person. You look like real person. You seem genuine. So a lot of trust, I guess, in this process. This whole journey has been a bunch of people I don't know.

And Annie was the one that has, like, you know, babysat for free has been truly just an amazing lifesaver, because she lives 10 minutes away can come. drop of a hat has two kids on her own, understands kind of like what she's going through. And it's just like, helped so much.

Andrea Smardon: When Becca thinks about what has happened since she went to Afghanistan, she sees a theme.

Becca Moss: I feel like women trust women a lot. You know, doing this special operations thing with all women then training in elite force of women in Afghanistan, and then obviously, coming to Salt Lake City and of course, it's only women that are helping. So it's kind of a cool theme of woman being very proactive, and on it 100% of the time.

Andrea Smardon: And then, Becca got a call from another woman wanting to help Jennie Hua, She's the one I met at the Thanksgiving event who was introducing volunteers, finding bicycles and sewing machines.

Turns out, Sima was the first of the Afghan arrivals who Jennie met.

Jennie Hua: I asked Naziva and said, Naziva, is it okay, like, if I, if I just go ahead and help her? Is that that legal like, I don't know how this works. Um, I just saw I want to help and just want to know how the system goes here. And she's like, Yeah, sure you can be her friend. Go ahead!

Andrea Smardon: Jennie called Sima, and Sima asked her to talk to her military sponsor Becca.

Jennie Hua: She was vetting me to see, you know, what kind of person are you? Do I want to associate with you?

Andrea Smardon: After Jennie got the OK from Becca, she helped Sima move into her new apartment with her nephew, furnish it, find rugs. She invited her over for dinner with her family and on Halloween, brought her trick-or-treating.

Jennie Hua: So as I got to know, my friend better, one day, she said to me, kind of in a personal way. Can we get some shoes, we don't have any shoes. And this was like,

November, so it was getting pretty cold. And she was commuting to an English class with her baby on the train. And all she had was like these little like, slip on kind of dress shoes. And I was like, oh my goodness, yes, I can get you some shoes.

Andrea Smardon: As the two women got to know one another, Sima told Jennie her son was struggling with digestion issues, and he was in pain. As a mother of five, Jennie was able to give her breast feeding advice.

Jennie Hua: I feel like she's my friend, and I'm her friend and that we know each other. Yeah, I feel very comfortable with her. And I think she with me, she's told me her stories about her family. I can't fix all of her problems, like she wants to bring 20 members of her family here on humanitarian parole, which I did help her to apply for through the legal clinic that took place about a month ago. I can't get those people here for her. She knows that there are some things that are not going to happen magically. But, you know, it's nice to have someone who, at least for her, I think it's nice to have someone who at least cares that she's in that situation and wants to know about it.

Andrea Smardon: Meanwhile, Becca told me she was really nervous about Sima out in Utah, and she was stressed about trying to help from so far away.

Andrea Smardon (talking to Becca Moss):

Do you think we've been a welcoming community?

Becca Moss: I think initially, everyone's welcoming, right? Like everyone wants to be the great big idea fairy everyone wants to help and like they want to feel like they help these poor refugees, which is like unfortunate, because they're not poor refugees. They are there because they don't have a choice. They don't want to be a charity case. They want to be a strong individual like they were in Afghanistan. I think it's really sad to see people not have enough resources initially. But the community is really great meeting Annie and people like Jennie who's like, shown up and like consistently shown up, that's a huge show of character. And that's what people need is somebody who's consistently showing up in their life.

Andrea Smardon (talking to Becca Moss): What do you think our obligation or our sort of responsibility is to these women who are now in the US from Afghanistan?

Becca Moss: Um I think we owe them a lot. I mean, I don't know many Americans that are in the military, like, I have a lot of military friends. But like, I'm the only person from my high school friends in the military. And like these women, literally are an anomaly, like they're from Afghanistan, against all odds, joined the military, joined the Special Forces, and then like, fought for their freedom, alongside US soldiers, which is like, more than 99% of Americans can say. So I think they've sacrificed a lot more for America than most Americans, probably. So I guess, what do you think your obligation is to somebody that sacrificed something for America?

Andrea Smardon: After the break, the women who have been weaving a web around Sima finally meet in person.

[Break]

(Music)

Andrea Smardon: Sima had been living in Utah for about 5 months when Becca was finally able to arrange a visit.-Becca had a lot going on in her life. She was retiring from the military, applying for jobs, planning her wedding, and she had a half marathon she was running in a week. But she flew out to Utah and rented a place on her own dime to make sure Sima was doing OK.

When I show up in the late afternoon, Becca, Sima, and her son are sitting on a big sofa watching music videos.

Andrea Smardon (talking to Becca Moss): So you've been watching some music here?

Becca Moss: We've been watching the top hits of Afghanistan. Mushda, we've been watching a lot of Mushda. This chick's from Tajikstan, the other girl was from Afghanistan.

Andrea Smardon: Becca's drinking wine, while Sima and her son sip lemonade and play with almonds.

Becca Moss: Oh some Shakira! You like Shakira?

Sima: Yes

Becca Moss: I do too, I love Shakira. Do you like Shakira?

Son: Hah

Becca Moss: Yes! (laughs)

Andrea Smardon: Even Sima's son, who is not even 2 years old, likes Shakira.

Becca Moss: We all like Shakira here

Andrea Smardon: In the evening, Becca invited the locals in the community who had been helping Sima over for dinner.

Becca Moss: "Come sit, bon appetit"

Annie Pond: “Thank you so much, this looks delicious”

Andrea Smardon: Sima’s first American friend Jennie Hua is here along with the woman who has been babysitting her son Annie Pond. It’s the first time they are all meeting each other in person.

Annie Pond: Thanks for having us over. I feel like I know you.

Becca Moss: Annie and I have faceted a few times. We’ve all talked on the phone.

Jennie Hua: Really nice to know who I’m talking to now.

Becca Moss: When you walked in I could tell by the voice

Andrea Smardon: On the table, is a feast of eggplant, chicken and lamb, salad, yellow rice, berries, and flat bread. And a platter of dates, which is what Sima’s son is most interested in.

Andrea Smardon: You found dates?

Becca Moss: That’s the good stuff:

Jennie Hua: That’s cool

Andrea Smardon: Sima can hardly put food in her mouth, occupied as she is by keeping her son from climbing on the table.

Baby: making noise/crying

(Sima talking in Dari)
(fade way down underneath)

Andrea Smardon: While they eat, they talk about the reason they’re here together - how they can help Sima. As government funds start to taper off, she’ll have to pay rent. She’ll need a job and childcare. She’ll want to get a driver’s license, but she needs English to do that. She’ll need English for everything she wants to do. Becca suggests moving her to Georgia where some of the other FTP’s are in school. he’s been in contact with some of the FTP’s, and they are worried that Sima is isolated they’re worried about her mental health.

With her limited English, it’s not clear how much Sima understands from this discussion.

Sima’s son is fussing, so she moves with him to the living room floor. There’s a tension in the room. Here is a table of well-meaning Americans trying to plan her future, people who really want to help, but Sima can’t really participate in the discussion. It must be a lonely feeling, to be in a crowd, but not be able to express yourself.

Andrea Smardon: In the spring of 2022, I visit Sima in her apartment with a translator to find out how she's doing.

[Sima talking]

Andrea Smardon: Sima says some things have gotten easier, she knows where to shop and how to function here.-She's working on getting her driver's permit. And she has a job now.

Translator for Sima: She say I just started working with Walmart for three weeks

Andrea Smardon: What are you doing at walmart?

Translator for Sima: Cashier. She's working as a cashier

Andrea Smardon: How is it? Do like the work?

Translator for Sima: Say yes, I like it.

Andrea Smardon: I'm just thinking because you worked in the military, which is very different. A risky job, but one that you had a lot of pride I think about.

Translator for Sima: She said, Yeah, it's completely different for me in Afghanistan, I was working at a special operation and here I'm working as a cashier. I just want to do this job because I had to improve my language to find a military job in here.

Andrea Smardon: You want a military job?

Translator for Sima: Yes, you see, I'm trying hard to learn new language. I had online class and it just finished I'm waiting for another class to started to improve my language and go to the military.

Andrea Smardon: I ask her why she took the job.

Translator for Sima: She say I need to work because everything is really expensive. The rent, the food and everything. And I have a child. I need to buy a lot of stuff for him. That's why I need to work.

Andrea Smardon: Sima's rent is currently paid for with government funds, but she's very worried about the moment when she will have to pay for it herself. Rent is two thousand dollars a month.

That might sound high, but these days, that's normal for Salt Lake City. This is why it's been so hard to find affordable housing for this group of arrivals. Resettlement agencies have resorted to putting people in far flung places.

Sima made good money when she was in the military in Afghanistan. Enough to support her mother, but here she doesn't make nearly enough to cover her own expenses, let alone send money home. She isn't even working full time because she is still nursing,

Translator for Sima: She said in Afghanistan it was okay I was working on support my family and my mom and I was working over there. But in here when I'm talking with the people, they gave me a lot of stress. And they say life is really hard in here you need to work hard to support your family but and she said yeah I when I'm thinking that how much money I can work in Walmart than in her full rent for food and for everything is a lot of stress and I'm worried about that how to survive with that money that I'm making.

Andrea Smardon: Sima is also worried about her legal status. Just like most of the Afghans who were evacuated in a rush in 2021, she arrived as a humanitarian parolee, a temporary status that allows her to legally live in the US for a limited time. She's not even technically classified as a refugee yet. She has to apply for asylum, and it's not clear what will happen if it doesn't get approved.

Translator for Sima: She said I get a lot of stress and the only thing that can help me I'm just crying and it's helped me feel better.

Andrea Smardon: You're crying a lot?

(Crying)

Andrea Smardon: Sima dabs at her eyes with her headscarf and after a long silence, I ask her if she has people to talk to that make her feel better, and she says yes, her neighbors who are also from Afghanistan, and Becca and Jennie. She also chats almost every day with other FTP's that she knows on a messenger app. She shows me a picture on her phone it's an embroidered design she made for Becca the Afghan flag overlapping with the American flag. And another project with brightly colored flowers stitched with a J. for Jennie.

Sima offers us tea and a platter of snacks.

Translator for Sima: She says Sit down I will bring you guys some tea. I should get going but um oh thank you we have to get going but thank.

Andrea Smardon: I say no, we need to get going and she brings it out anyway.

Translator for Sima: She said please sit down.

Andrea Smardon: I will just try one.

Andrea Smardon: While we drink green tea in small cups, Sima says she's worried about her son he has an ear infection, and has been coughing. She wants to take him to

the doctor, but she has a classic working parent dilemma. The health clinic is only open when she's working. We talk about how daycare is so expensive, and she says luckily DWS the state department of workforce services is paying for it. And then she starts laughing, and I'm wondering what's so funny.

Translator for Sima: She's funny she says that. I have to ask DWS don't pay that money for daycare. pay that money for me. I don't need to go to Walmart to work. I just want to stay and take care of him and he'll have fun. She said DWS pay more money than what I make with Walmart.

Andrea Smardon: I guess you could call it funny the state is paying more money for Sima's childcare than she gets in her paycheck. And she thinks of an obvious solution just give her the money directly!

It strikes me that some of Sima's stresses are particular to refugees, but some are just everyday working American problems, especially if you're a single parent. How is it even possible to work part time on minimum wage, take care of a young kid, *and* pay the rent 2,000 dollars a month at that? Even an elite soldier is reduced to tears. What would Sima do without all the support of the women who have mobilized around her. Her own personal special operations team.

[MUSIC TRANSITION]

Andrea Smardon: The Sisters of Service have had a front row seat to what this process is like. They have seen what happens to the 43 women and their family members who are now spread out across the US. And Ellie says it can be hard to stay positive when they see the struggles their fellow soldiers face just trying to live in America.

Ellie: Here we are, we just worked with these women that are at the highest rung of Afghan society, like they're special operators, as Afghan females. And now we're celebrating when they get a job at Starbucks, because we know how difficult that was for them to figure out the US job application process. And us and the mentors, being pretty heartbroken that we had to work so hard just to get them an employment ID so they could get a job at a fast food restaurant. And just knowing all that we can do is meet them where they're at, each day is a new challenge in how to figure it out together.

Andrea Smardon: Ellie knew nothing about the refugee and immigration systems in America when she began, but when she and Leah started Sisters of Service they put themselves on the front lines, and from what she's seen, Ellie thinks we could do better.

Ellie: This isn't the first time we've brought refugees into our country, or withdrew from a war zone. We didn't have to reinvent a wheel here. And so how do we make sure systems can work and not be overwhelmed? Because the people doing the most are getting burnt out? How do you maintain that humanity within a broken system over time?

Andrea Smardon: Ellie, Leah, Becca and the Sisters of Service are committed, but a small number of people are bearing a lot of the weight of this responsibility. The CST's and their Afghan sisters are members of a very rare group, and they refuse to leave anyone behind. They may be strong and capable, but they've learned from experience that they have to spread the weight if they're going to be able to continue. They alone cannot provide all the elements of a community. They depend on civilians like Jennie to fill in the gaps. But once the evacuation fades from the public view, for most of us, it's easy to turn away. How many are willing and able to run the marathon, and not just the sprint?

[MUSIC]

Andrea Smardon: Next time on Stranger Becomes Neighbor Jennie and Nazifa run up against their limits as the needs of the new arrivals test their capacity.

Jennie Hua: I couldn't sleep all night, I'm like, I just can't believe this is happening. I cannot believe that people are going hungry. So I'm like, How many more people need food today, this week, and I can't get to them by myself.

Andrea Smardon: A single thread can only hold so much weight before it breaks.

Nazifa: I mean I've been consistently sick for the last few months. I haven't really felt well.

Andrea Smardon: But it was seriously sick, like you were hospitalized, right?

Nazifa: Yeah, I went to three times emergency.

Andrea Smardon: Nazifa struggles with her health as public attention wanes.

Nazifa: Asthma is really triggered by how you feel. And I was quite depressed what I was seeing, a few months later, nobody cared about Afghanistan.

Andrea Smardon: The network needs to grow if it's going to be sustainable.

[END}

.....

CREDITS

Andrea Smardon: Stranger Becomes Neighbor is researched, written and hosted by me, Andrea Smardon. Audio Production and sound design by Aaron Mason. Bonus content produced by Nina Earnist. Mixing and Mastering by Trent Sell. Executive Producer is Sheryl Worsley. My thanks to our editorial team Amy Donaldson, Dave Cawley, Ben Kuebrich, Josh Tilton, Ryan Meeks, Feliks Banel, and KellieAnn

Halvorsen. Special thanks to Tanya Vea, Stephanie Avis, Candice Madsen, Matt Elggren and Toss Patterson.

Each week we're releasing bonus content with extended interviews if you subscribe on Apple Podcasts.

For this week's bonus episode, I talk to a US army veteran. One of the early members of the Cultural Support Team who helped break ground for both American and Afghan women in the military. In our interview, she gets honest about her struggles building trusting relationships with the Afghan women who she trained. Now she feels a personal responsibility to make sure the FTP's who worked alongside US special forces are taken care of in America.

If you're unable to subscribe and you'd like to support the show, please give us a rating and write a review. It really does help others to discover us. For pictures and more information, find us at StrangerBecomesNeighbor.com

Stranger Becomes Neighbor is a production of KSL Podcasts.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/04/05/the-changing-face-of-americas-veteran-population/>

The big question for Zahra and the other FTPs is what kind of status they will have in the US. What will happen when their parole runs out? Will they be able to

build a life in America? In Zahra's case, even with the sisterhood looking out for her, she's going to need more help. We'll find out what happens for her later in the podcast.

~~On April 14, 2021, President Biden made an announcement from the Oval Office, the same room where George W. Bush declared war in Afghanistan in October of 2001.~~

~~(CLIP of Biden in April?)~~

~~<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2573268/biden-announces-full-us-troop-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-by-sept-11/>~~

~~(4:25)~~

~~"I have concluded that it's time to end America's longest war. It's time for America's troops to come home."~~

~~He announced the US would begin the drawdown of troops on May 1st, as the US had agreed to. President Biden said the troops would be completely withdrawn by September 11th, making it a 20-year war.~~

The newest Afghan arrivals are a small part of our overall population, but so are military members at this point. In the latest figures from Pew Research, about 7% of U.S. adults were veterans, and less than 1 percent active duty.

