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U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

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For Immediate Release:
Feb. 19, 2013

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Meet the Multanis: an American family Building Strong in Afghanistan

KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, Afghanistan — Husband and wife team, Balwant and Bimla Multani, have traveled the globe building infrastructure and friendships for nearly 45 years. Their latest foray into construction and camaraderie has both Multanis serving in Kandahar, Afghanistan with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

"Wherever I've lived, I've tried to connect with the people, learn the language, the culture, listen to the people's needs and concerns and be responsive," said Bimla, an information management specialist who is known affectionately as "Bimi."

Mechanical engineer Balwant, known by his nickname, "Bal," says he feels lucky to have been blessed with a smart, beautiful, highly-adaptive wife who sees challenges as adventures and is willing and able to join him on deployment.

Risk has been part of his life almost since birth. Bal was born just a few years before the Partition of India in 1947 in a village that is now in modern-day Pakistan. Immediately after Partition, Bal and his family fled their village toward the Indian side of the border.

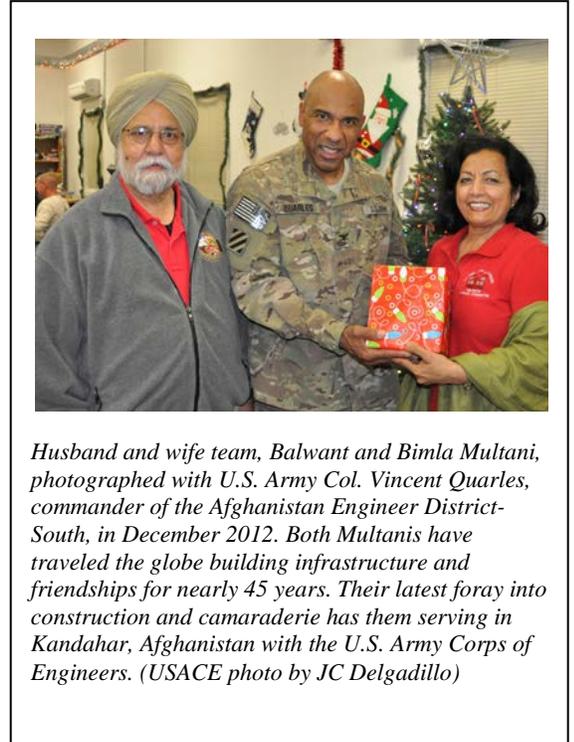
"It was a treacherous time and our lives were in danger, so we left everything behind and headed to a safe place," he explained.

For six months, Bal and his family lived in a refugee camp. They were penniless, he lamented, but eventually acquired a plot of land and became farmers.

For Bimi, a city girl, born in New Delhi to educated and well-travelled parents, knowledge acquisition and servant-leadership were highly encouraged.

"My father was a World War II veteran and my hero," she said. "He was a signal officer in the British Indian Army and served throughout Europe and the Middle East. He believed in teaching people how to think rather than what to think," she said. "He believed knowledge and self-awareness were essential to becoming self-sufficient and capable of leading others."

It's no surprise then that Bimi graduated from the University of New Delhi with a bachelor's degree in education in 1968.



Husband and wife team, Balwant and Bimla Multani, photographed with U.S. Army Col. Vincent Quarles, commander of the Afghanistan Engineer District-South, in December 2012. Both Multanis have traveled the globe building infrastructure and friendships for nearly 45 years. Their latest foray into construction and camaraderie has them serving in Kandahar, Afghanistan with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. (USACE photo by JC Delgadillo)

Bal, on the other hand, moved to the United States to build his future. His brother-in-law, a physician, who lived and worked in Connecticut for one year, inspired Bal to go to the United States. A colleague of Bal's, who was also an engineer, recommended Bal apply to Howard University in Washington because the colleague had attended school there and raved about the experience. Bal's aptitude for hard sciences led the country boy to Howard, where he earned a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering in 1966 after previously earning degrees in math, physics and chemistry in India.

He returned to India in 1968 at which time he was introduced to Bimi. Within hours of meeting, both agreed to marry each other. Theirs was an arranged marriage. The couple returned to the United States and Bal worked for private-sector engineering firms until 1974, the year Bal became a naturalized American citizen.

"American citizenship opened the door for me to join the federal government, and I was selected for a position at the Naval Facilities Engineering Command," Bal said. Bal also obtained the registered professional engineer designation. Similar to how the CPA defines the accountant, and a license to practice law defines the lawyer, the PE license tells the public that an engineer has mastered the critical elements of the engineering profession.

In 1982, Bal started a new job with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The Multanis, with two young sons, headed to Saudi Arabia where USACE was building large-scale Saudi military installations. Under contracts between USACE and the Saudi government, King Khalid Military City and many other military installations were built. From 1982 to 1986, Bal served as a project engineer and project manager on numerous military infrastructure projects in Saudi Arabia.

The Multanis returned to Washington, D.C. in 1986 and Bal resumed his position at NAVFAC. Meanwhile Bimi, who had also become a naturalized U.S. citizen, went to work in finance and accounting for a large company in Reston, Va. In 1996, Bimi, who had an interest in computer technology, became a software support specialist.

Bal's experience building military installations, hospitals, bridges and roads made him a good fit for reconstruction projects in Afghanistan. He deployed to Kabul in 2005 and worked on projects aimed at helping the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan promote security and stability. Although Bimi was proud of the work Bal was doing, she missed her husband terribly, she said. She was either going to ask him to come home or find a position for herself in Kabul. In 2006, after being apart from Bal for a year, she resigned from her private-sector job upon being selected for a position in Kabul. Ten years of information technology experience made her a good fit for a computer and Internet-based knowledge management position with USACE. She and Bal were reunited and both have been able to live and work together in Afghanistan since then. Bal works in Afghanistan Engineer District-South's Technical Service Branch. He fulfills an assortment of functions that require a registered professional engineer's guidance. Bimla continues to work in knowledge management for the district. The Multanis are currently completing their last deployment in Kandahar. They expect to return to Virginia near their adult children and grandchild by the end of 2013.

For Bimi, having a small part in improving public infrastructure in a country that desperately needed support from the international community has been the highlight of her professional life, she said.

"I've made so many friends here, from all over the world, and I've even had the opportunity to teach and mentor Afghans," she said.

For Bal, a youthful 74-year-old, he is finally really ready to retire, he said. Bimi will join him, she said.

"We left India when we were young, so we'd like to go exploring India further. We also want to visit many states in America. Both America and India are big countries and we have not seen too much of either, so we want to travel a bit, just the two of us," Bal said. "I will leave Afghanistan knowing Bimi and I did the very best we could to help improve conditions for Afghans, and that for me is a poignant way to finish out my career as an engineer."

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