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— Dr. Kathy Platoni '74

PHOTO BY GREGORY SEARLES '13

A Healing Force

Retired from the U.S. military, Dr. Kathy Platoni '74, PTSD expert continues to fight for change

by Jonathan Everitt

The Watergate scandal. The Vietnam War. Captain & Tennille. The world has changed since 1974, the year Kathy Platoni graduated from William Smith. But one thing that endures: her fiery drive to speak her mind and challenge the status quo.

Platoni has taken on not one, but two disciplines: psychology and military service. She's confronted the dark place where the two intersect, taking a stand for the people most affected by that intersection, refusing to sit down. Refusing to be quiet.

She still has plenty of fight left in her, too.

Platoni has seen the effect of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on military personnel. She's a fierce advocate for those who suffer from it. A PTSD expert and a clinical psychologist in private practice, Platoni is a retired colonel with the Medical Service Corps of the U.S. Army Reserve. She's also served as Army Reserve Psychology Consultant to the Chief of

the Medical Service Corps, the position of chief psychologist for the entire Army Reserve for six years.

“You have to know what ‘right’ looks like.’ A very wise two-star general taught me that,” Platoni says. “It’s about commitment and investment, and how far you’re willing to go to take care of your Soldiers.”

Knowing what ‘right’ looks like comes in handy in other areas, too.

As a high school kid looking for the right college, Platoni fell in love with Hobart and William Smith as soon as she set foot on campus.

“When I saw the campus, I knew this was the place. The atmosphere and academic environment were just unsurpassed. I was very happy to come here. And very sad to leave,” says the Yorktown Heights, N.Y., native who today lives in Beavercreek, Ohio, with her husband, John D. Hutchinson, retired from the U.S. Air Force.

Platoni started out pre-med, but the required courses changed her mind.

“Chemistry and calculus did me in,” she says. “Then something happened. Judy Lane, also class of '74, and I volunteered at Willard State Hospital—very much like *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. We worked with very seriously mentally ill patients. This was my junior year. Boy, it bit me. I switched majors. It was then and there that I wanted to become a clinical psychologist.”

After graduating, Platoni went on to earn a master's in education from the University of Miami-Coral Gables. But when she was accepted by Nova Southeastern University to pursue her doctorate, she realized there was no way she'd be able to afford to finish school. So, Platoni turned to the Army for a scholarship.

“I applied and was one of three people who won a full scholarship through the Army for my doctoral studies. I owed them four years.”



Dr. Kathy Platoni '74 sitting on top of a Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicle in Afghanistan.

Turned out that she loved being in the Army.

"It was something so much greater than myself," Platoni says. "It required a tremendous amount of sacrifice, but it felt very right for me. I found a home there."

In her military career, Platoni has been deployed four times—stateside during the Gulf War, Joint Task Force-Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, Afghanistan and Iraq in support of both Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom twice. She also served in the aftermath of 9/11, supporting the New York Police Department at Ground Zero on two occasions.

Her exposure to the impact of war makes her a passionate advocate for her fellow service members who suffer from PTSD and war trauma. Platoni fights for better care when they come home—and combats the stereotypes common among civilians when it comes to psychological injuries.

"Just because you have PTSD doesn't mean you're violent," she says. "The misconception comes from movies, the press and sensational cases. It doesn't necessarily impair you from returning you to your family and your life."

Platoni doesn't hesitate to speak the truth. "I've never gone anywhere quietly," she says. "When Soldiers are damaged by toxic leaders, I'm going to stand up against it. I've stood up against the Taliban and Al Qaeda; if I can't stand up to the Army I work for, there's something wrong with me."

Her courage and insight have made her

an important resource for journalists who cover related issues. Platoni has been quoted in *The Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *Boston Globe*, *Los Angeles Times* and *Huffington Post*, and has been featured on Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC, among others.

As a soldier herself, Platoni understands

deeply the courage and strength it takes for men and women to confront the demons of PTSD. In 2009, she was on the scene of the infamous fatal shooting at Fort Hood, Texas. She comforted one of the victims—psychiatric nurse Captain John Gaffaney—as he lay dying. A second shooting at Fort Hood this spring prompted several national media outlets to turn to Platoni for her direct insight, both as a soldier and a psychologist.

"Millions have deployed since 2001 to Iraq and Afghanistan," Platoni says. "My guess is that 65 percent of people are coming back with PTSD, because of multiple deployments."

The repeated exposure to combat takes an even heavier toll.

"I think there's a cumulative effect with PTSD," Platoni says. "The symptoms worsen and are harder to treat."

As an expert in hypnotherapy, Platoni believes in doing whatever works to provide relief—even if it's unconventional. For decades, she's found hypnotherapy to be effective in help-

ing soldiers manage a range of PTSD symptoms, from flashbacks to panic attacks.

"I trained with the best people in the field," she says. "And in the combat theater, where people are desperate for some inner quiet, it's a powerful tool."

Despite the roadblocks PTSD sufferers face, things are changing. Much of that change is coming from service members and their families. For instance, self-expression can be therapeutic, and they're telling their stories.

"It's just recently that people have started to write about their experiences," Platoni says. "And paint about their experiences. And dance about their experiences."

Staying connected to the people who shared your experiences is a big part of the healing process, too.

"We gather for weekend conferences and preserve those bonds," Platoni says. "The most powerful healing forces are those bonds of fellow soldiers. I don't know anything else that rises to that level. It's not a pill. It's each other. 'You're my battle buddy. You need help. Here am I.'"

What drives someone to work so tirelessly in two demanding fields for nearly 40 years? Some of it's undoubtedly innate. But the right start helps, too. Platoni says that happened at the Colleges. For all her years of education

across several institutions, Platoni's memories from her time at HWS are profound. So is her sense of home—she came back to campus this spring to speak to students about the psychological cost of

war as part of the President's Forum Series.

The Colleges have grown since 1974, but the intimate setting and smaller classes that foster closeness remain. Platoni—a recipient of the William Smith Alumnae Association's Achievement Award—cherished her time with professors whom she says went to the ends of the earth to support their students.

"You got pretty close to your professors. You developed personal relationships with them. They were such wonderful human beings," she says.

This was a place where she first flourished as a feisty, outspoken advocate. That early encouragement has served her well.

"From being a rabblouser here, I knew this was a place that would inspire me to do great things. It took me several years, but that aspiration grew here." ●

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