

THE LAST WORD:

"HOMECOMING"

by Catherine Williams

Dr. Kathy Platoni '74, a clinical psychologist and colonel with the Medical Service Corps and U.S. Army Reserve, is currently serving in Afghanistan.

An expert in hypnotherapy and the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder, Platoni is one of the nation's leading authorities on the psychological effects of warfare. She previously served one stateside tour of duty during the Gulf War, command of a Combat Stress Control Detachment at Joint Task Force Guantanamo Bay, and one tour of duty in Iraq. Now on the front lines in Afghanistan, Platoni works alongside troops, attending to those whose wounds are not inflicted by bullets or bombs, but are just as severe.

What is it like to return home to 'normal' life following a deployment?

Upon returning home, it seems as if we just stepped back into time, everything remaining as it was the day we departed. So much has changed, from our families and all the burdens they have had to assume in our absence, to the growth spurts of children and grandchildren, to the very environmental surroundings of our homes and communities.

We expect to miss the excitement, the rush, the thrill of being a part of something so much larger than ourselves, something of value, meaning and purpose that exceeds all. Outlooks and values and priorities have changed vastly for many of us, as the willingness to give all has come to redefine us. We are less materialistic, as there is no dollar value that could possibly be assigned to those moments in which we witness true and unparalleled heroism and the pure joy derived from a degree of camaraderie and *esprit de corps* that reaches to incomparable depths of the soul.

What is typical behavior for a soldier returning home?

It is said of warriors that one can never really go all the way home. I know this to be true.

Homecoming has been a painfully difficult task for most, if not all, of us. What has become the new normal is surviving in the war zone. Our old selves are no longer hanging in the closet awaiting our return. In the wartime theater we worry about two critical things: saving ourselves and saving the lives of our buddies. Willingness to lay down one's life is the force that drives and sustains us in combat.

At home, there is a mass confusion of tasks we have to labor to take on all over again, least of all reintegrating into our families and adjusting to routines and undertakings that are baffling at best. Paying bills, buying groceries, remembering how to drive, disciplining the children, budgeting, figuring out what to wear.

My first week home from Iraq, I couldn't figure out how to turn on a cell phone or where the ignition switch in my 14-year-old car was located. I got lost because nothing was the same and so many new structures dotted the landscape. Too often the overwhelming task of readjustment gives rise to tremendous anger and frustration.

What have your Homecoming experiences been like?

My own readjustments have been plagued with missing the comfortable presence of buddies upon whose lives I've relied, the absence of an austere environment, preoccupation with worry over those left behind to continue the good fight, the bone-crushing grief and sadness of the loss of comrades and the guilt over tasks left unfinished. I've also missed the adrenaline rush of excitement of living and breathing the wartime theater, the sounds and smells and sights and noises that become all too familiar (mortar, rocket, and RPG attacks, small arms fire, and the like), the meals often unrecognizable as food, the heat, the sand, and the challenge of having risen to myriad of ungodly circumstances.

In the field, can home become an idealized notion?

The home front is uninteresting by comparison in so many respects. The most grueling task of all



DR. KATHY PLATONI '74 JOURNEYS WITH THE 101ST FIELD ARTILLERY REGIMENT IN AFGHANISTAN.

is dealing with the ignorance of the masses, as no one could possibly understand what it is to live in our boots. The lack of understanding of our plight and the absolute taking for granted of sacrifices often leave me feeling angry and frustrated. This is more than commonplace among returning veterans. It is sometimes difficult to be patient and forgiving when someone asks what hotel I lived in during the war. How about a smelly, mildewed tent without heat or AC for a year? That's "home" when you're deployed.

Is there a special place or an image of home that you keep in mind when you are away?

The images of home that sustain me are of my beloved, saintly and patient husband of 23 years, John Hutchinson, sitting in the wingback chair, covered by an American flag throw, two dogs – Skippy and Pricilla – sprawled across his lap.

To what or to whom do you credit your approach to life?

It was at William Smith College more than 35 years ago that I learned the significance of devoting yourself to something much greater than yourself. Nothing has ever risen to that and nothing will ever surpass that. ●