



The Invisible Front: Love and Loss in an Era of Endless War

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An involving, ultimately inspiring story of a military family that lost two sons—one to suicide and one in combat—and devoted their lives to fighting the military's suicide epidemic.

Major General Mark Graham is a decorated two-star officer whose integrity and patriotism inspired his sons, Jeff and Kevin, to pursue military careers of their own. When Kevin and Jeff die within nine months of one another—Kevin, a student enrolled in the University of Kentucky's Reserve Officers' Training Corps program, commits suicide and Jeff, who served in the Army as a second lieutenant, dies as a result of an IED attack in Iraq—Mark and his wife Carol find themselves reeling after the loss of two of their three children. As they begin to gather their bearings and contemplate a life without their sons, they must also come to terms with the terrible stigma that surrounds suicide in the military. This stigma is brought into high relief through the Grahams' own experience of how their tight-knit military community marked their sons' very different deaths.

The Grahams commit themselves to fighting the military's suicide epidemic and making sure that the families of troops who take their own lives receive the dignity and compassion that were the hallmarks of both of their sons' lives. *The Invisible Front* is the story of their quest to do so. As Mark ascends the military hierarchy and eventually takes command of Fort Carson, Colorado—a sprawling base with one of the highest suicide rates in the armed forces—the Grahams assume a larger platform from which to work to reduce the stigma that surrounds mental health in the military and to develop new ways of keeping troubled troops from killing themselves. Their efforts put them in direct conflict with an entrenched military bureaucracy that considered mental health problems to be a display of weakness and that refused to acknowledge, until far too late, the severity of its suicide problem. The Grahams refuse to back down, using the pain and grief that their sons' deaths inspired to fight to change the institution that is the cornerstone of their lives.

Yochi Dreazen, an award-winning journalist who has covered the military since 1999, has been granted remarkable access to the Graham family and, as a result, is able to tell the story of Kevin and Jeff's legacy in the full context of America's two long wars. *The Invisible Front* places the Graham family's story against the backdrop of the military's suicide spike, caused in part by the military's own institutional shortcomings and its resistance to change. With great sympathy and deep understanding, *The Invisible Front* examines America's problematic treatment of its soldiers and offers the Graham family's work as a new way of understanding how to minimize the risk of suicide, substance abuse and PTSD in the military.

The Invisible Front: Love and Loss in an Era of Endless War Details

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Hilary says

Copy received through Goodreads' First Reads program.

This is an incredibly powerful and visceral look at one military family (the Grahams) and the treatment of mental health issues in the military generally. The Grahams were military lifers: the father, Mark, rose to the rank of Major General and took a seemingly endless series of positions all over the world, and his two sons, Jeff and Kevin, both sought to follow in his footsteps. In a heartbreaking turn of events, the Grahams lost both of their sons in the course of nine months: Kevin hung himself, and Jeff was killed in combat in Iraq, seconds after warning his fellow soldiers about the IED that took his life. The military, friends, and relatives all treated the deaths so differently - Jeff was often lauded as a hero, his death made front page news and his funeral was full of teary, respectful attendees, while even their own relatives condemned Kevin (who was a star ROTC cadet) as a sinner or a weakling.

Eventually, Mark and his wife, Carol, began addressing this double standard, and worked to make mental health treatment more available to the increasing number of soldiers who developed PTSD or suicidal ideations, and to remove the stigma such treatment has in a military setting. It's a bleak picture: mental health treatment can effectively end a soldier's career, can cause other soldiers and superiors to isolate an individual for being weak or feigning injury, and can lead to a dishonorable discharge where the army refuses to cover any future medical care. Even if one could come over all those stigmas and threats, there are often so few psychologists on staff that it could take months just for an initial appointment. Suicide rates in the military have skyrocketed over the past several years, and Yochi Dreazen, an experienced military reporter, uses the story of the Graham family to look deeper into the reasons for this, and the treatment of mental health issues in the military.

Dreazen is a talented writer who captures the Graham family in a series of vignettes, small moments dating all the way back to Mark and Carol meeting in college and raising their three children (they also have a daughter, Melanie) through a series of difficult relocations. The Grahams were very open and honest with Dreazen about everything, including the pain, shame, and self-recrimination they all felt after Kevin's suicide (for example, Melanie admits that she sometimes tells people she just had one brother, because she doesn't know how to talk about Kevin, or how others will react). Even though you know from the outset what's going to happen to Jeff and Kevin, Dreazen makes them so alive and full of promise that you can't help but hope for some other outcome. A remarkably well-written and often heartbreaking book.

Julie Ekkers says

The Invisible Front is a book to make time for. It concerns a still unfolding and devastating chapter in the history of our country's armed forces. The author has written a consciousness-raising chronicle of the experience of one military family, a family that continues to serve this country in sharing their painful story and working to create change in how the military treats soldiers with mental illness and who commit suicide.

Retired major general Mark Graham and his wife Carol are parents to three children--two boys, Kevin and

Jeff, and a daughter, Melanie. Although there are many affecting stories thought this book, the Graham's is its heart. Kevin committed suicide shortly after graduating from an ROTC program. Less than nine months later, Jeff was killed by an IED while on a tour in Iraq. The military's treatment of their sons' deaths in their wake made the Grahams sensitive to the ways in which it is especially difficult for men and women in uniform with mental health wounds to seek and receive treatment and the losses that result from this difficulty. They have worked ever since to make a difference in the lives of soldiers suffering from mental health illnesses, particularly PTSD, and to prevent suicide in the military, and mitigate the stigma surrounding both.

The author is their equal in bringing their story to a wider audience. He has written a strong narrative well-anchored in multiple stories that demonstrate the scope of the issue and its many facets. The hierarchical world of the military is foreign to many, to say nothing of the often hidden world of mental illness. He has made them both accessible to the civilian and lay person. The sensitivity and care of his reporting is evident throughout. (Both qualities are also evident, incidentally, in his beautifully written acknowledgements.)

One of the epigraphs of this important book comes from Archibald MacLeish's "The Young Dead Soldiers" and reads,

"They say, Our deaths are not ours; they are yours;
they will mean what you make them."

The Grahams have imbued their twin losses with tremendous meaning. Their work is a loving testament to their love for their sons and the commitment they share with Kevin and Jeff to serving their country.

Rose says

You wonder just how much pain one family can endure.

Hope Ortego says

Such a moving book with a wonderfully gripping story.

Joanne Kelly says

This book would have been much more powerful if it were actually penned by Mark or Carol Graham or their daughter. While Dreazen does a great job of telling the tale of the Grahams' lives and their struggles to change the military culture with respect to PTSD and suicide, the reportorial style he uses feels somewhat distant or disengaged. That said, I am glad he wrote the book to bring the military's issues out into the open. And I am grateful to the Grahams for the work they are doing.

Kathy says

This is a powerful, enlightening book that should be read by every American. It helped me further understand the mindset and culture of the military life. The story of the Mark Graham family is beautifully

told (two sons in the military, one lost to suicide, one in combat), and their resultant determination to ensure that all soldiers are treated with respect, dignity, and get the help they need regardless of whether their disability/injury is mental or physical is inspiring. Their ability to use their personal pain as a springboard to help others shows such strength of character, it is humbling.

The book was disturbing to me in that I did not know the extent of the stigma (and repercussions) that soldiers with depression, PTSD or other mental issues endure from their leaders and comrades in arms. It particularly pained me to read how hard it is for troubled soldiers to seek help, the severe lack of resources available to them and that the military tries to discharge them so that the military doesn't have to pay them their pension and medical benefits. I was outraged at that!

I can only hope that the efforts of Mark & Carol Graham to increase awareness of the need to change the military reaction/response to soldiers suffering from PTSD continues to bring about changes. Not only in the accessibility of needed services, but in removing the stigma for seeking help when needed. Those who serve us, deserve better.

This book is not a "fun" read, but it is an important one.

I received an advance copy of this book through Goodreads First-Reads program in exchange for an honest review.

Jessica Leight says

This was an engaging close-up chronicle of one military family's struggle with tragedy and particularly suicide, but it reads more like an adulatory speech than a true piece of journalism. I thought the author was oddly uncritical of the Grahams, and paints them unabashedly as heroes. While I was moved by what they went through, and did agree with most of their actions, it was hard to trust that I had the full story given that the author was so committed to praising them. I also felt that relatively little information was provided that would enable us to step back and see the question of military suicide in a broader framework.

Betty says

This is a very moving account of the personal costs of war to Major General Mark Graham and his family. The General and his wife raised two sons. Their oldest son, Jeff was killed by an IED in Iraq and their younger son, Kevin committed suicide nine months later while pursuing a military career. Mark and his wife Carol are astonished at how differently their son's deaths were handled by the military. Jeff's death was handled as that of a hero while Kevin's death was all but ignored.

PTSD and mental illness in the military became Mark and Carol's quest. The number of suicides in the military was spiking and seemed to be getting higher all the time. They made it their goal to try to get this the attention and help that it needs.

This is a moving, well written story of one family's quest to solve one of today's most baffling issues.

*Good Reads Win

Olivia says

This book is an essential read about mental health even if you don't have a connection to the US Military. It delves into how mental health has been largely ignored in general but especially in a hyper-toxic masculine environment which makes our predominantly male military a reaping ground for suicide and mental illness. Yochi focuses the first half of the novel on one family who lost two sons in the military--one in the middle east and one in the murky waters of his own mind. The stigma against mental illness in the military is intensified versus how it is for civilians due to the ingrained toxic masculinity that has been the benchmark of how to make a "military man" over centuries. The losses of the Graham family however propelled them to do the impossible and I was crying non-stop reading how Mark Graham, a two star general, used his visibility and personal tragedy to begin the seemingly impossible task of fighting for mental illness awareness in universities and in the military. I do wish there had been a little more focus on female military officers which felt tacked on as an after thought. Especially with respect to the high rate of sexual violence women in the military face (as well as men who are doubly afraid not only to be mentally ill but admitting to being victims of sexual violence) and how that also plays into the suicide rates but I realize that was not the focus of this specific story.

I wish we were spending half as much on our military budget, not sending our soldiers to die on battlefronts that do not protect our interests, and were spending more of that money both taking care of the veterans we have and mental health for the nation as a whole. Sadly it doesn't seem to be that this will be the focus in the coming years.

Jaina Rose says

This review is also available on my blog, [Read Till Dawn](#).

This is going to be a very tricky book to review, because I honestly don't know how to approach the material. This is probably the saddest nonfictional book I've reviewed yet, including *The Family Romanov*, which is literally subtitled "Murder, Rebellion, and the Fall of Imperial Russia."

The first half of *The Invisible Front* traces the Graham family all the way from Mark and Carol's early years of courtship and marriage through the death of both of their sons. The narration goes mainly in order, but skips around rather confusingly every once in a while. I would say that some of the level of detail is a bit excessive (meaning not all of it is strictly relevant to the topic of depression/suicide), but on the other hand it's a book about the Grahams as well as about depression and suicide in the army, so it's perfectly natural for the first half of the book to focus almost entirely on them.

Okay, about Jeff and Kevin Graham. I have to say that after reading about their personal lives, these are not the sort of people I would have been friends with if I met them in college. I don't drink, I don't party, and I don't sleep with people - all things that one, the other, or both Graham boys did with gusto. However, both of their deaths still hit me very hard, and I had tears in my eyes when their deaths were described (in detail - this book is not for the faint of heart). Lifestyle choices aside, they both sound like genuinely nice people who could have made the world a better place for a very long time if they hadn't died at such tragically young ages.

The second half of the book discusses depression and suicide in the army, citing anecdote after anecdote

about real soldier who really attempted suicide - many of them succeeding. It also follows Mark's time working as general at a fort where he worked to implement techniques to decrease PTSD-related depression and suicide. I frankly would have preferred to read more about what Mark did than about all these random deaths and almost-deaths. It is definitely talked about, but Dreazen could have gone a lot deeper into talking about what worked, what didn't work, etc. I came away with a feeling of helplessness more than anything else; it didn't really feel like Mark did any good. Of course, standing back a step I see clearly that he saved many lives (likely more than he could have by going overseas), and I register the fact that his techniques have been implemented across the country. But while actually read the narrative, it felt a bit disjointed. I would have preferred to have the pieces placed together neatly in front of me, instead of scattered around for me to pick through and piece together.

Basically, that's the only flaw I can come up with: it's a bit disjointed. Besides that, there is really nothing I can possibly criticize. It's a book about suicide in the military, what is there to say? The only thing I can say is that it is incredibly tragic that the best and bravest of our nation are not given the proper mental care they need. They do and see unspeakable things in order to keep us, the citizens of America, safe. We need to ensure that when they come home, they will be greeted with proper medical care not just for their physical wounds, but their mental wounds as well.

Disclaimer: I received a complementary copy of this book through the Blogging for Books program in exchange for an honest review.

Amy says

Very powerful. Very heartbreaking. Brought me to tears on more than one occasion. That we, as a nation, have failed our soldiers so badly, for so very long, should be our greatest shame. More people should read this book (or listen to the NPR interview <https://onpoint.wbur.org/2014/11/11/t...>)

We all should be aware of this, and we all should be working to de-stigmatize PTSD/depression/TBI in our military.

Liralen says

Several things at play here:

1) Kevin's death. Kevin Graham died of suicide following ill-managed depression -- depression that was poorly managed in large part because he didn't have the resources he needed or the assurance that he would be able to follow through on his military goals if he *could* access those resources. His loss was absolutely colossal to the family, of course, but some of the reactions they got -- implications that they should be ashamed, for example -- are far harder to understand than grief.

2) Jeff's death. Jeff Graham died on patrol in Iraq, another impossibly large tragedy for his family. Because he died at war, though, his death was treated as, for lack of a better word, 'legitimate'. The support the Grahams got this time was unreserved, and made the (sometimes) hesitant support after Kevin's death stand out in even starker relief.

3) That either of them were doing what they were: Kevin was in the ROTC, and at university in Kentucky, because he thought he should be, because the military was viewed in his family as such an honourable thing to go into and because being in the ROTC made paying for university easier. Being in the ROTC also meant repercussions if it came out that he was on Prozac or struggled with depression. Jeff was in a particularly dangerous area in Iraq, performing a role that, really, he wasn't meant to do. Two very flawed situations.

4) There are many, many other anecdotal stories in the book, of soldiers who faced PTSD or depression, who killed or tried to kill themselves, who killed or tried to kill others, who were injured at war or at home. Many stories of trauma being (at best) ignored and (at worst) exploited and used as a reason for abuse. This is not the first I've heard of the often skeptical approach the military takes to PTSD and mental illness, but it's heartbreaking to hear about. So many people putting their lives on the line and ending up in terrible situations with no support.

On that note, it's wonderfully researched (although my copy is an ARC and doesn't have a bibliography at the end -- woe!); it strikes me as tremendously good for the book that the author is a journalist rather than, say, a family member. He's compassionate in his writing but able to work with the broader picture. It's a really hard read in places (impossible not to feel for the Graham family; flabbergasting situations and reactions and policies in places), but also a very *good* one.

I received a free copy of this book via a Goodreads giveaway.

Shawna Fox says

The story of the Graham family is heartbreaking. This book is a must read and one I didn't want to put down. While I was aware of the mental health epidemic that is sweeping the nation I was not aware that it was so prevalent in the military. PTSD is a huge issue that needs to be addressed by not only our government but the military. It was heartbreaking to read the shame that people feel for wanting to seek help and not getting it because of the embarrassment they may face. I encourage everyone to read this book.

Mandy says

This deeply moving book is an examination of the mental health crisis facing the American military, and the stigma attached to any sort of mental health problem, through the experience of one family who suffer the unimaginable loss of both their sons. General Mark Graham's career success inspired his boys to join the military themselves. Kevin commits suicide and Jeff is killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq. Mark and his wife Carol were shocked at the Army's difference in attitude to each death, with Kevin's being considered shameful whilst Jeff was hailed a hero. Somehow they managed to transform their grief at their family tragedy into a campaign for greater understanding and a more proactive approach to helping those suffering from PTSD and suicidal feelings. The book is a damning picture of what the situation has been up to now, with any mental health problems being considered a sign of weakness. Mark Graham's efforts have already had some results but more need to be done to combat the quite horrifying statistics, particularly of suicide rates.

The author has meticulously and painstakingly researched the subject, and based his book on hundreds of hours of interviews with the family and military personnel, family journals and correspondence and his own personal experience when embedded with army units in Iraq. Sometimes I found there was just too much

detail, especially in the early pages, when setting the scene and introducing the reader to the family, and I am always somewhat irritated by re-created conversations, however closely based on related fact, but nevertheless this is an important and eye-opening account of a little known subject. It is both clearly and succinctly written, if on occasion not as tightly constructed as it could have been. The author is to be congratulated on bringing these issues to a wider audience, and opening up a debate on mental health and the military.

Rachel C. says

"By 2012, more soldiers were dying by their own hand than in combat. Suicide effectively became the army's third war, and it was a conflict the military was singularly ill prepared to fight. Decades of chronic underfunding meant that the Pentagon had thousands of unfilled slots for psychologists and psychiatrists when the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan began.

...

The soldiers who even bothered to reach out for help were very much the exception. Many troubled troops, no matter how severe their PTSD, tried to hide the symptoms from their fellow soldiers. The primary message they absorbed in basic training, ROTC, and military academies such as West Point was that mental illness was a sign of weakness, and that weak soldiers had no place in the army."

While tackling a serious and terrible issue - untreated PTSD and suicides in the military - I ultimately found this book unfocused and poorly structured.

A good three-quarters of the book is a portrait of the Graham family. General Mark Graham, who became an advocate on mental health issues within the military, had two sons: Kevin, who suffered from depression and killed himself during college, and Jeff, who was killed in an IED explosion while serving in Iraq. My heart goes out to the family, but note that neither Jeff's nor Kevin's stories are directly on point to the author's subject.

This was frustrating because there were so many stories mentioned in the book that *were* on point, but were underdeveloped. General David Blackledge, for example, who went public with his own story of PTSD and its aftereffects. I would also have liked to see more from the perspective of the medical personnel treating these soldiers.

Sexual assault in the military, a widespread problem and a cause of both PTSD and suicide, rated only a few rushed pages of coverage near the end. In fact, the author spent more time describing Mark Graham's daughter's wedding.

In the end, I got about a long article's worth of content on the subject I came to this book to learn about. I expected more.

(Note: My review relates purely to the book, and is not meant to be a comment on the issues or the Graham family.)

