

WEEKENDER: Survivor of IED blast that killed 5 Canadians shares her story

BY ANDREW DUFFY, POSTMEDIA NEWS SEPTEMBER 20, 2010



Foreign services officer Bushra Saeed, 26, of Orleans, was sitting beside Calgary Herald reporter Michelle Lang when an IED exploded beneath their armoured vehicle in Kandahar City. Lang and four soldiers died in the attack. Saeed is learning to walk again, with the help of physiotherapist Marie-Andr e Paquin at the Ottawa Hospital Rehabilitation Institute, after losing a leg while making peace with the tragedy.

Photograph by: Wayne Cuddington, The Ottawa Citizen

OTTAWA — “I promised my family I wouldn’t get hurt ... I promised my family I wouldn’t get hurt ... I promised my family I wouldn’t get hurt ...”

Bushra Saeed breathed the vow over and over, like a mantra, to quiet the panic that hammered in her chest. Flat on her back on a Kandahar City roadside, she didn’t dare raise her head to examine her legs: she knew they would put the lie to her promise. She knew it was bad. How would she ever be able to tell her parents?

It was late afternoon on Dec. 30, 2009. The sky over Afghanistan, Saeed remembers, was postcard blue.

Minutes earlier, the petite, 25-year-old Foreign Affairs officer had been sitting in a light-armoured vehicle (LAV) beside Calgary Herald reporter Michelle Lang. They were chatting about the meeting they had just concluded with a group of Afghans.

Lang was in midsentence — she had just started to explain how she might approach that day’s story — when a deafening blast ripped through their closed travel compartment. The explosion lifted the

17-tonne LAV into the air, turned it upside down, and tore a hole through a rear panel.

“I remember waking up and breathing very, very quickly and being very nervous,” says Saeed, a diplomat with Canada’s Provincial Reconstruction Team. “I remember thinking, ‘OK, panicking isn’t going to help anybody.’ ”

Saeed searched the darkened vehicle with her hands. She was pinned. She could see blue sky through the back of the LAV, but she couldn’t reach it. Her legs didn’t work properly. Bodies seemed to be everywhere. No one else moved.

She feared a second attack or an abduction; it was something they had been warned about during training.

Within moments, however, Canadian soldiers from the lead vehicle began to pull bodies from the wreckage. Saeed crawled hand over hand so a medic could haul her out before she bled to death.

Her legs were wrapped in battlefield tourniquets. She was in shock: the pain had not yet announced itself.

Saeed was loaded onto a helicopter and, as it flew toward Kandahar Airfield (KAF), she turned on her stretcher to look at the mountains of southern Afghanistan. “I remember looking out and seeing the view coming back to KAF — these beautiful mountains, this beautiful scenery, in such a terrible area.”

Saeed would confront more paradoxes in the months ahead: a body desperate for nutrition unable to eat; the pain of a leg no longer there; the utter exhaustion of sitting in a chair.

And now, eight months after the attack that changed her life, she is wrestling with still another: how to make peace with an act of unspeakable terror.

Bushra Saeed grew up in Orleans, an Ottawa suburb, the youngest daughter of Pakistani immigrants.

Her father, Amjad, had emigrated to Canada in 1966 from Lahore to study chartered accounting at McGill University. He went to work for a large firm in Montreal and later brought his wife, Neelam, to the country.

They moved to Ottawa in 1981 when Amjad joined the Office of the Auditor General of Canada. The Saeeds’ third daughter, Bushra, was born three years later.

Her Grade 1 teacher predicted Bushra would be prime minister. “She was a very active child,” remembers Neelam. “She was always organizing something.”

The family would visit relatives in Pakistan every three years. It was a galvanizing experience for young Bushra, who had been raised in the orderly affluence of suburban Ottawa. She hated the way

that so many women in Pakistan lived in fear; she was scandalized by the poverty.

“We’re really fortunate in Canada,” she says. “And to just sit idly and enjoy it is fine for some people, but it was hard for me. To see my cousins having such a difficult time in Pakistan, and thinking it was normal ... I always knew I had to bridge that somehow.”

At Ottawa’s Sir Wilfrid Laurier Secondary School, she became an energetic fundraiser for international causes and a student politician.

Yet Bushra, like many Muslim girls, faced strict rules: she had a 9 p.m. curfew and wasn’t allowed to date.

Still, her parents embraced their adopted country’s commitment to gender equality and pushed Bushra and her sisters to excel both as students and citizens.

“They understood that our lives would be very different than what their lives were like,” says Bushra. “My parents used to say, ‘Whatever you do, just do it well and enjoy it. And be able to take care of yourself and be independent.’ ”

Bushra took the advice to heart. She enrolled in international development at the University of Ottawa, where her professors often remarked that her essays reflected an unreconstructed sense of idealism. “I was always, ‘What is the problem with that?’ ” remembers Saeed.

In 2007, she began an internship at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) three days after her final exam. Since she could still pass for a high school student, Saeed wore black outfits and mascara to lend herself more gravitas.

Within months, she had a full-time position on the Pakistan desk of the South-Asian division. Fluent in Urdu, Saeed was assigned to work on the Dubai Process, a Canadian effort to broker discussions between Pakistani and Afghan officials on border security, law enforcement and counter-narcotics.

She became so familiar with the issues that when a job was posted for a border specialist, based in Afghanistan for one year, Saeed considered herself an obvious candidate. She believed her knowledge of the region’s language and culture could help rebuilding efforts.

“I felt it was important for me do my part,” she says. “I didn’t think it was right for me to sit here in our relatively utopian society and say, ‘Thank God I’m not there and too bad for those people.’ ”

Her parents were worried, but they decided not to interfere. Besides, their daughter hadn’t really asked for permission.

“They knew it was something I had my heart set on,” Saeed says.

Arriving at Kandahar Airfield in mid-October 2009, Saeed was assaulted by its dust and noise: the thump and roar of tanks, fighter jets and helicopters. Travel in Pakistan had not prepared her for life in a war zone.

“It was really hard for me,” she admits. “Everything is huge, everything is intimidating, everything is scary.”

What’s more, Saeed didn’t like being so far from home, from the safety of Orleans and the comfort of family. She would talk with her mother once or twice a day.

“I remember thinking, ‘I’m four days away from home, in the middle of a war zone, and I’m five feet, one inch and 100 pounds and I’m trying to make a difference? Who the hell am I to do this?’ ”

To squelch her misgivings, Saeed threw herself into her job. She would regularly travel from KAF to the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Kandahar City, a former factory where about 400 diplomats, development workers, RCMP officers and soldiers worked to rebuild Afghan society. She felt more comfortable at the less-militarized PRT.

In addition to working on border and narcotics issues, Saeed helped the local stabilization team develop ties with communities in and around Kandahar City. It was in the latter capacity that she joined the mission of Dec. 30, 2009, — three days after returning from her first two-week leave. (She had flown straight home to her family.)

That day’s mission involved a visit to the outskirts of Kandahar City, where a new tribal group had settled. The Canadians wanted to understand if the Afghans had been displaced by the war, whether they needed help, whether they presented a security threat.

It was the first such patrol deemed safe enough for Saeed to undertake: the roads they would be using were frequently travelled by NATO forces.

That morning, Saeed and Lang were briefed on the patrol. There was a natural affinity between the two young women, both in a war zone for the first time, both rising stars in their respective fields.

Earlier that year, the Vancouver-born Lang had won a National Newspaper Award for her medical reporting. Her newsroom colleagues called her “Dr. Lang.” Waiting for their patrol to leave, the two women talked about the singular nature of their lives in Kandahar. They talked about the beauty of Afghanistan and the hardships faced by its people. Lang described her plans for the three weeks that remained of her assignment.

Their convoy left PRT headquarters at 2 p.m. and drove to the southwest corner of Kandahar City, where the Canadians conducted interviews. Saeed was surprised by how eager the Afghans were to talk.

The soldiers, however, became concerned as more people gathered. What had started as a small meeting had now drawn too much attention. “That’s when we decided to stop: it was becoming too high risk,” says Saeed.

The Canadians climbed back into their two armoured vehicles. Saeed relaxed once inside the protective cocoon of the troop compartment. It had been her first time walking around “outside the wire.” She was relieved it had gone so well.

The terrorists struck at 4 p.m., short minutes into the return trip. Military investigators would later conclude the bombers had used a remotely controlled detonation device to trigger the explosives, which had likely been buried days earlier.

It was one of the largest IEDs to ever target Canadians in Afghanistan.

As she treads purposefully across the tiled gym floor of The Ottawa Hospital Rehabilitation Centre, Saeed concentrates on the toes of her left foot. She must push hard off the toes to generate the momentum that initiates the swinging action of her artificial right leg.

“I’m trying to make it look natural,” she explains.

Saeed’s right leg was amputated above the knee after the bomb attack. Her lower left leg, broken in two places, had much of the flesh torn from it. Doctors at the Ottawa Hospital saved the limb by transferring muscle from her thigh to cover exposed bone on her calf.

Saeed underwent her first surgery while still in Afghanistan. Doctors had to cut open her stomach, swollen by the blast wave, to relieve pressure on her lungs. She was flown days later to the U.S. military hospital in Landstuhl, Germany. Her parents and sisters, Sabina and Hanaa, joined her there.

They told the nurses to call her “Bushy” — a family nickname — to calm her nervous energy. Bushra’s swollen hands were strapped to her bed.

“I felt so helpless: I didn’t know what to do,” says her mother. “This is my little girl, my baby.”

Although heavily sedated and unable to talk, Bushra drew comfort from familiar voices. “I remember thinking, ‘OK, good, I don’t know where I am, but I’m with my family. And they’ll talk to the doctors and nurses and I’ll be OK.’ ”

Saeed was flown back to Ottawa on Jan. 8. In the weeks that followed, she underwent more surgeries. Fed only by an intravenous line, her weight dropped precipitously, to 70 pounds — some 32 kilos.

Saeed entered rehab in mid-February. She was still unable to keep food down. She wasn’t strong enough to lift a glass of water. “I was a newborn baby again,” Saeed says. “But my family never left

me. They were always by my side: I really would have just crumbled if it wasn't for them."

Her physiotherapy began in bed with one inch sit-ups. She curled half-pound weights. She would need to sleep after half an hour of exercise: Saeed was still in considerable pain.

"She had not much strength left: just a desire to get better," remembers her physiotherapist, Marie Andree Paquin.

Her initial goal was to sit in a wheelchair. "I would sit on the wheelchair for 10 minutes, then 20, then 40," says Saeed. "By 40, I would pass out."

Slowly, she recorded new milestones: sitting for a full day; transferring from bed to a wheelchair.

In early May, she received her custom-made right leg. The prosthetic has an adjustable heel so she can wear an assortment of shoes with it. Her family gathered to watch her stand between parallel bars and take her first step in five months.

Saeed has since graduated from parallel bars to a walker, to two canes, to one. Today, she can walk without assistance.

In eight months, Saeed has travelled a hard road of small but steady triumphs. She hears her physiotherapist's voice in her head with each new step: "Keep your head up; push off your toes; don't raise your right arm for balance; stand up straight."

Saeed lived her first 25 years in perpetual motion. She loved skiing, cycling, tennis, and especially, travel. One month before her Afghan posting, Saeed went with friends to Iceland where they hiked on a glacier. She had to cancel a planned trip to Egypt and Jordan earlier this year.

She's not sure if she'll be able to reclaim all she's lost: "To be honest, I'm still really nervous if I can do those things again."

A black bracelet on Saeed's left wrist is engraved with the names of the five Canadians who died next to her: Sgt. Kirk Taylor, 28; Sgt. George Miok, 28; Cpl. Zachery McCormack, 21; Pte. Garrett Chidley, 21; Michelle Lang, 34.

"I wear it as a reminder," she says. "There are a lot of times I get frustrated with my progress or my circumstances. It reminds me to continue to work hard and appreciate that I was given a second chance."

In June, Saeed went to a memorial service in Edmonton for the four soldiers. She has yet to speak to Lang's family. "I can't imagine how difficult it has been for them," she says softly.

Saeed continues to deal with emotional fallout. For weeks after the attack, she endured terrible

nightmares. She would be trapped somewhere, unable to flee. She would wake with phantom pain in her missing leg. She could only fall asleep if someone held her hand. A parent or sister slept beside her every night for months.

She has tried not to dwell on the circumstances that carried her to that time and place in Afghanistan. Her religious faith has helped her come to terms with fate.

“I believe in destiny,” she explains. “I’m a practising Muslim. Things are written, I think.

“We say, ‘You are not tested with anything you can’t handle.’ So you deal with it. Yes, you pity yourself, you feel sorry for yourself, that happens, but it’s not going to help ... For me, I feel it was written, it was going to happen. I don’t regret my decision to go to Afghanistan. I believed in a cause and I went to do my part.”

Saeed still embraces that cause. She believes Canada, too, should continue its work in Afghanistan. But she will not return: she has vowed never again to put her family through that kind of distress.

At the end of her rehabilitation — she faces more surgery and months of physiotherapy — Saeed wants to return to work at Foreign Affairs. She still feels a keen responsibility to help others less fortunate.

“I’m still horribly an idealist,” she says, smiling at her own paradox. Then she continues to explain lest anyone think she hasn’t considered her position: “Obviously, I’ve been smacked in the face by reality. But I don’t think that should limit you from continuing to strive to do good. There’s no reason to be complacent with what’s happening in the world.”

Making peace with those who killed her fellow Canadians has been difficult.

She knows Afghans have suffered during three decades of war and civil strife. But there is no moral justification, Saeed says, for an attack on innocent people.

She wants the terrorists brought to justice. Yet she knows that will never happen.

“As angry as I am, and as much as I’m upset that that guy made me lose my leg and killed good people, it’s not like a car accident where there’s going to be a fair trial. I don’t have the opportunity to say to that person, ‘You really hurt me and my family and the hundreds of other people who were affected by this. And you deserve to suffer in jail.’

“I’m never going to have that. Wishing that I did is not going to make it happen. So the next step is just to move on and do what I can to continue living my life — and hope that karma means he gets what he deserves.”

Still, Saeed admits, she sometimes thinks about the bombers. Where are they now? What are they

doing while she struggles to regain what they've stolen?

"I'm not going to lie. I'm not going to pretend I'm some strong person. It sucks, it's hard. You think about those questions and you wonder about it, but after a while, it doesn't help. So why do it?"

Saeed celebrated her 26th birthday on the Fourth of July: her family held a large surprise party.

She is determined not to have her life shaped by one terrible, sunny day in Afghanistan. "I will not be defined by this accident," Saeed vows. "I'm still really young. I do not want to be recognized for something that happened to me as opposed to something I achieved."

Neelam Saeed has always wondered why her daughter — the smallest member of the Canadian patrol that day — survived the IED attack. She's convinced her true destiny has yet to be written.

"She has some other project to do, that's what I think now."

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