

By Lynzy Billing

Video by Mauricio Rodríguez Pons

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For many Afghans, terror came when night fell. Over the years, CIA-backed operations killed countless civilians. The U.S. left without being held accountable. A reporter returns to investigate her past and unravel the legacy of the secretive Zero Units.

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This story contains graphic descriptions and images of war casualties.

On a December night in 2018, Mahzala was jolted awake by a shuddering wave of noise that rattled her family's small mud house. A trio of helicopters, so unfamiliar that she had no word for them, rapidly descended, kicking up clouds of dust that shimmered in their blinding lights. Men wearing desert camouflage and black masks flooded into the house, corralling her two sons and forcing them out the door.

Mahzala watched as the gunmen questioned Safiullah, 28, and 20-year-old Sabir, before roughly pinning them against a courtyard wall. Then, ignoring their frantic protests of innocence, the masked men put guns to the back of her sons' heads. One shot. Two. Then a third. Her youngest, "the quiet, gentle one," was still alive after the first bullet, Mahzala told me, so they shot him again.

Her story finished, Mahzala stared at me intently as if I could somehow explain the loss of her only family. We were in the dim confines of her home, a sliver of light leaking in from the lone window above her. She rubbed at the corner of her eyes; her forehead creased by a pulsing vein. The voices of her sons used to fill their home, she told me. She had no photos of them. No money. And there was no one who would tell her, a widow in her 50s, why these men dropped out of the sky and killed her family or acknowledge what she insisted was a terrible mistake.

But now there was me. I had ended up in Rodat in the heart of Nangarhar province while researching my own family's story of loss in this desolate rural region in eastern Afghanistan.

Mahzala's neighbors had pressed me to meet her; I was a foreigner, I must be able to help. Three months had passed since the raid. The neighbors believed it was the work of the feared Zero Units — squadrons of U.S.-trained Afghan special forces soldiers. Two more homes in the area were targeted that night, they said, though no one else was killed. Everyone acknowledged the Taliban had been in the area before; they were everywhere in Nangarhar province. But Mahzala's sons? They were just farmers, the neighbors told me.

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