

Published June 6th, 2012

## A Very Special Flag Comes from Afghanistan to Moraga

By Sophie Braccini



Al Archangel and Tom Westernoff holding the framed flag at the karate studio in Moraga Photo provided

Flag Day commemorates the adoption of the United States flag on June 14, 1777. For Al Archangel, June 14 has a special significance; it reminds him of July 4, 2011 when, as a reserve Lieutenant Colonel deployed for six months in Afghanistan as a mission commander, he flew an American flag during combat operations in honor of his karate 'sensei' and friend, Tom Westernoff.

"I wanted to honor Tom because he is such a great role model and has brought so much into my life as well as the lives of many others in Moraga," said Archangel, who presented the flag to Westernoff this spring.

Archangel, a Moraga dad who's raising two teenagers with his wife Carol Shenon, started his professional life in the military. After several years serving as an active duty officer, he went back to civilian life as a software engineer. But he didn't want to end the service to his country. "As a young man, I looked up to my older brother who had made this career choice," said Archangel. "I thought it was a privilege and loved serving. Going into the reserves afterward was a natural thing for me."

Being an Air Force Reservist, Archangel trains with his unit every month and could be called upon to serve if needed. But the monthly commitment was not enough for

him. "I wanted to serve again in active duty," he said. So he signed up for six months in Afghanistan.

Abroad, he was stationed at a large military base in southern Afghanistan and his missions had to do with "finding bad guys" and providing over-watch of transport routes. Without adding too many details about his deployment, he shared some thoughts and memories: "Most of the men and women over there were very young. Being a father of teenage kids, I was definitely one of the oldest," he said. "The climate and conditions were pretty harsh, and there were a few times when the situation became quite dangerous."

While Archangel enjoyed doing his duty, he said it was no picnic. "The military made things as comfortable as possible for us," he added. "We could call our families every day, there was some recreation on the base, and we had a few special privileges."

One of these privileges was the opportunity to fly an American flag on an actual mission in honor of someone. "I went to Tom's karate dojo out of curiosity," said Archangel. "I learned a great deal there and love the values and practices that are taught to adults and children alike." Archangel said the discipline and rigors that characterize the martial arts coincide with his philosophy of life and honor.

For Westernoff, it was a great honor to receive such a meaningful gift. "I will hang it in the front of the dojo so that we always remember," he said. He too believes that the hard work and dedication of all service men (and women) mirror the principles of karate-do. He encourages everyone to stop by The Karate & Fitness Place karate dojo in the Moraga Shopping Center to check out the framed American flag.

"A sincere thank you goes out to Lt. Col. Al Archangel and his team for their role in protecting our freedom," Westernoff said, "and for acknowledging the personal benefits gained through martial arts training."

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[back](#)

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