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GWU Nursing Alum Reflects on 9/11's Impact

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Terrorist Attacks 15 Years Ago Ignited Kacey Hawley Whisler's Desire to Serve Country Through Profession

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.— Like many Americans, Kacey Hawley Whisler's life path changed on Sept. 11, 2001, a day thousands died in terrorist attacks in several U.S. locations. At that time, Whisler was a nursing student at Gardner-Webb University, and she vividly remembers grieving with her fellow students on campus. "That day changed each of us," she recollects. "I felt a calling to serve our great country and be part of something bigger than myself."

Spurred by 9/11 events, Whisler met with a U.S. Air Force recruiter at the Snack Shop restaurant across from campus in Boiling Springs to learn about military opportunities. "I was hooked," she recalls of the conversation that offered clarity for her career and life as she committed to three years of service in the military. After earning her Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) from Gardner-Webb in 2003, she was commissioned as a second lieutenant.

Whisler was stationed in Idaho before being promoted to first lieutenant, selected as a flight nurse and transferred to Okinawa, Japan. There she was part of the 18th Aeromedical Squadron that transported patients in critical condition from the Pacific and Hawaii back to the U.S. mainland for treatment. While in Okinawa, she was deployed in support of several missions, including Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa.

Photos contributed by Kacey Hawley Whisler

Flying out of the country of Qatar, she assisted with medical evacuation missions out of Iraq, Afghanistan and Africa, caring for injured service personnel and helping them return to their families. In total, she flew 165 combat hours in 62 missions. "Working as a flight nurse put me in the position to directly affect the mission, and that was the highlight of my nursing career," she assesses. "During my Qatar deployment, I was able to evacuate over 200 wounded warriors out of Battle from Iraq and Afghanistan. The survival rate for injuries was 98 percent because of the coordinated efforts of a robust joint service medical transport system."

“Playing a role in getting wounded troops the healthcare services they need in order to get them home and healthy will have a lasting impact,” she continues. “To me, that means Christmases, birthday parties, graduations, weddings—more time with family.”

After being honorably discharged from the Air Force with a rank of captain, Whisler continued with the Air Force Reserve and with the Veterans Health Administration in Utah. Following several ensuing opportunities, she and her husband moved to Arizona, where she now serves as senior nurse manager for emergency and trauma services at Banner Boswell Medical Center in Phoenix. She provides 24-hour support to patients and staff, overseeing leadership of clinical, financial and personnel management of several areas.

Looking back on 9/11’s impact 15 years ago, she credits the Gardner-Webb Hunt School of Nursing with providing a firm professional foundation and the support to pursue her call to serve her country. “Gardner-Webb taught me how to focus on the bigger meaning of servanthood,” she explains, “by emphasizing the importance of ethics, morals and faith.”

Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University’s purpose is to advance the Kingdom of God through Christian higher education by preparing graduates for professional and personal success, instilling in them a deep commitment to service and leadership, and equipping them for well-rounded lives of lasting impact, Pro Deo et Humanitate (For God and Humanity).