



Sgt. Ladani's service wins commendation medal

She was medic with CT's National Guard

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WINDSOR, Conn. — The voice on the other side of the line giggles, and you wonder whether you have the wrong number. You wonder if this chirpy young voice could possibly be one of a soldier hardened by one of the most violent war zones in the world.

Sgt. Alpa Ladani, a medic with the Connecticut Army National Guard's 118th Medical Battalion, was in Iraq for 15 months before returning home in February this year. She says quite simply of the experience, "It was a job for me. My country called me to serve, and I did."

To have a sense of her life as a soldier, imagine a series of explosions outside your tent, at a place where you went to get your personal supplies. Imagine a sound, loud and booming, eerily like a bomb blast effect at a movie hall.

Glass is shattered everywhere, combined with the smell of burning flesh and shrapnel.

All your senses are now consumed and dominated by this attack, as you realize it could have easily been your life.

Would you move toward the blast site?

Ladani bolted to the assistance of the wounded as fast as she could, saving several lives in an attack that claimed 23 lives.

Responding quickly to this attack has earned Ladani the Army Commendation Medal, given to any member of the Armed Services who distinguishes himself or herself by heroism, meritorious achievement or service. "For responding

during mortar attacks with immediate medical assistance, putting herself to risk to help fallen soldiers," the citation reads.

Ladani was in high school when she was fascinated by the National Guard at a career fair. The representative explained to her how, in return for training for two weekends every month and a month in summer, she could get her college education paid for. She was hooked—not just by that, but she thought that it would be a different thing to do.

"I felt the army would suit my personality a lot," she explains. And after a lot of convincing, she got her parents to agree to her idea. This was in 1997.

Says older sister Devangi Ladani, who's studying to be a nurse, "At that time, we didn't think of war." She was also thrilled that her sister was doing something different, she admits.

Ladani then breezed through school and enrolled in the marketing program at the University of Massachusetts.

After serving as part of security at the 2002 Winter Olympics at Salt Lake City, Utah, Ladani was on a three-month stint in Nicaragua. "That was kind of preparation for Iraq, really. Especially in terms of medical stuff, we only had practiced on each other before," says this 25-year-old.

Back from Nicaragua, she was about to graduate, when her unit was called for service to Iraq. The family was worried, and Devangi, who had never been apart from her sister for long, was scared. "The things we used to hear about on TV, and though she would try to calm us, we knew she herself didn't know how bad it was going to be."

Her mother, Prafullaben Ladani, coped the tried and tested way — she prayed day and night for the safe return of her daughter, and for



Sgt. Ladani is flanked here by Sgt. Comulada (left) and Sgt. Morgan (right) during training exercises in Kuwait. Ladani served as a medic with the National Guard.

peace in the world.

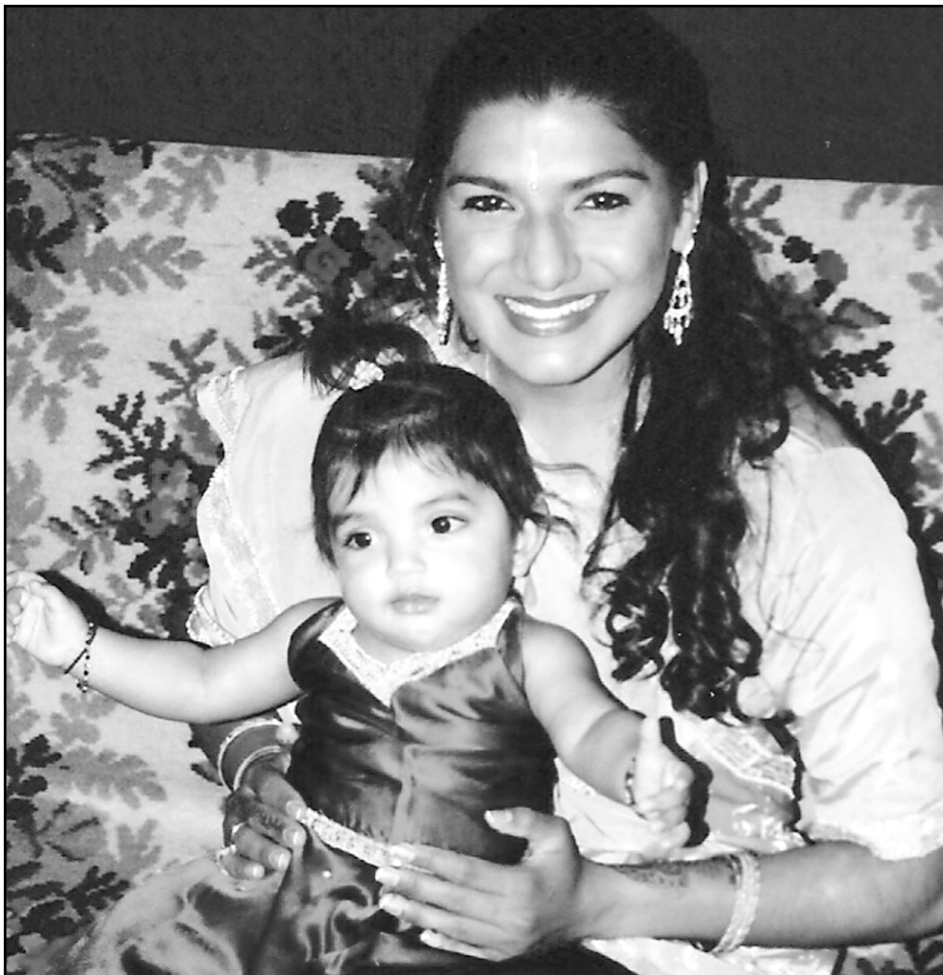
"For many in our unit, it was a culture shock. But I had been to India before, so it wasn't that much of a shock for me," she says of her first impressions of the place.

She was stationed at Balad, a major air base with over 200,000 troops. Her unit, which had 20 medics, three physician assistants and three doctors, provided medical care to at least 100 patients a day. They took care of common ailments, immunizations, basic procedures and emergency medical aid, mostly for soldiers.

"We cared for troops as well as local Iraqis, anyone affected by bombings in the area," she explains.

Being of South Asian origin did have its advantages. Most of the dining facility workers were of Indian or Pakistani origin, and really took care of her well, she says. "They would cook some Indian food for me sometimes," she says.

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Sgt. Ladani enjoys some family time with her niece, Niyati. She returned in February this year after a 15-month stint in Iraq. Ladani is the youngest of three girls.

Sgt. Ladani made sure troops celebrated holidays

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She paid heed to her mother's pleas to stay vegetarian, and helped by vacuum sealed treats from home, she survived the 15 months without eating meat.

Her unit once set up a health clinic in the nearby market in Balad when hostilities were down, and she saw that the locals would gravitate towards her. "They would start talking in Arabic, and I had to tell them that I did not know Arabic, and get a translator," she reminisces.

Day to day living was not easy, though, and Sgt. Ladani had to deal with the danger of mortar attacks every day. The base was averaging one attack per day, and was a popular target for insurgents.

Ladani remembers one of the first attacks vividly. Hostilities were escalating in Fallujah, and there was an overflow of casualties that were coming in to Ladani's unit. One of the first soldiers that Ladani tried to save was a 19-year-old boy, who did not survive. "That was the first time I had, like, someone else's blood on my body," she says as she remembers the brutal day.

She later learned that the boy's father had been on the "Today Show," and she says she wanted to reach out to his family somehow. "I wanted to tell them that we tried to save him, that we took good care of him," she says.

Major Donald Slater, her commanding officer, says of her, "It was really great knowing her. In these two years that I've known her, I've always known her to put others' interests above her own." Slater, a principal with the William Hall High School in West Hartford, Conn., has been with the Army for 24 years and is full of praise for Ladani. "She was almost like a mentor to younger kids. She was a natural leader."

Ladani, in fact, put together a few social events for the troops. As chairperson of the social committee — called the Moral Welfare Recreation activities, she made sure that troops

did not miss out on traditional holidays and festivities. She organized a Thanksgiving dinner, Halloween party, and also a Christmas talent show.

So appreciative were the troops, that before she left, she was given a plaque by the troops commending her on her initiative.

"The experience was both good and bad — you just have to make sure that the good outweighs the bad," says Slater. "And Ladani was one of the main people who tried to do that."

Now that they are back on base, Ladani is in New York, letting doctors at the base look at a fracture more carefully. She is due to start classes this fall, and hopes to graduate by next summer. She would like to go for a master's in business administration, but is undecided yet.

Returning home hasn't been any easier than going away. "I sort of kept to myself for a little while," she says, adding, "I could speak with someone that was with me in Iraq for hours. It was like we shared something in common, like we went through the same things."

She felt like everything had changed while she was away, she says, while in fact, she has changed. That has not diminished the joy, relief and pride that her near and dear have expressed on her return. "I'm proud that my daughter has done something for the world," says Prafullaben. Agrees her daughter Devangi, "Her return was the most amazing thing ever. I felt like a part of me was missing when she was gone."

The first time she spoke about her experiences was at an event organized by SNEHA, a South Asian women's organization based in Hartford, Conn. "I had prepared these things I would talk about, but once I started talking about casualties, I just broke down," she says. "I realized that these things will stay with me forever." Ladani was born as the last of three daughters and the obstetrician told the crestfallen family, "This daughter will do something good for the world, wait and see."