



SHALI LORD IS RUNNING FOR NAVY LT. FLORENCE B. CHOE

35, of El Cajon, Calif.; died March 27 when an Afghan National Army soldier opened fire on personnel assigned to Combined Security Transition Command — Afghanistan at Camp Shaheen, Mazar-E-Sharif, Afghanistan. Also killed was Navy Lt. j.g. Francis L. Toner IV.

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By Tony Perry

Her colleagues at Naval Medical Center San Diego were not surprised when Lt. Florence B. Choe volunteered for duty in Afghanistan, even though it meant a year away from her husband and their young daughter.

Choe was pure Navy.

Her father is a retired Navy culinary specialist. She was born at the Navy hospital in San Diego. She met her future husband, a Navy doctor, at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., and the two of them were later assigned to San Diego.

While serving at Navy hospitals in San Diego, Bethesda and Okinawa, Japan, Choe earned a reputation for hard work, collegiality and being able to garner respect not usually afforded a junior officer. Her specialty was helping hospitals to run more efficiently and to provide top-notch care.

Much of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan involves helping the country improve its government and its security forces. For Choe, it was an assignment seemingly tailored to her skills: setting priorities, organizing, following tasks to completion.

She left San Diego for Afghanistan last summer and quickly adapted to the work of mentoring the Afghans as they devised a healthcare system for their army. When she e-mailed colleagues, and during a home visit some weeks ago, she was enthusiastic about the progress.





On March 27, in circumstances still being investigated, Choe and another Navy officer were shot and killed by an Afghan National Army soldier at Forward Operating Base Shaheen near Mazar-e-Sharif in northern Afghanistan's Balkh province, which borders Uzbekistan. She was 35.

Lt. j.g. Francis L. Toner IV, 26, of Westlake Village, also died in the attack.

"We're all pretty much devastated," said Cmdr. Con Yee Ling, a neonatologist at Naval Medical Center San Diego, her voice breaking. "She went there on a humanitarian mission. We all expected her to come home."



Choe is survived by her husband, Lt. Cmdr. Chong "Jay" Choe, a urology resident at the medical center; their 3-year-old daughter, Kristin; her mother and father, Francisca Bacong and Rufino Bacong Sr.; and two brothers, Rufino "Ruffy" Bacong Jr. and Ron Bacong. Choe and her husband lived in El Cajon, in San Diego County.

Choe had attended elementary and high school in the San Diego suburb of Spring Valley. She earned a bachelor's degree in biology at UC San Diego and a master's degree in public health and healthcare administration at San Diego State.

She went to the Navy recruiter just days after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and was commissioned five months later.

Rear Adm. Christine Hunter, commander of Naval Medical Center San Diego, said Choe was an outstanding officer who made a "lasting impact" on issues including quality control while assigned as the executive assistant to the hospital's governing board.

Hunter said she was not surprised that Choe volunteered to be what the Navy calls an "individual augmentee" in Afghanistan, even with its dangers. "She fully understood that Navy medicine's mission is to reach out to other nations," she said.

In her off hours, Choe was a runner and a snowboarder.

In Afghanistan, she helped with the United Through Reading program, which allows military personnel to stay in contact with their families via webcams as they read stories to their children.

"It was never about Florence. It was about how she could make things better for other people," said Capt. Anne Diggs, executive officer of the Naval Hospital at Camp Pendleton, who served with Choe at Bethesda.

