



*Representative Brad Wenstrup (R-OH) and Kathy*

## Fort Hood Massacre Fuels Local Psychologist's Fight

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On Nov. 5, 2009, Army major Nidal Hasan entered a readiness processing center on Fort Hood, Texas and, armed with a handgun fitted with a laser sight, started firing on unarmed civilians and soldiers.

Among the Army personnel readying to deploy overseas was Kathy Platoni, a Centerville psychologist. As an Army officer, Platoni was in a nearby building with members of the 467th Medical Detachment, working through pre-deployment health checks.

“At 1:34 pm, I heard someone screaming, ‘They’re shooting, they’re shooting,’ from the other building,” Platoni recalled.

She had been in that very building only moments before.

Platoni’s life, like others, would never be the same.

Hasan killed 13 people and wounded 30 others before he was shot four times in what is regarded as one of the worst mass shootings at a U.S. military facility. (Hasan lived; he was sentenced to death in 2013, and he is incarcerated at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas.)

Although Platoni is well known among Dayton-area police officers and first responders, the Fort Hood experience might be a facet of her life that is less well known.

The horrific events around Fort Hood inspired an 11-year quest for Platoni that endures to this day. She and allies have urged the federal government to classify the Fort Hood Massacre as a terrorist attack.

For her and fellow advocates, the matter goes well beyond mere semantics.

Without the declaration of the Fort Hood shooting as terrorism, survivors are denied combat-related benefits.

“This is my life’s work for the good of the many victims of this senseless national tragedy,” Platoni said.

“I know that has been at the epicenter of her life,”

Dayton Police Chief Richard Biehl said.

## **Working with Dayton police**

Born and raised in upstate New York, Platoni has practiced in Centerville for 28 years — minus about six years for military deployments. At one point, a voice mail greeting at her practice told callers that she would be gone for about 14 months.

She began working with Dayton police in 2006 and has been on contract as that police force's psychologist since 2011; she has worked with Dayton SWAT members for a decade.

She served in active duty and for the Army Reserve for 34 years before retirement as a colonel in 2013.

When she counseled police officers and first-responders trying to deal with the aftermath of the August 2019 Oregon District shootings, she did so as someone who had dealt with her own trauma, Biehl said.

"She's certainly understood that experience, where others could potentially maybe empathize," he said. "She knew. She knew."

Uniformed officers and first-responders trust Platoni, said John DiPietro, president of the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge 117, who has known her for seven years.

She works with any officer who can show her a current FOP membership card, he said.

"It's also nice to work with somebody who herself is a survivor and has realized the issues of traumatic events and how they tend to linger on in somebody's lifetime," DiPietro said.

She's a psychologist who has worked in combat zones, noted Dayton Police Sgt. Jeffrey Spires.

"She's been there; she knows what it's like," Spires said.

"Even though it's almost 12 years ago, it's still so raw and fresh in my mind," Platoni said, referring to the 2009 shootings. "It's something you will never get past. You can't unsee these things."

## **Advocating for survivors**

Advocating for survivors of serious trauma is not new for Platoni.

Before Fort Hood, she pushed the military to improve its response to post-traumatic stress disorder.

The Army reservists processing at Fort Hood that day had been dedicated to counseling soldiers in war zones.

For survivors of Fort Hood, the government's decision not to describe the massacre as terrorism has left anger, resentment and perhaps confusion in its wake.

"That the massacre is still labeled an incident of workplace violence committed by a disgruntled employee is delusional and contemptible," Platoni wrote in the Wall Street Journal in 2015.

In that column, she pointed to the example of Staff Sgt. Shawn Manning, shot six times by Hasan. Manning told reporters in 2014 that because his injuries were not classified as combat-related, he lost about \$70,000 in benefits and \$2,500 a month in pay.

"I was embarrassed by the initial ruling it was a workplace violence issue," U.S. Rep. John Carter, R-Texas, told the New York Times in 2014. Carter sponsored a bill that designated the shooting as an act of terrorism, allowing victims and their families to be eligible for combat-related benefits. "I still am embarrassed by that."

It's about "recognition, calling this by its right name," said Dr. C. Alan Hopewell, a Texas board-certified neuropsychologist and a retired Army major, who, like Platoni, was present at the Fort Hood killings in 2009.

"No. 1, it directly affects how we view terrorism and how we classify it," Hopewell said. "Our point is, if you can't recognize something and call it accurately by what it is — if you don't know a snake is a snake, then it's going to bite you again."

There's also the question of benefits due to survivors, many of whom were active duty military personnel.

Those injured in the event did not have their injuries counted as combat casualties, Hopewell said, adding: "A lot of those people aren't qualified for health care, medical care and other benefits because it was classified incorrectly."

Some of those hurt were reservists returned to their home towns, which in some cases were far from military health care.

"They're just left with no follow-up, no care, they're not authorizing care, and they're not recognized," Hopewell said.

Without proper classification, survivors lack "full benefits," Platoni maintains.

### **Impact of Fort Hood shooting**

Because the incident has not been officially declared an act of terrorism, victims do not get combat-related special compensation that provides disability pay for medically retired service members, Platoni and her allies say.

"This is the ultimate betrayal by our own government," she said. "They sent us to hell and back."

Less than a month after Fort Hood, Platoni and her unit were deployed to Afghanistan.

At last count, there were eight suicides among Fort Hood survivors and one failed attempt, according to Platoni.

There has been some movement on the issue. The victims of the shooting were awarded Purple Hearts in 2015, after Congress took action in the matter.

Also that year, legislators added an amendment to a defense spending bill, extending Purple Heart eligibility to attacks in which an attacker “was in communication with the foreign terrorist organization before the attack,” and was “inspired or motivated” by a terror group, the Army Times reported in 2019.

Fort Hood victims were also offered burial plots at Arlington National Cemetery and compensation pay upon retirement.

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