

Boston College Veteran Alumni Network - Keynote Address, Reunion 2023

Good morning, and thank you for having me here today to address this esteemed group, especially those veterans celebrating their 50th reunion, BC EVP Michael Lochhead, BC AD for Veteran Programs and Services Michael Lorenz, and the BCVAN co-chairs Mike Dunford and Bill Kelley. You're absolutely my favorite audience to be in front of due to the uniqueness of our shared experiences as Boston College Alumni and Veterans, and the exclusivity of our small group who stands Ever to Excel, and Ever to Serve.

I've often been among the exceptions in my accomplishments, or one of the few by chance, which has been lonely and challenging at times: I grew up as the only girl I knew with a boy's name, and only girl on a boys' travel soccer team in Middle School, only woman in various men's hockey leagues, among the minority of females in aviation as a whole, an even smaller minority of female military aviators, and often **one** of a handful of women in a squadron. The distinction here follows suit as a small percent of the BC student body population are veterans or active military members, and an even smaller percent of uniformed service members across all branches are BC grads. But for the first time possibly ever, I'm not an exception here with you, I'm finally at HOME among my people!

And while we all have different paths that led us to this point, whether through enlistment, ROTC, OCS, or another commissioning source, and you can't tell by looking at most of us today what service or services we belong to, we've all worn the flag on our shoulders, the maroon and gold tassel on our mortar boards, and we've all chosen to further the Jesuit ideal of "Men and Women for Others" through service to our country.

Like any good intel officer, I did some research to get data on the collective events our combined reunion groups would have experienced. Together we've served under Presidents Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush 41, Clinton, Bush 43, Obama, Trump, and Biden, probably covered ground on all continents, and likely participated in most military conflicts dating back to or before 1973. There's a chance we've actually been excited to eat an MRE or day-old box lunch in extremis, and missed some holidays and significant life events with friends and loved ones. And there NO DOUBT we're missing friends and loved ones among us today, but we carry them close in our hearts always. They ARE here.

Members of the Class of 1973 were born to WWII era parents, grew up in the escalating Cold War and Space Race era, endured the Cuban Missile Crisis and practiced Duck and Cover drills in school, entered college in a time of war in Vietnam, and as ROTC members during college were prepared to fight upon graduation and commissioning. In 1973, Boston College was the third largest Catholic University in America, Title IX was newly in effect, and the mods were new. Today, we are ranked among the top three Catholic Universities along with Georgetown and Notre Dame, we have over 10 varsity women's sports teams, and amazingly, the mods are still standing!

The Class of 1978 graduated a year after Star Wars debuted, as smallpox was declared eradicated, and as the Rec Plex construction was beginning. In their first year of service, 3-Mile Island went into partial meltdown, and tensions were rising in Iran, where the US Embassy was eventually

overtaken and 49 American hostages were held captive while the world watched from afar first in horror, and then in devastation after the failure of Operation Eagle Claw.

The Class of 1983 was the last of our reunion classes to know a world without Air Jordans, and graduated in a year where astronaut Sally Ride became the first woman in space, the US invaded Grenada in Operation Urgent Fury, and the TV show M*A*S*H ended. They also commissioned in a year when separate bombings in Beirut killed 17 Americans at the US Embassy, and 241 US service members at the Marine Barracks, including 220 Marines, 18 sailors, and three soldiers.

1988's class drilled in the Top Gun era while the Iran - Iraq war was raging and a missile attack on the USS STARK took the lives of 37 sailors, and graduated shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Saddam Hussein's genocidal counterinsurgency in Iraqi Kurdistan. They were early into their active service when Pan AM 103 was blown up over Lockerbie, Panama was invaded in Operation Just Cause, and the Berlin Wall fell. They also celebrated the return of NASA's Space Shuttle program post-Challenger disaster.

The graduates of 1993 probably watched news break of the first World Trade Center bombing and the Waco siege on the nightly news from their dorm rooms, drilled while the class of '88 was involved in Operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm & Desert Sabre in the First Gulf War, and may have provided humanitarian aid to Bosnia or participated in military action in Mogadishu within months of their graduation. Rudy was a big hit that fall, as was the BC football team, who defeated and unseated the No. 1 ranked ND team with a 41-yard field goal kick as time expired.

1998 was both the originally scheduled completion date for the Big Dig, and my graduation year – I think we're the last group of our presently assembled reunion classes to graduate outside of an active conflict. I sat riveted in front of the TV my freshman spring watching images of a firefighter tenderly cradling a baby girl covered in blood and ashes in Oklahoma City, learned about the US Embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya upon returning from a post-graduation trip to Europe, read that Eric Rudolph was officially charged for the 1996 Olympic Bombings, and heard the tragic fate of college student Matthew Sheppard. I saw Saving Private Ryan in a movie theatre, and celebrated John Glenn's return to space as a septuagenarian – so no complaints about your trip to Boston this week, class of '73!

By the time the Class of 2003 graduated, Elian Gonzalez had been returned to Cuba, Shuttle Columbia disintegrated before a sorrowful nation's eyes, the USS Cole had been bombed in a water-borne suicide attack, the submarine USS Greenville collided during a rapid-surface maneuver with Japanese high school training ship Ehime Maru in Hawaiian waters, 9/11 had rocked our world, and 22 Eagle brethren had perished while the heroic and selfless story of the Man in the Red Bandana was beginning to surface. The War on Terror was well underway in both Afghanistan and Iraq in Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, respectively, the US controlled territory of Guantanamo Bay had a new purpose, Saddam would soon be captured, and the Terminator would become a Governor.

The Class of 2008 came of age in a time of war, just like the Class of '73, and had a renewed sense of patriotism along with pride in a National title in Men's Ice Hockey. In their first year post-graduation, after historically catastrophic hurricanes and devastating school massacres and in a

significant recession, they saw OIF become Operation New Dawn, cheered when Capt Sully executed a flawless emergency landing in the Hudson River, and undoubtedly cheered again when Navy SEALs took out the Somali pirates who'd hijacked the Maersk Alabama – incidentally, graduates of classes 2013 and 2018 would've grown up watching Tom Hanks play the leading roles as Capt Sully and Capt Phillips in both stories, and also witness two Red Sox World Series Wins in their graduation years.

The Class of 2013 graduated in a post-Bin Laden era, a few months after US Ambassador Stevens and other Americans were attacked and killed in Benghazi Libya, and a few weeks after the Boston Marathon Bombing, at a time when Bradley Manning and Edward Snowden were accused of leaking classified information publicly, and Bowe Bergdahl was being held captive by the Taliban after deserting. These graduates would have been the first among our reunion groups who *could* serve openly and proudly in a **post** Don't Ask, Don't Tell military.

The 2018 Class graduated a year after a Marine C-130 fell out of the sky, shortly after a false warning about a ballistic missile terrorized Hawaii, and a year and a half before the world came to a screeching halt for a global pandemic that popularized the long-loved VTC utilized in military circles, and redefined work culture forever.

With our collective background recognized, from Boomers to Gen Z, let's give the people who stood behind us, sacrificed, and helped us get here, as well as those who worked hard over the past two decades to bring this group together in reunion, a big round of applause.

Kissing Frogs

And now that I've used up half the time allotted to me, it's my honor to share my abridged story with you, reflecting upon how my BC experiences shaped my time in uniform, and how both involvements impacted my life.

I was raised Catholic in a family with deep ties to Notre Dame. In my 8th grade Confirmation class, Fr DeLuca taught us about Kissing... FROGS. A tomboy who regularly caught frogs and toads of all sizes in the neighborhood, and even smuggled one back from Barbados, I was truly excited for this lesson! The story was way less literal than I'd hoped, and far more impactful than I could have imagined. Based on the childhood fairy tale where a kissed frog turns into the true prince he is, the gist of metaphorically "kissing frogs" in life is that a simple gesture of kindness and encouragement goes a long way. If we consider strangers we might not normally speak to as frogs for a moment, and take the time to compliment or do something small for them that can make the difference in what may be an otherwise mundane day, we bypass stranger mode, creating a brief connection that helps others feel seen, and recognizes their worthiness and value in this world. True fact, this kindness interruption has actually saved lives.

Reflection on Boston College

Frog Kissing has always inspired me to be of service to others by finding a way to momentarily and positively contribute to their lives. This is the basic concept of Servant Leadership, and is what being Men and Women for Others is all about. It was a driving force in my pursuit of an undergrad experience at a Jesuit University like BC. I was also drawn to BC for the cultural

experiences of a big city, the ability to remain just a few hours from home, and the opportunity to play on two D1 sports teams. I wasn't recruited at BC, so my choice to attend in hopes of playing ice hockey or lacrosse was somewhat of a gamble as I'd have to walk on to both teams and earn a spot. But I was determined and driven, and believed I'd be ok.

Through competitive involvement in sport, I'd gained confidence, mental discipline, focus, fortitude, perseverance, strength, and resilience, and developed a strong work ethic, understanding of commitment, and ability to manage time and competing agendas. Sport encouraged me to take calculated risks, and demonstrated to me time and again my own ability to recover from setbacks and failure. It also taught me invaluable lessons about team dynamics. Being a student-athlete defined much of my time at BC, where I was able to do something with others where I found joy, purpose, fulfillment, community, and connection. And along with frog kissing, I'm sure my athletic involvement at BC is what set the trajectory for a successful operational military career.

Aside from hours spent in Conte Forum, Kelley Rink, the Plex, Alumni Stadium, the trainer's table, and on buses and in locker rooms with teammates who became some of my closest life friends to this day, I spent the rest of my time divided between academics and navigating life as a co-ed experiencing independence for the first time. I remember large lecture halls where I learned I could skip an occasional class without my absence being noticed, liberal arts classes where discussions with people from different backgrounds expanded my mind and challenged my thoughts with new perspectives, small labs where I spent a lot of late hours working independently, and incredible TAs in the tightknit Geology Department who helped pull me through my most challenging classes.

I took notes and wrote letters by hand in college, and used a corded telephone to call home. I remember being incredibly homesick in the fall of my freshman year when my favorite grandpa was dying and everyone I loved felt so far away. And I remember finding solace, peace, and a meditative comfort during that difficult time in the minimally attended early morning chapel services in the basement of St Ignatius in the familiar ritual of prayer. But mostly I remember the walks to and from everything on campus with friends, classmates, and teammates in sunshine, rain, and snow, up and down so many sets of stairs to and from classes and practices every day, talking, laughing, crying, and growing up. Rather than feeling elation at graduation when my days at BC came to an end, I felt a deep sense of loss knowing everyone was headed in different directions in a time when none of us yet had cell phones, and this thing called electronic mail was brand new. I knew there were many people I'd never see again.

Transition to the Armed Forces

I also knew I lacked professional direction at that time in my life, and was digging deep to figure out my next step – without Google or ChatGPT, which probably would've saved me a LOT of time! I worked halfheartedly in finance for a year, and craved something more adventurous that would allow me to travel and work with a team again. I considered career options that met my desires, flirted with becoming a flight attendant for lack of commonplace female pilot role models, and ended up in a life-changing conversation with my dad. For the first time ever, I considered the

possibility of flying the plane I'd envisioned serving others on, and investigated civilian and military flight training options.

As a BC undergrad, military service was the farthest thing from my mind. I had two friends who chose to serve while attending BC: I was present for the Commissioning of one into the Marine Corps aboard the USS CONSTITUTION after freshman year, and the other shared a few classes with me, and did the best Michael Jackson cover I've ever seen. I found the brave and forward-thinking commitments to service that they made in their college years intimidating and incomprehensible, and I never considered I'd make the same choice a few years down the line. But with a goal identified, similar to my walk-on days at BC, I was motivated to gamble and get gritty again, and pursue a career as a USCG pilot where I could put my skills to use in a humanitarian service with a peacetime mission to help others. I applied to OCS a year after graduation, while still paying off student loans, and suddenly understood the financial value of ROTC!

Reflection on Experience in Armed Forces

When my dad dropped me off at OCS, the hardest 5 months of my life to that point commenced. I hated every day of the first couple months of military training, and wanted to quit so many times. At my breaking point, an intimidating prior Marine drill instructor turned Coastie reminded me that worthy goals take grit and determination to achieve, and discomfort is only temporary. That was the frog kiss of support and encouragement that I needed to refocus my resolve and recommit to reaching my pursuit, even though I was struggling to see the forest through the trees. I graduated from OCS with distinction, and got orders to Naval Flight Training.

Flight school was kicked off by a *very* warm welcome from the Commanding Officer, who threatened us that more people make it *to* the NFL than *through* military flight training, and told us we might as well say goodbye to the people seated to our left and right as one of us was bound to wash out of the program. While I was unsure *how* I'd get through the technical requirements of the training ahead, and become a master of complex aircraft systems considering I couldn't even change my own tire or oil, I knew I'd make it through. I was committed to success, and determined not to quit.

The realization struck me again that I was really far from everyone I cared about in life, only this time I didn't feel lonely. I was among others who'd endured similar military indoctrinations and were equally driven toward a common goal. I made good friends with some great Marines who got me through API, and together we manifested our dreams on those coveted Wings of Gold, endlessly prepping and quizzing each other, studying long hours late into the night, and ensuring no one missed a wake up.

We put on parachutes and got dragged behind trucks and across pools so we could learn to land safely and egress from harness and canopies in all conditions. We learned to jump from platforms without passing out or breaking limbs on land and in water. We spent hours fully clothed in the pool swimming laps, treading water, and escaping things while blindfolded, and we hung out in the jellyfish infested bay to practice helicopter rescue. We soloed, flew cross country, and did

aerobatic and formation flights without killing each other, and we celebrated our accomplishments together. Flight school was hard work, but man was it FUN.

As fate would have it, my journey to qualify as a military aviator culminated with an oral exam and final checkride on a sunny, beautiful Tuesday morning on the 11th of September, 2001. Mine was the first flight to take off at official sunrise, and the only sortie to complete from NAS Corpus Christi that day. My flight examiner sat to my right, manning an instructor-only radio frequency, giving me instructions and simulating emergencies to test my proficiency. When I try to picture his face today, I can only recall the distressed look and vacant stare that burdened his green face near the end of my checkride.

I thought he was simulating pilot incapacitation to elicit my emergency response. When I asked if this was the case so I could spring into action, he reached across the cockpit, slapped off *all* my external radios, directed me to keep flying, and told me we'd talk on deck. I knew immediately that something horrible happened; and my heart sank as I assumed a plane in our squadron had crashed, and worried a friend had died. I fought off rising anxiety, said a quick prayer for mercy, and flew the plane. In an eerie communication void aside from internal transmissions between the two of us over headset, he relayed instructions to me from tower to complete the final approach that would get me the X, and told me without emotion upon landing that I'd passed my checkride.

As we taxied in, my instructor briefed me on the situation unfolding, and directed me to leave base before it locked down as soon as the chocks were set so I could focus on family in the NY area which was under attack. I felt farther than ever from home that morning as I struggled to reach loved ones, heard my parents' voices strained through tears, and learned my brother was on the run in Lower Manhattan while buildings were falling. I had no idea the friend I feared lost would become multiple friends lost, not from my squadron, but from LIFE, to include a friend from junior high, my first hockey coach, the boyfriend from Boston that I broke up with when I started flight school to pursue my dreams, Welles Crowther, the Man in the Red Bandana who I'd shared a summer sublet with, and many others. I was completely alone in my grief in Texas where NO ONE I knew understood what it was like to see the backdrop of my hometown under attack on TV, and get notifications throughout the night and coming days about a friend or their family member unaccounted for, feared lost, or confirmed as a passenger on Flight 175.

Many people were called to service *after* September 11th. I felt enormously proud to be in uniform already, resolute in my decision to serve, and prepared to respond however needed. The pride that comes with service in whatever capacity it takes is not an arrogant one, but one that fills you with a sense of unrivaled purpose, contribution, and peace, and exemplifies the Jesuit ideals of being Men and Women for Others. I was blessed with a sense of pride a few more times in my career when my efforts helped save people's lives, enabled recognition and promotion for others, got my aircrew out of trouble in foreign countries, and provided the critical connection for intel geeks and field operators to successfully execute missions together. And I've felt incredible sorrow watching disasters unfold below or afar that I couldn't do anything about.

It took just under 3 years from my initial decision to pursue a career as a military pilot to be qualified to fly my fleet aircraft, the C-130 Hercules, and it was well worth **all** the time it took. I

enjoyed flying for many years as a CG pilot alongside the best teammates in the business, logging thousands of flight hours over the Gulf of Mexico, Caribbean Sea, and Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, saving lives by locating people in distress, and safeguarding many more by preventing the transfer of illicit drugs and weapons to our shores. I earned an individual action Air Medal for meritorious flight in Hurricane Katrina, but in no way did I do it alone. I'm certain I escaped death a time or two as well. And even *through* the suck of it all at times, the memories of the people and the mission are all resoundingly good ones.

In 2006, I transferred to a staff job in a joint-service Maritime Intelligence Command in Washington DC. My new role opened my eyes to a world beyond the cockpit, and informed and enabled my next career steps. I separated from the USCG after ten years of active service, and went to work for DIA. I simultaneously commissioned into the Navy Flight Reserves, happily returning to the cockpit after successful completion of Survival School. Navy missions took me all over the world and introduced me to all sorts of wonderful and different people from Pacific Atolls to the Arctic Circle, again satisfying my travel and adventure desires, deepening my understanding of anthropology, geography, and global weather patterns, and enhancing my role and reach in intel circles, while serving a greater good.

I met my future husband on one notable flight to Kuwait, when my crew was a bit behind schedule. We were tasked with transporting a team of special operations bomb techs to Bahrain on the first leg of *their return* to the U.S. after a 6-month deployment to Iraq. I welcomed the EOD Team aboard, thanked them for their work on the front lines, and made a peace offering for our tardiness with cold water from our ample supply. The loadmaster and I prepped the team for flight and separated the men from their weapons, leaving the team lead disgruntled. I returned to the cockpit to a thorough reprimand from my all-male flight crew for showing hospitality to our passengers, and was bluntly informed, "we don't talk to the cargo." LOL. That disgruntled piece of cargo and I married the following year.

Reflection on Life

My husband and I both continued to deploy with the Navy, and later moved to Virginia Beach where my work with Defense Intelligence continued as a liaison to Naval Special Warfare, advising Navy SEALs on intel matters and prepping them for deployment. When my husband and I had a son together in 2013, my flight days came to an end, and my role of being a woman for others took on an entirely new form. I became a military spouse and a single mom for months on end, and gained new appreciation for military families and the sacrifices they make, not always by choice. I'll paint you a brief picture for your understanding, and for a laugh.

Since stepping back from the cockpit to ensure my son had one parent dedicated to being there for him, I earned a master's degree in leadership and became a certified yoga teacher to help find life balance, worked part time in a small southern town consulting veterans with PTSD, and taught a few classes as an adjunct aviation professor. I was finally offered an amazing job on Friday morning, March 13, 2020 that never came to fruition. My family endured two out of state moves and a number of prolonged geographic separations for my husband's in-residence graduate school opportunity, more overseas deployments with JSOC that sometimes came short notice, and a multi-phase PCS across the country during the height of the pandemic where we had the

pleasure of house hunting entirely online. We lived in a one-bedroom hotel room in our new state for 3 months with our blind old bird, our dog with separation anxiety, all the plants I couldn't leave behind, and our 6-year-old son who regularly rode his bike and performed drum parades through the empty hallways, and became besties with the high school girls on the housekeeping staff. This all came after saying goodbye to previous besties, both his and mine, in VA and NC, many of whom were in the waste management profession.

In my efforts to teach my boy to treat people fairly and equally, to stand up for the underdog, and to be as brave as he can be, I've learned the best lessons in life, and I've felt that fullness of pride mentioned earlier that comes from living with purpose and contribution. I've discovered that sometimes kissing frogs starts with self-care, which we as a collective are probably not very good at after a life of putting others first. I've learned the importance of grace, patience, and forgiveness, and the power of a few deep breaths. I've found that in all the work I've done, that which I most enjoy is the time I give freely when I serve as a character and leadership development coach in a local girls' hockey program.

In Closing

I think as BC Veteran Alumni, it's safe to assume that some traits we have in common are our desire to run toward the boom, to be selfless, to go above and beyond, and to put others first. And again due to our shared backgrounds, I'm certain too that each of you is a fair and just leader of strong character and high emotional intelligence.

Subsequently, I think St. Ignatius, the Patron Saint of Catholic Soldiers and founder of the Society of Jesus, would be proud to recognize us all as Men and Women for Others, regardless of faith. Even here as strangers today, we share deeper bonds with one another than we will find with most close friends in a lifetime of experiences together. We answered the call of duty by choice, we've been willing to sacrifice it all, we've updated wills and left behind letters for loved ones knowing there was a chance we wouldn't make it home, and we share similar core values that we've *truly* lived of honor, courage, respect, devotion to duty, commitment, integrity, and loyalty.

We've all developed the grit and mindset to get us through the most challenging times in our lives, become masters of compartmentalization and resourcefulness, and learned the priceless value of flexibility, adaptability, and humor as life skills. We're capable of making ethical and moral choices, and driven by the best ideals, which get us and those around us through the worst of times. We've learned to not only appreciate teamwork, but to treasure the opportunities we have to serve as part of a team, be connected, and become greater as a whole than we are individually. We look out for one another, we can be counted on without fail, and in our circles, people know we won't leave them behind.

In closing, there are good and *great* times behind us as services members and as Eagles that we all cherish, miss, and remember, and there are even better days ahead. So keep going, Brothers and Sisters, stay connected, go kiss frogs, and let's do this again in five years!

Thank you.