

THOSE WE'VE LOST

Suhaila Siddiq, Afghanistan's First Female General, Is Dead

Also a renowned surgeon, she rose through the ranks of the Afghan Army and practiced medicine during the Soviet invasion and the Afghan civil war and under the Taliban's rule.

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KABUL, Afghanistan — Suhaila Siddiq, the first woman to hold the rank of lieutenant general in Afghanistan and a renowned surgeon who became a feminist role model in a largely patriarchal society, died here on Dec. 4 at the same hospital where she had treated the wounded through decades of war in her country. She was thought to be 81 or 82.

General Siddiq, who had Alzheimer's disease, died from complications of the coronavirus at the Sardar Mohammad Daud Khan military hospital in Kabul, said one of her doctors, Amanullah Aman. It was her second bout with the virus this year.

General Siddiq rose through the ranks of the Afghan army during the Cold War and went on to run the Daud Khan hospital during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979, the long Afghan civil war and years of harsh rule by the Taliban. She was one of the few women to become an Afghan government minister, overseeing the public health ministry until 2004 under the transitional government led by Hamid Karzai, following the U.S. invasion in 2001.

As health minister she helped carry out vaccinations against polio after the disease had become widespread during years of instability and violence. She went back to her job as a surgeon after she left the government.

General Siddiq "dedicated herself to serving her country," Mr. Karzai said in a tribute on Twitter. President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan paid his respects in a memorial ceremony at the hospital.

Despite her unassuming manner, General Siddiq was described by those who knew her as self-possessed and unintimidated by people around her, especially men.

In the mid-1980s, at the height of the Soviet-Afghan war, the Communist-backed government in Kabul promoted her to surgeon general of the Afghan army after she saved the lives of hundreds of wounded soldiers and civilians who had poured into the 400-bed Daud Khan hospital. She was known as "General Suhaila."

General Siddiq and Hamid Karzai, the president of Afghanistan at the time, greeted Secretary of State Colin Powell when he visited in 2002. Pool photo by Bullit Marquez

Suhaila Siddiq was born in Kabul, probably in 1938. (Sources are unclear on her exact birth date.) She attended high school and Kabul University in the early years of the Cold War. After studying in Moscow on a scholarship, she returned to Afghanistan with her doctorate and became a surgeon at the Daud Khan hospital in the years before the Soviet invasion.

General Siddiq was one of six daughters of a former governor of Kandahar who was supportive of her education. She traced her ancestry to the Barakzai dynasty, which ruled Afghanistan for more than 100 years in the 19th and 20th centuries.

General Siddiq never married. Information about survivors was not immediately available.

After the collapse of the Communist government in 1992, she retained her position in the hospital under an interim government that was established at the outset of the Afghan civil war.

Kabul was soon split as competing factions vied for control. The appointed prime minister, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, ordered incessant rocket attacks on his adversaries in the capital, and as civilian casualties mounted, the defense minister, Ahmad Shah Massoud, personally asked General Siddiq to run the hospital, according to Sher Ahmad, a family friend. The city was ultimately torn apart by attacks from all sides, including by Mr. Massoud.

"She believed in her job, not in any regime," Mr. Ahmad said.

When the Taliban took Kabul in 1996, however, they enforced draconian rule under a harsh interpretation of Islamic law, barring women from holding most jobs and requiring them to cover their faces in public. General Siddiq was sent home.

But she and her sister Shafiq, a professor at Kabul Polytechnic University, “were smart and funny, and they weren’t going to be intimidated,” said Kathy Gannon, an Associated Press reporter who wrote an article about General Siddiq at the time.

“Also,” she said, “the Taliban learned quickly that they needed her.”

General Siddiq in 2003 with Carol Bellamy, a former New York City Council president who was executive director of the United Nations Children's Fund. They were at the opening of a maternity hospital in Kabul. General Siddiq oversaw Afghanistan's health ministry until 2004. Pool photo by Shah Marai

Taliban officials had within months determined that they needed to retain people with sought-after technical abilities and higher education, so they asked General Siddiq to return to her job at the hospital. There, she tended to wounded Taliban fighters, performing many operations under the flickering light of a lantern, Mr. Ahmad recalled.

“They needed me, and they asked me to come back,” General Siddiq told The Guardian in 2002. “It is a matter of pride for me. I stayed in my country, and I served my people. I never fled abroad.”

General Siddiq and her sister were among the few women who walked around Kabul without face coverings or wearing the long, enveloping burqa. It was a bold statement against the Taliban, but they left her unscathed because of her hospital position.

At the same time, General Siddiq taught medicine to female university students whose academic careers had ended under Taliban rule. On at least one occasion the government tried to crack down on her teaching, but General Siddiq pushed back, said Makai Siawash, a close friend who briefly lived with General Siddiq.

“She was ready to get whipped by them, but she didn’t let the Taliban fighters in,” Ms. Siawash said.

One of General Siddiq’s students was Sayeda Amarkhel, the daughter of General Amarkhel.

“She fought the Taliban for us,” Dr. Amarkhel said. “Today I am a gynecologist, and I owe it to her.”