

BLUE SKY FACULTY FOLIO

# INSPIRED





## Dreaming Big

Lifelong love of learning fuels high achievement in military, nursing fields

Even at a young age, Kathleen Flarity, DNP, PhD, Associate Professor in the Department of Emergency Medicine at the University of Colorado School of Medicine and Deputy Director of the CU Anschutz Center for Combat Medicine and Battlefield Research (COMBAT), displayed an exceptional work ethic and an appreciation for service. Born into a military family, she spent much of her early life in Adana, Turkey, where her father was stationed at Incirlik Air Force Base.

**“MY FATHER REALLY INSTILLED IN ME THE BENEFIT OF HARD WORK, SETTING GOALS AND WORKING TOWARDS THEM WITH INTEGRITY, HONESTY AND HONOR WHILE BEING UNAFRAID OF FAILURE,” FLARITY SAYS.**

After spending eight years in Adana, Flarity was 10 when her family moved to Cedar Falls, Iowa. She grew up working after school to earn money by babysitting, detasseling corn and bussing tables at restaurants. Prior to graduating high school, Flarity’s plan had been to go to nursing school. She applied and was accepted but couldn’t afford the tuition, so she set aside her nursing dreams and sought a new path.

“I didn’t know anything about grants, about scholarships. I didn’t even know about the service academies. But what I did know was that my brother had joined the Army the previous year. He was a military police officer and was enjoying it,” she says.

This sparked the idea to enlist a combat medic, but there was one snag. Still only 17, Flarity needed parental permission, and her father wasn’t convinced that his daughter should join the military. It was 1980 – the first year that women were allowed to serve in previously all-

male platoons. Her father eventually acquiesced, and Flarity enlisted. At basic training, she was soon chosen as squad leader.

“The leader of basic training sent my father a letter announcing that I had been named the outstanding trainee of the cycle. For my father to see me as a woman in this position, that’s when he absolutely embraced me being in the military,” Flarity says.

## PUSHING GOALS

When she was a sergeant and stationed in South Korea, Dr. Kenneth Lee, a physician and Army Major, called her into a meeting.

“He said, ‘Kathleen, let’s talk about your goals.’ I can’t remember what I said, but it wasn’t enough. He said, ‘You need to dream bigger than that. What would be a reach goal for you?’”

**SHE ADDS, “AT THE TIME, I WANTED TO EARN A BACHELOR OF SCIENCE IN NURSING, AND TO ME, THAT WAS UNATTAINABLE. NO ONE IN MY FAMILY HAD GONE TO COLLEGE. I THOUGHT I WASN’T SMART ENOUGH, I WASN’T CAPABLE OF IT, BUT SAYING THAT GOAL OUT LOUD REALLY SOLIDIFIED FOR ME I WAS GOING TO ACCOMPLISH MY GOAL.”**

When Flarity returned to the states, she enrolled in the Allen School of Nursing in Waterloo, Iowa, where she planned to attend years earlier. In 1987, she earned a



diploma in nursing while continuing to serve in the U.S. Army Reserve as a medic. A year later, Flarity completed a Bachelor of Science in Nursing, fulfilling the goal she set in South Korea. But she was only getting started.

Over the next 20 years, Flarity embarked on a remarkably productive dual career, rapidly ascending the ranks of the Air Force while earning multiple advanced degrees in nursing and education. This includes a Master’s in Nursing (specializing in emergency and critical care), a Doctorate in Education, and a Doctorate in Nursing Practice.

While achieving once unimaginable academic success, Flarity was also advancing through the military ranks. Shortly after earning her diploma in nursing, she received a commission in the U.S. Army Reserve as a second lieutenant. Three years later, in 1991, she was

promoted to first lieutenant, then deployed to Saudi Arabia in support of operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

She also had accumulated combat service, deploying as the Commander of the 455th Expeditionary Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron in Bagram, Afghanistan, in 2011. There, she directed all air medical evacuation teams at the height of the conflict.

During her military career, Flarity had risen from a basic training squad leader to the Mobilization Assistant to the Air Mobility Command Surgeon, a position with oversight of a budget of \$781 million and assets exceeding \$1.6 billion. She served a total of 15 years in the Army and 26 years in the Air Force, where in 2017, she achieved the rank of Brigadier General.

As in her academic career, Flarity’s rise in the military has much to do with her work ethic.

**“I’M BLESSED THAT I HAVE INTRINSIC MOTIVATION. THOUGH THE ONLY EXPECTATION WAS THAT I WOULD GRADUATE HIGH SCHOOL, MY PARENTS ALWAYS INSTILLED IN ME THE IDEA THAT I CAN DO WHATEVER I SET MY MIND TO,” SHE SAYS.**

“I love learning; I’m a life-long learner. Some of my education was happenstance, like getting a Doctor of Nursing Practice because the Air Force was leaning towards requiring all its nurse practitioners to have their DNP. As a leader, I didn’t think I could ask that of people and not do it myself.”

## **COLORADO AND COMBAT**

In 2008, Flarity was assigned to Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs, serving as the inaugural Commander of the 34th Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron. While stationed there, she also took on a civilian job, working as a nurse scientist for UCHealth Memorial Hospital in Colorado Springs. Her hospital work eventually led her to the University of Colorado’s Anschutz Medical Campus in Aurora, home of the Center for Combat Medicine and Battlefield Research (COMBAT) within the Department of Emergency Medicine.

“Knowing my military history and my research background, Vik Bebarta, who founded COMBAT, came to me, and said, ‘I really need a deputy director,’” Flarity says.

She jumped at the opportunity, and they quickly got to work.

“We’ve only been around three years, but the amount of work that we’ve already done is exceptional,” she says. “One of the things that’s helped us do so well is the speed of trust from being well-known in the research and military communities. People know that if we’re involved, it has integrity.” ■

