

Heartfelt Tribute to Military Enriches Homecoming, Remembers 9/11

No one will ever forget the 2001 terrorist attacks and the collapse of the twin towers of the World Trade Center. On Sept. 11, the eighth anniversary of the attacks, KCUMB held a special commemorative ceremony in Weaver Auditorium as part of its Homecoming activities.

The tribute was a memorial to those who lost their lives in the attack, and also honored alumni who have served or are currently serving in the military.

At the event, Karen L. Pletz, J.D., president and chief executive officer, and Col. Frederick Flynn, D.O. (COM '76), president-elect of the KCUMB Alumni Association and chair of the Awards and Recognition Committee, presented the Star-Spangled Banner Medallion to retired Air Force Col. Elizabeth Clark, D.O. (COM '87).



"Today, we honor the loss of lives most assuredly, but we also honor the acts of heroism," Pletz said.

During the ceremonies, Col. Clark shared moving accounts of her time with the 447th Expeditionary Medical Squadron (EMEDS) as chief of aeromedical services.

Her challenges were many. While serving with EMEDS in Iraq, she performed surgery in tent clinics that were erected in the desert. Daily physical training included piling sandbags outside the tent, as protection from the bullets that could fly right through.

Her other "clinic" was in the air; she was one of only two on-site physicians specially trained for helicopter duty. Unloading and loading patients had to be done while wearing 45 pounds of body armor. Clark's armor was a gift from her husband, Michael Clark, a retired Army chief warrant officer, who was working with a security company in Iraq.

By Julie Stutterheim

"Nothing says 'I love you' like body armor and a Kevlar helmet," Col. Clark laughed.

She recalled many instances performing surgeries during sandstorms.

"Sandstorms come in like a thunderstorm in the mountains, a fine powder that gets everywhere," she said.

Then there was the food. Her team was stationed at the end of the supply chain for food and water. Many times when the food finally came in, it wasn't edible.

Col. Clark saved lives on a daily basis, but her own heroes were those she served alongside with in the war: fellow physicians, nurses and soldiers.

"Sometimes it felt like choreographed chaos," she said. "But it was a phenomenal thing to be a part of. It was all about the team, all about being everything you could for the patient."

She recalls that her team remained positive and reached out to the Iraqi people even when times became desperate.

One Christmas, the nurses recruited their families and friends back in the United States to send candy for the children in Iraq. The donations came pouring in, and more than 90 pounds of treats were delivered to the children on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

"To see the kids' faces light up when we delivered candy was amazing," Col. Clark said. "Caring for people's hearts and minds is what it's all about."

Col. Clark reminded KCUMB medical students and alumni in the



The Ft. Leavenworth MEDDAC Color Guard Team solemnly marched through Weaver Auditorium during the commemorative ceremony.

audience about the importance of delivering patient care on a more personal level. She told the story of a burn victim, a soldier covered in bandages.

While visiting him, she reached out and touched an unbandaged part of his arm. His eyes welled up with tears.

"He started to cry," Col. Clark said. "And then he said, 'You're the first person who has touched me in three days.'"

The lesson: never forget the importance of human touch, she said.

Col. Clark has received numerous military decorations, including the Legion of Merit, Bronze Star, Defense Meritorious Service Medal, and Meritorious Service Medal with four oak leaf clusters, the joint commendation medal, the Air Force commendation medal, the Army Commendation Medal, the Army Achievement Medal, the Southwest Asia Service Medal with one device, and the Outstanding Unit with Valor and two devices. ●