

Strong Point Ashoque

Kathy Platoni, Psy.D., Clinical Psychologist

Colonel, Medical Service Corp, US Army Reserve
OIC, Team Wilson
467th Medical Detachment (Combat Stress Control)
Army Reserve Psychology Consultant to the Chief, Medical Service Corp
FOB Wilson
Kandahar Province
Zhari District

Dr. Kathy Platoni reflects back on her time serving in Afghanistan following the Fort Hood tragedy.

We have been overwhelmed by such enormous trauma and tragedy; we often know not where the day begins or ends. The impact of the massacre at Ft. Hood has left irreversible impressions that will ferry us to our graves. Many of us were on scene and witnessed the horror. To lose five fellow soldiers on American soil is beyond the unfathomable. The magnitude of suffering in the months that have followed has not diminished the anguish we carry in the depths of our souls, only to be multiplied exponentially by every loss to follow. We have lost eight soldiers alone from the 1-12th Infantry Battalion since arriving at FOB Wilson in early January, 17 killed in action since their arrival in theater. These are the highest numbers of losses and wounded within the entire 4th Brigade, 4th Infantry Division. Now it is personal. We live among them. They have become our comrades in our four months of boots on ground, the suffering souls that seek solace and some semblance of peace of mind day after day, deep into the nights. These become our losses as well. In this Taliban stronghold, every



single day is another 1000 pound IED waiting to launch "red mist." There is no shortage of soldiers in need of mental health services or the multitudes of them seeking treatment.

In many respects, the stigma, even among combat arms soldiers, has ebbed or disappeared. Even more so, this is the outcome of multiple deployments with so little dwell time at home. This is further punctuated by the trails of damage perpetrated on military families, most of who learn early on to live without their loved ones, sometimes forever. Nevertheless, there are cherished moments that remain anchored and engraved, a testimony to the value and purpose of the Combat Stress Control mission in the wartime theater of operations, Operation Enduring Freedom. Nevertheless, there are moments that we savor and that permit the authentication of unforgettable experience that will surely endure.

With some degree of trepidation after requesting convoy movement from "higher" (headquarters) four times over four days in a row, word was finally received at the eleventh hour



that we were a "go." Our mission to support 3rd Platoon, Bravo Company, is even more essential now, as they lost four brothers in January and we have interfaced with them regularly since the day following. Battle rattle making every step on gravel painful, we lugged ourselves and at least half of our body weight in tow over to Bravo Company for the safety brief. Many pay homage to the NCO who has the courage of conviction to step up to ROE, holding the decision-makers responsible for turning us into human shields of no consequence.

We were separated into three different MRAPs (Mine Resistant Ambush-Protected vehicles), PV1 S. at the wheel. There was nothing to hoist my sorry self onto in order to climb into the MRAP, so tow straps and crawling in on my knees with these minuscule legs of mine was the best I could do. My boney knees are screaming even as I write the day following. He wears the name tag of his deceased friend, CPL Wildes, killed in action in August of last year, on the back tab of his body armor (IOTV).

Austerity doesn't even begin to describe the conditions at Strong Point Ashoque, but we witnessed field expediency at its best. There was a heated badminton match ongoing when we arrived (rackets held together by ace bandages) and SFC G. had just prepared a meal of delectable wild rice for the masses. We were very sorry to have missed out on anything edible. Healthy Choice meals were being heated in the compound microwave and open bays filled with cots were just beginning to show signs of looking like home away from home, such as it is. Our Cheryl and Company cookies sent to us from retired Army buddies back home, the second batch I might add, were a hit and had been specially saved for delivery to 3rd Platoon.

Upon arrival, one LT P. 3rd Platoon Leader asked if we would like to accompany them on a mission to the actual village of Ashoque for

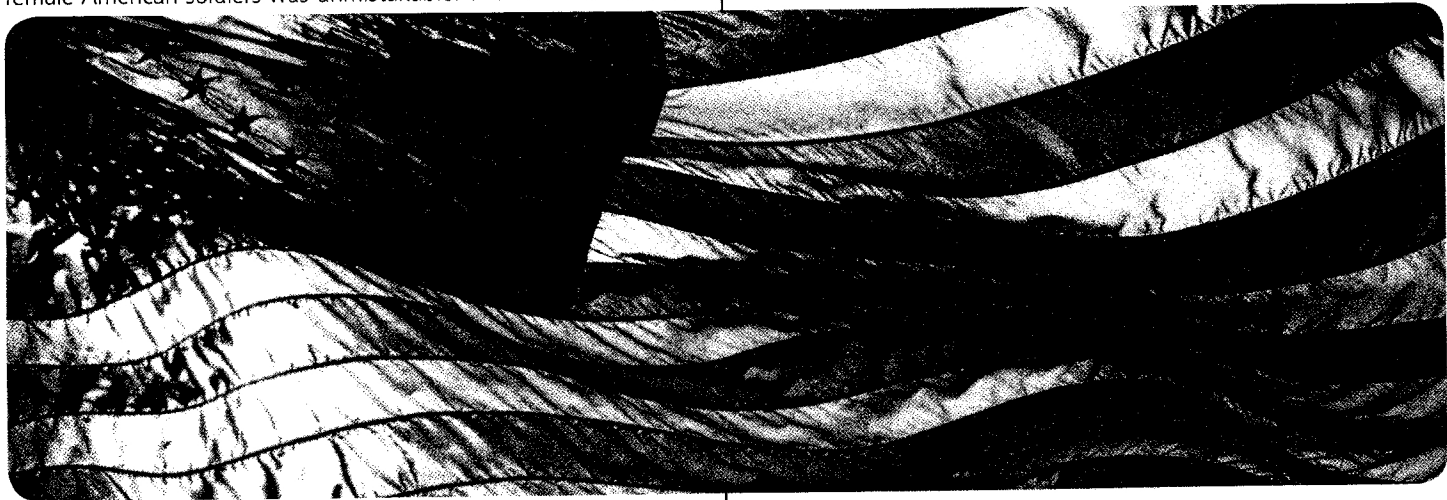
their platoon leadership to meet with the tribal elders. This was an opportunity not to be missed under any circumstances, regardless of command's decisions to allow or disallow, and certainly didn't qualify as a dismounted patrol. Who the hell were we to say no to an offer like that? After interacting and integrating with the soldiers already so familiar in the aftermath of tragedy of epic proportions, we all suited up again and off we went, our "entourage" following up the rear behind a platoon of Afghani National Army (ANA) soldiers and with the platoon leader, RTO (radio man), and additional security in the rear. I originally thought we would be driving in MRAPs, but this was a "dismounted" occasion, much to my surprise. We were off to Oz on foot, like it or not. It was a 300 meter trek, but this was no trivial walk in the park or the woods. The paths across waddies (small river beds) would have made Tom Sawyer proud. They were barely wide enough to hold my small feet, let alone normal sized feet in boots. Falling into that stew of teaming bacteria was to be avoided at all costs, but poor SPC T., one of our own stepped on a sandbag that gave way and did just that, right up to her waist. It should have been me. She was right behind me. It was an awful feeling for one of my own to be thrust into the dip. Everything, including her rifle, was soaked. Her recovery was a thing of beauty and she has been deemed a 3rd Platoon Bad Ass, not the first to take a bath in Afghani muck and sewage. She jumped right back out as if nothing happened and did us proud.

The level of security at the front and the rear was well-executed, danger minimal (360 degree security and brute force is standard in these instances). We came across a farmer and his children en route, their large dark eyes peaked with curiosity about GI Janes in tow. That they are such beautiful little creatures with a future probably lost to the Taliban is unthinkable. Roosters and dogs ran amok throughout the mud compound, making for somewhat bizarre parallels back home.

We were vastly surprised to have 1LT P. invite us to join the shura, a secret meeting of the tribal elders conducted outside their compound and under the watchful eyes of the Taliban. We couldn't help but be struck by the tremendous honor bestowed upon us at our beckoning. The meeting was comprised of five of eleven brothers and the town "doctor," a middle-aged man who had provided emergency medical care during some type of uprising in the past. The ANA commander was also present with 3rd Platoon. That we were included was a life-altering event of enormous proportions and each of us drank in every single image of this meeting as events unfolded.

It was clear that these exceedingly hospitable people feared for their lives. They had no evidence of anything less than prehistoric in their mud hut. Their women were hidden away, but their generosity to SPC T. and me and their obvious high regard for us as female American soldiers was unmistakable. The elders rolled out

presence and the degree of security that allowed the villagers any degree of safety. That appeared to be grossly lacking in Ashoque, a village considered very friendly towards American and ANA forces. It was remarkable to detect the camaraderie between Americans and these tribal peoples, their ability to generate laughter under high stakes and language barriers, and despite the gravity of their situation and the risks they took to demonstrate such kindness and warmth towards us, to do so regardless of cultures or genders. The elder of the gentlemen, one of two wearing colorful wrapped scarves around their heads or a kind of silk turban, continually tried to serve us more tea or spoon in more sugar, at one point crossing over to both SPCT and me with a tiny engraved spoon to stir up the sugar at the bottoms of our glasses. One glass of chai tea will probably sentence us to the latrine for the next several days. God knows what we were really drinking and from whence the water for the tea came.



handsome woven blue and gold rugs and mats for the meeting, even velour pillows and blankets to assure our comfort. SPC T. was so worried about leaving trails of mud on her velour blankets, but the elders paid no mind to this. We all worried about the proper manner for sitting on the ground with our body armor, no easy or comfortable task, while preventing the showing of the soles of our boots, a sign of great disrespect in this culture. There was just no way to prevent our limbs from falling asleep and our "kits" from cutting off circulation at vital junctures. Nevertheless, each one of us was treated like royalty, or so it seemed.

The elders brought out their finest pots and kettles filled with chai tea on silver trays, heaps of refined sugar in covered glass dishes, white candies in silver dishes that looked like popcorn (the flies did just fine setting up housekeeping in them), and flouted clear glasses in which tea was served to each of us. SSG B., SSG R., and a host of infantrymen had us surrounded at all times. It was stunning to even realize that this was all taking place as events of great significance transpired over the course of almost two hours. One by one, children took their places in their father's laps or at their sides, dads wiping their faces and noses in their little boys' linen robes and magnificent peacock blue, gold and beaded blouses worn by the little girls. It was clear that these fathers had a tremendously active parenting role and readily doled out mounds of affection and love towards them. The children were most curious about females in uniform and smilingly stared us down and waved or held out their hands, one little boy mischievously trying to garner all the attention he could muster. They were afraid to come closer, but neither of us could take our eyes off one another. With two "terps" or interpreters in tow (Pashtu, Dari, and other possible dialects), the meeting began with 1LT P. leading off the discussion about Taliban

We were mesmerized by the entirety of the event, not to mention the reactions of the children to our every move. I asked one of the "terps" how to say thank you, which I doled out in large doses every chance I got (ma NA na). The discussion proceeded to 1LT P. asking what we could do to build them a school and provide additional security for the villagers. It ended with him inviting them to his home in America. Everything was conducted through interpreters, but some communication is universal. Sadly, in these times these people know that the Taliban would retaliate and destroy anything that might provide for the education of their children. There will be no school anytime soon and we will remain unable to promote education in this primitive culture. The Taliban have seen to that. One wonders what the life expectancy of this family will be for hosting American forces and how quickly they will have to move on as nomadic peoples to preserve their lives. There are sad days ahead.

The trek back was uneventful, though and no one fell in, though the pathways were sinking closer into the waddies every time someone passed through. Some of the crossways were so far apart, SPC H., seeing that trouble lay ahead, reached out his gloved hand so that I didn't end up in the soup.

This was a day that will live on as one of the highest points of this deployment, not just because we experienced a cultural extravaganza and saw history in the making, but is because of this brotherhood of infantrymen who welcomed us into the fold and permitted for our ministry of presence to take hold. This is what keeps me coming back for more abuse and torment, deployment after deployment, the call to arms and to the brotherhood-sisterhood that is pure sustenance.