



STICKS FOR SOLDIERS
 THANKSGIVING CHARITY
 LACROSSE TOURNAMENT

FAIRFIELD LUDLOWE
 HIGH SCHOOL LACROSSE

STICKSFORSOLDIERS.ORG

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Sticks for Soldiers 2024 Honoree

U.S. Marine CPL Kelsee Lainhart (Ret.)

Thank You for Your Service
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For decades, the phrase “thank you for your service” has been used by Americans to say thanks to Veterans and active-duty service members. The phrase may have begun as a way to recognize Vietnam Veterans, a group that, according to many, did not get the thanks they deserved. But thank you for your service may have become more of a modern-day cliché, something that might make one feel good without *actually* doing anything.

I’m not here to debate the merits of the phrase or how genuine the sentiment might be when offered, or whether it is just a conditioned reflex. But if we are going to offer it up, let’s make sure we understand what we are saying thank you for. SERVICE. Service. What does it mean to be in the military and serve?

By the way, when you meet a Vietnam Veteran, rather than offering a thank you for your service, I’d encourage you to offer “Welcome Home.” It’s a sentiment that has more meaning to Vietnam Veterans.

I’m a story teller, and what I’ve learned about telling stories is this, even the best line of reasoning, even the most persuasive arguments, seldom change

a person’s mind, but a good story, a good story sometimes can. So, I’m not going to attempt to explain what service means, instead I’d like to tell you the story of two young women Marines. I think, when we hear their story, we may better understand what it means to serve.

This story is true. It took place during the last ten days of our withdrawal from Afghanistan. *It’s the story of Kelsee Lainhart and Nicole Gee, two women Marines assigned to Female Engagement Teams or FETS.*



There’s a lot to the story of these two women Marines, more than I’ll tell today, but this part of their story takes place in AFGHANISTAN, mid to late AUGUST, 2021, the final days of our withdrawal. Kelsee and Nicole had arrived around August 12th or 13th.





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Half of Afghanistan, at least it looked that way, had gathered outside Hamid Karzai airport since the Taliban began its takeover of the county, soon after the American withdrawal had begun. As their numbers grew, soared past the tens of thousands into the hundreds of thousands, refugees crowded each other outside the airport. The forced intimacy, no running water, no toilet facilities, no shelter, little food, and most of all – uncertainty – was more than many could endure.

LCPL Kelsee Lainhart and Sergeant Nicole Gee, friends assigned to FET teams, female engagement teams, had the job of searching Afghan Women. They had orders, to remain at Entry Control Points, ECPs set up inside the airport – behind fencing and barriers, away from gates that Afghan refugees were trying to pass through. Days, everyday had, for all the FET teams been a continuous loop, bouncing from one team to another, there were four or five eight women teams. They'd had almost no downtime.

Kelsee was not supposed to be part of any FET, she was a Marine Intel specialist. But days after arriving at the airport, Kelsee's integration into her Intel unit had stalled. A few days of do nothing, keep busy assignments are all she was tasked with. An officer asked her to join a shorthanded FET.

"I don't have the training, Sir," Kelsee replied. "Don't you have to have special training, Sir?"

"There's no time for that, Marine, you'll learn on the fly. You're a Marine, right, so are you in or not?"

"Yes Sir. It'll be of better use of my time."

"Damn right, it will! That's the spirit, Marine."

Kelsee joined the same team that Nicole had become part of, they'd known each other for months, were friends. Thrown into the mix, Kelsee did indeed learn on the fly. She had good instincts. Nicole and the other FET team members, specifically trained in FET tactics, were easy to model. Kelsee's days filled, she searched women, those allowed as far as the ECP. The FET teams, normally limited to the ECP areas, sometimes worked outside the fencing, at the gates. Helping at airport gates that exposed them to risks had been prohibited by general orders. Rules were bent.

At the ECPs, Kelsee, Nicole, other FET team members searched the women and children. The searches, rifling through heavy, long flowing gowns, head scarfs, the worst, a woman wearing a Burka, took time and patience – *and – something more.*

Searching, patting down, running a hand over clothing required an intimacy that brought the women marines face to face with the refugee women. Without privacy, the women simply urinated in their clothing – *worse!* Whatever they wore, Burka, long gowns, all their clothing, stiff with sweat, urine, and feces, smelled worse than anything Kelsee could have imagined. The stench made her gag, filling her mouth with a taste so violently bitter, she fought to keep down what little food she managed to eat.

Afghan women, if they made it through the gates, arrived at the ECPs carrying unconscious children. Many of the women, barely conscious themselves, collapsed when they reached the ECP. They may have gone days without food or water.

Not long after Kelsee joined the FET, during one of her shifts at an ECP, a woman, carrying a young child, a toddler, staggered toward her. The woman's legs buckled, she collapsed into a seated position. The baby still in her arms.

"Oh my God," Kelsee said, turning to the marine closest to her, "I think she's dead."

"Try to revive her!" he shouted.

Kelsee yelled directly into the woman's ear. Nothing. She shook her. Still nothing. She took the child, sat her next to her mother, then performed a sternal rub, a painful stimulus, a last resort technique to revive the woman. The child screamed.

"Corpsman!" Kelsee yelled, hoping a corpsman would respond. He did. He began a more vigorous sternum rub, screamed into the woman's ear, fought to revive her. Kelsee stood aside, holding the child. The corpsman continued massaging and yelling. The child, eyes wide, frightened, inconsolable, reached for her mother. Kelsee tried to calm her.

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Days passed quickly for those trying to escape. With the complete withdrawal nearing, the panicked crowd surged around the airport, threatening to wash over the guarded perimeter. Most of the gates closed. Abby Gate the biggest, remained open, the only real access point. The crowd, men, women, and children resorted to wading through a sewage canal moating the airport. They lowered themselves into the cesspool. Waist deep, they waded through, holding infants above their heads. Older children clung to their mothers' and fathers' backs. For more than ten days the turmoil, a twenty-four-seven continuous loop since the FET teams arrived was like a bad dream.

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Fast Forward: August 26, 2021

The crowd, desperate, knowing that only a few days remained before the Americans would be gone, taking the chance to escape with them, grew increasingly unmanageable. They began to cross the sewage canal in earnest, scrambling up an embankment that led to a three-foot-high retaining wall. Marines on the other side, their backs to the fencing just a few yards behind them, there to prevent a breach, turned people away – physically. The mass gathering, the chaos, *was a suicide bomber's dream come true.*

Early that morning, Kelsee and Nicole, after working non-stop over the past twenty-four hours, slipped off their gear, wolfed down tasteless MREs, then collapsed onto their bunks. They fell asleep immediately. Just a few hours later they geared up, donned full battle gear and reported for duty.

At one of the many ECPs, they relived another FET team. The team leader met them, told the women they'd most likely be asked to head out to Abbey Gate.

"I pretty much expected that," Nicole said.

"**You guys do not go,**" the team leader said, "Understand? If you're asked, say no. Don't go. It's not your job, stay at the ECP, stay behind the fencing and the wall. Your job is to search women and children at ECPs, inside the wire, not to turn women away at the gate. You search the ones that make it this far. I'm telling you, don't go!"

A request came from the gate. "We need a FET team at the gate?" An officer at the ECP looks to see if there is a team available and if they'll go. They don't have to. Nicole, always optimistic, always willing, let the officer know she'd respond.

"With permission, I'll go Sir," she said.

With the officer's blessing, Nicole turned to Kelsee, "I'm going. You want to head out? with me," she asked.

Ignoring her own skepticism, too conditioned by training to refuse, the no in her throat became a yes that escaped her lips. "Sure, I'll go," Kelsee said

The two of them left the ECP and hurried to Abbey Gate. The last open gate. A FET team is usually comprised of at least eight, only Nicole and Kelsee moved out.

They arrived at the gate, stood behind a retaining wall, the fencing behind them. Women splashed through the canal. Fear emboldened them. They climbed out, reaching the wall, too many for the Marines to turn away without force. But American men aren't supposed to touch the Afghan women, *can't have that image splashed across news feeds around the world.*

There's no place for the men or women to go, other than back across the sewage canal. The look of disbelief twists their faces into crying theater masks. Tragedy captures center stage. They'd braved the traverse; certain it was a one-time thing. *How could anyone force them to return through the hell they'd just waded through? Forced away, the escape they'd hoped for disappeared.*

"Sister! Sister!" women shouted at Kelsee and Nicole, their voices, shrill.

"Help me. Help me. I have papers. Take my daughter. Take my son. Please!"

They smiled.

They pleaded.

They shouted.

They tried to force their way past the two women Marines.

Nicole and Kelsee, at the wall, positioned themselves close to one another, hoping to blunt the flow of women with children. Kelsee encountered a woman with two children, boys, one a toddler, the other a



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preschooler. The woman's clothes dripped with sewage. She climbed to the wall, wouldn't listen when Kelsee ordered her back down. She shouted. Her words unintelligible. Kelsee tried again, reasoning with hand gestures, quieting her own voice. The woman is immovable. The preschooler climbed onto the wall.

"Get her and those kids back down!" shouted a Marine, losing his temper, waving his rifle. "I don't give a damn if she's a woman. You make her go back down or I'll throw her into that cesspool myself!"

"No, you won't. You're not throwing anyone back down that embankment," Nicole and Kelsee shouted back.

They argue with their male counterpart. "I've got it," Kelsee shouts back at him. Nicole nods in support. The marine backs off. Kelsee does indeed have it. She manages to move the woman back down to the edge of the canal. The woman starts across, turns, standing in the human waste. She has the toddler with her. She points to the wall. The older boy squatting on top of the wall, fingers digging into the cement, clinging, clawing, fought Kelsee as she reached him and tried to free him, get him back with his mother.

Kelsee stretched out on top of the wall, prone, her rifle slung over her back, one leg stretching to touch the ground on the safe side of the wall, the other bent knee against the concrete. She reached for the boy. *A balancing act.* He fought her, doing everything to keep himself leeches to the wall. Kelsee repositioned herself, tried to get better leverage, got her hands on the boy. Nicole, just a few feet away, was preoccupied with another woman.

In the sea of people, thick, loud, teeming, one man's hatred rippled through crowd, he's intent on killing.

There was no moment when understanding turned to fear. The blast was too quick. There was no time to break loose and save herself; Kelsee wouldn't have even if she could have. There was the boy. The illusion of safety, the wall that she should have been behind – how would she get the child – her Kevlar, body armor, it was all just that, an illusion. Nothing protects a human standing in the way of a supersonic blast driving thousands of steel ball bearings toward anything in its path.

The world turned upside down in a milli-second. Smoke, dust, falling chunks of earth and concrete are everywhere. Kelsee, deafened by the blast, could see her hands, hands that a second earlier held onto a little boy, hands that are bloody, littered with torn chunks of flesh – hers, or the boy's? She doesn't know.

She's a rag doll littering the wall. Tattered and torn. Shrapnel has blown a hole in her arm. The blast that smashed into her lungs, forced a grunt through her blistered lips, a sound she knew came from her, but so foreign, she does not recognize her own groan of pain. Ball bearings riddle her body. One darts through her flesh, finds a path, to her spine. One more lodged in her skull, taking up permanent residence. Blast force stuns her entire body, bludgeoning her spine. She's suddenly paralyzed.

She can see Nicole. She lies just a few feet away. On her back. There's a thin line across Nicole's forehead, a split in her flesh, the wet of blood rising before the true wound would reveal itself. "Oh, that doesn't look too bad, Kelsee thinks. She's probably knocked out – yeah, she just looks unconscious."

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Bodies are piled up everywhere.

Kelsee made eye contact with another marine. "Help me!" she shouted, waiting, hoping. The marine heard her. He rushed to her, pulled her off the wall. Paralyzed, unable to grab hold of him, she tumbled off the wall. She couldn't feel where her body began – ended. Unable to lift her head, and look for herself, she yelled at the marine.

"Are my legs there?"

"Yes!"

"Don't lie to me. I can't feel my legs. Don't lie to me. Don't you dare!"

"Your legs are there. I'm telling you the truth. Your legs are there."

"Okay," Kelsee said, relieved, believing.

She's brought into a medical tent.

"Did Nicole make it?" Kelsee asked. *She must be here somewhere too, getting looked at. The cut on her forehead didn't look bad, she's got to be here.*



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Shock began to retreat; pain took hold of Kelsee. The tourniquet, its tight clamp closing off blood flow, sent numbing pain through her arm, a pins and needles fire racing down to her fingertips that felt as if it was devouring her.

“Get it off!” Kelsee shouted. “Take it off. *Please!*”

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Days after the attack, in the ICU at Walter Reed, Bethesda, Kelsee woke from a medically induced coma. Surgery on her arm, while she’d been asleep, had gone well. Shrapnel, as much as could be, was removed. Conscious now, the stamina of youth on her side, she’s alert, questioning everyone about her own injuries and still wondering about Nicole. Whenever she asks, the answer is the same – I don’t know.

Checking Instagram on a gifted I-pad, angry at the world, *no one will tell me anything, what’s the big secret – somebody tell me what happened to Nicole! I saw her. She looked okay. It’s just like her to be fine and I’m the one in a hospital bed – anyone is going to step in it – get away clean, it’s gotta be Nicole. How can she be fine and I’m the one so messed up? I didn’t even want to go. She talked me into going.*

What are all these messages? What’s going on!

Kelsee taps and scrolls, reads dozens of messages. Messages that say I’m sorry, leave her wondering. Is Nicole here at Walter Reed? Wounded? Or is she dead? *What is everyone sorry about? What? What’s happened to Nicole? What? What! Somebody – tell me!!!!!!*

Suddenly, images of Nicole fill the screen of the I-Pad. Pictures of Nicole holding an Afghan baby. Headlines, Among the Thirteen American Military Personnel Killed, Sergeant Nicole Gee. And just like that, Kelsee learned on social media, what no one would tell her.

Nicole is dead. A single ball bearing burst through her forehead, piercing her brain.

Tears flow. But I thought you were okay, Nicole. I’m sorry I’m sorry that I’m alive and you’re dead, I’m sorry.

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Kelsee has outlived a friend, a sister in arms. What is survival supposed to feel like? Relief? Shame? Regret? Mercy? Is a soldier supposed to feel shame because she outlived another’s sacrifice? The answer – almost certainly not. But living is a selfish instinct. Death doesn’t select, pick or choose. On the battlefield, death is random, indiscriminate. There’s no, you’re next in queue, no reason why some live when others die. What’s left for the millions of battlefield survivors, Kelsee too, is the complex tangle of survivor’s guilt.

In the days that followed, Kelsee, still at Walter Reed, Bethesda, began to recover. Youth and physical conditioning are on her side, her strength and vigor quickly return. Some of the steel ball bearings remain forever lodged in her body. She remains paralyzed from the waist down.

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Nicole’s battle ended at Abbey Gate. Kelsee’s had just begun. Most of the ball bearings that riddled her body and nicked her spine, have been removed. Some remain. One is lodged in her skull. Pummeled by a supersonic blast, a force that should have crushed her lungs, *it didn’t*, bludgeoned her body so savagely that nerves and tissue along her spine are beyond repair. She cannot use her legs. Rehab and physical therapy five days a week at the Shirley Ryan Ability Lab, the best in the world, doesn’t promise that Kelsee will walk again, but it’s the best hope, that if there is a chance, they’ll make it happen.

In between the physical therapy workouts, there’s a first semester of college wrapping up. Kelsee and Oli, her service dog, travel home to Indiana on weekends, the trip, five hours one way with a pit stop. By Sunday night they’re back at Ryan. Monday mornings, when her eyes flutter open, there’s a hope filled wish for just one more miracle.

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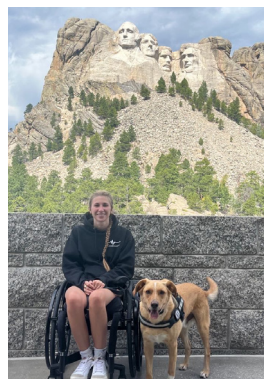
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America lost thirteen men and women that day. Many more like Kelsee were wounded. They are not necessarily the men and women you'd expect to find on the front lines, they mostly never are. But they go. Some like Kelsee are just a year older than some of you sitting here. They enter the fray, believing they can do good somewhere in the world, and because we ask them to go.

Nicole gave her life, Kelsee, beyond a miracle, will never walk again. Nicole was just on the other side of 22. Kelsee was 19 years old. So, let's ask ourselves one question, "Is the simple phrase, thank you for your service, enough of a thank you? Is that the real thank you?"

I'm fairly certain of your answer. You know that words are not enough. For 16 years Sticks for Soldiers has put meaning into the phrase, thank you for your service. It's not a cliché to you. You understand that well done, WELL DONE, DOING SOMETHING, is always better than well said. You've gone beyond words. You offer a real thank you by giving your time, money, effort to help change lives for men like Reda Said, this year's honoree.

And – So to you, Sticks for Soldiers, I say, from deep within my heart – THANK YOU, THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE! OR MORE APPROPRIATELY – THANK YOU FOR ALL THAT YOU ARE DOING FOR OUR VETERANS.



About Sticks for Soldiers – Sticks for Soldiers is a non-profit high school charity lacrosse event held in Fairfield, Connecticut to raise money for wounded troops. Held on Thanksgiving Saturday, it is sponsored by the Fairfield Ludlowe High School lacrosse team. The primary mission of the tournament is to provide support and give thanks to the service men and women who put their lives on the line and sacrifice for our country. A secondary objective is to create awareness among high school athletes to the sacrifices being made by people just a few years older than themselves. Through their play and fundraising participation, the athletes demonstrate their tangible thanks and support. Started in 2006, the idea came from long-time lacrosse advocate Mike Voucas with support by then Fairfield Ludlowe Head Coach Chris Parisi and a number of dedicated volunteers. The tournament and related fund-raising efforts has now raised over \$1,200,000 in 17 years. Sticks for Soldiers, Inc. is established under the IRS code for a 501(c)(3) non-profit charity. FEIN 46-0962202. www.sticksforsoldiers.org