



Nicole Powell-Dunford, B.A.'97: Helping to Rebuild Afghanistan

# From Albany to Afghanistan

By Christine Hanson McKnight

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— Army Capt. Nicole Powell-Dunford

Photos courtesy of Nicole Powell-Dunford

Capt. Nicole Powell-Dunford, B.A.'97, was completing a residency in family practice medicine at the Army's Tripler Medical Center in Honolulu, Hawaii, Sept. 11, 2001 when she heard about the World Trade Center disaster on the other side of the globe.

She reported for work as usual, but spent every spare second of that terrible day trying to find out if her family members in the Bronx and in Albany were safe. (They were.) She also wasted no time volunteering for the first possible assignment overseas.

“I kind of put up my hand in the air (for this kind of work) after 9/11. I knew I wanted to do it,” recalled Powell-Dunford, who joined the 225th Aviation Wing in Kandahar, Afghanistan, last July as a flight surgeon. Her main job is to keep the aviation unit's pilots healthy. But she also finds time to provide medical care to families in the surrounding villages of southern Afghanistan, where the old ways and traditions, including strict segregation of the sexes, endure. As a woman, she is sometimes the only doctor many Afghan women have ever seen.

“A lot of the illnesses I treat are the same kinds of problems you would see in the States — arthritis, upset stomachs — that kind of thing. But the people I see are a bit undernourished, and we often diagnose parasite problems in the children,” she said. The UAlbany alumna dispenses medicines and vitamins.

At UAlbany, Powell-Dunford was a member of the coed service fraternity Alpha Phi Omega, founded by Shawn Bowman, B.S.'97. One of the group's charter members was Mike Dunford, another student who later became her husband. The group did service projects in inner-city Albany and on campus.



From far left: Nicole Powell-Dunford attending to an Afghan woman, Afghan women and girls, Powell-Dunford talking to an Afghan woman, and Powell-Dunford talking with Afghan boys.

## Remembering George A. Wood, M.A.'04

As an ROTC cadet, Nicole Powell-Dunford served under George A. Wood, a UAlbany graduate student who commanded the battalion of 140 ROTC students from UAlbany, Siena and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

The 33-year-old Wood, a captain assigned to the 4th Infantry Division at Fort Hood, Texas, was killed in November of 2003 when his tank rolled over an explosive device in Iraq. The University awarded him his master of arts degree in classical archaeology posthumously at its graduate commencement ceremony May 15, 2004. Wood's name was the first of the master's graduates to be called, followed by a moment of silence.

“The University at Albany is indeed honored to include Capt. George Wood in its roster of distinguished graduates,” Interim President John Ryan said in a personal letter to Wood's widow, Lisa, shortly after the ceremony.

Wood had earlier earned a bachelor's degree from Cornell University and a master's degree from SUNY-Cortland. “George was the most outstanding cadet in our program,” Powell-Dunford recalled with admiration.

Mark Harrell, who recruited Wood for the Mohawk Battalion, said he was gifted both intellectually and athletically. “He was authentic, humble, and mature beyond his years, but most of all, he was a natural leader,” said Harrell.

Wood, the first UAlbany alumnus to die in the nation's war with Iraq, was a native of Marcy in central New York. Besides his widow, Lisa, he is survived by their daughter, Maria.



Capt. George A. Wood

Bowman, who went on to work for Cantor Fitzgerald, perished in the World Trade Center disaster.

“My experience at the University at Albany was a huge part of shaping me,” said Powell-Dunford, who enrolled in the Reserve Officer Training Corps at UAlbany and was a member of the ROTC's Mohawk Battalion. Headquartered at Siena College in the Albany suburb of Loudonville, N.Y., the unit enrolls about 140 students from UAlbany, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and Siena.

A double-major in English and biology, Powell-Dunford was commissioned a 2nd lieutenant when she graduated, then went to medical school at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, Md. She completed her residency in Honolulu and joined the 225th Aviation unit, part of the 25th Infantry Division's Task Force Diamondhead.

“I've been waiting for this opportunity since 9/11. It means so much for me as a New Yorker to be here. We lost so many good New Yorkers that day. I feel proud to be a small part of our effort to rebuild Afghanistan,” she said.

The 30-year-old Powell-Dunford, who plans to make the military her career, says the hardest part of her assignment is being separated from her husband, Mike, a lab technician at the University of Hawaii, and their two children, Julia, 7, and Joshua, 5. “I miss them so much,” she said.

The evidence that she's making a difference? When Afghani children spot the “Tropic Lightning” patch emblazoned on her uniform sleeve, identifying Powell-Dunford as a member of the famed 25th Infantry Division based in Hawaii, they flash her a smile and give her a surfer's “Hang Ten” sign. ■