HEALING INVISIBLE WOUNDS

Yochi Dreazen had seen his share of death and combat trauma as a military journalist in Iraq and Afghanistan. But it wasn't until he met an American general and his family that he learned how deep that trauma can go, and what needs to be done to heal it.

BY SAMUEL HUGHES

BY the time he met General Mark Graham early in 2009, Yochi Dreazen C'99 had witnessed enough of war's carnage and psychic wounds to last him several lifetimes. He had spent much of the previous six years reporting from the grimmest parts of Iraq and Afghanistan, and though he had managed to stay alive—no small accomplishment—he was starting to have symptoms very much like those of the combat-traumatized soldiers he was writing about. But the conversations with Mark and Carol Graham that led to *The Invisible Front: Love and Loss in an Era of Endless War* (Crown, 2014; paperback, October 2015) would prove to be more wrenching than anything he had experienced.

"It was the hardest set of interviews I've ever done, before or since," says Dreazen from his office in Washington, where he is managing editor for news at *Foreign Policy*. "Every 20 minutes or half hour, I had to excuse myself to go use the bathroom and splash cold water on my face. A couple of times I was crying. I'm pretty sure they were wondering what the hell is with this needing-to-pee-constantly reporter. But it was shattering to hear. I was also just completely blown away by these amazing people."

Mark was a two-star general and the commanding officer of Fort Carson, Colorado, when they first met. Dreazen had been hearing about his trailblazing approach to handling soldiers with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and related issues. Though the problem is as old as war itself, to get a quick, grim sense of how deeply combat has affected the current generation of soldiers, all you had to do was look at the suicide rate, which by early 2009 had climbed to epidemic pro-

 PHOTO BY DUSTIN FENSTERMACHER

portions. That was when Dreazen—who suspected that Graham might be not just an important source but an emblematic character who could bring the issue to life—reached out and called the general.

Graham, now senior director of the National Call Center at Rutgers University Behavioral Health Care and director of the Vets4Warriors Peer Support Line, remembers the call.

"The interview seemed to be going OK," he says in a comfortable Missouri-by-way-of-Kentucky voice that can rev up fast when circumstances call for it. "Then it kind of ended abruptly. So when I got home and Carol asked me how it went, I told her I wasn't sure."

A few days later Dreazen called again. This time he wanted to come out to Fort Carson and talk with both Grahams in person. When he arrived at the base and met with the general, he realized he had a compelling character to work with.

"My first impression was, *This guy's out of Central Casting*," Dreazen says about their initial meeting. "Tall guy, perfect posture, speaks with empathy and authority, doesn't stutter over his words. I mean, if you're trying to think of what a general should look like, it's this guy."

The general was equally impressed with the young reporter.

"You could tell he was very much a professional," he says. "A gentleman, soft-spoken but very detailed—had all the qualities you'd expect of a professional journalist—and a really personable, nice guy."

Dreazen's second thought, following hard upon the first, was: "It's unfathomable to me that a man who is this articulate, this calm, this empathetic, this willing to talk, had lost two sons. I just could not process the one, and then the other."

THE INVISIBLE FRONT begins with a terrible phone call.

It was June 2003, a few months into the US-led invasion of Iraq. Then-Colonel Mark Graham was stationed in South Korea, and shortly after midnight he and Carol were awakened by the ringing phone. On the other end of the line was their older son, Jeff, an army lieutenant stationed in Kentucky who was preparing to deploy to Iraq. He was beside himself: Kevin, his younger brother, a smart, sensitive student and top cadet in the University of Kentucky's ROTC program, had just committed suicide. Their sister Melanie had found him hanging from a ceiling fan in the apartment they shared.

The Grahams had known that Kevin was struggling, but they had no idea just how serious his depression was. They learned, among other things, that he had recently stopped taking Prozac because he knew that if his ROTC instructors found out, he'd be kicked out of the program. His funeral was held in a Frankfort, Kentucky, funeral home, not a church, since some members of Carol's family believed that by killing himself he had violated a central tenet of their faith, and didn't deserve the honor of a formal church service. Most of Kevin's fellow ROTC cadets and the head of the program came for the service, but a major who had been one of his and Jeff's primary instructors stayed away, viewing the suicide as an act of weakness.

The Grahams had entered one of life's darkest circles of hell, which Dreazen captures in simple, sometimes heartbreaking prose: "Jeff stood next to his brother's casket, reaching down every few minutes to brush lint off Kevin's lapels or straighten his tie. He didn't leave Kevin's side until the casket was closed and placed into the hearse for the short drive to Frankfort's main cemetery."

It would soon get even worse. Eight months later, Jeff was leading a route-clearing mission near the Iraqi city of Khaldiyah when his driver noticed something suspicious buried in the road leading to an overpass. Jeff went to investigate and ordered his patrol to fall back. It was too late: the huge, fiery blast from the IED blew him and another soldier apart. His last gasping words, according to the sergeant who reached him first, were: "Tell my entire family I love them."

It was every parent's worst nightmare, made even more painful by well-meaning expressions of sympathy. While the Grahams were grateful for the tributes to Jeff's courage, the contrast between the response to his death and Kevin's left a bitter taste.

"Mark's colleagues regularly told him that Jeff died a hero, and that he and Carol should be proud of their son's bravery and sacrifice," writes Dreazen. "They didn't say much of anything about Kevin, and acted as if his suicide was a tragedy better ignored than discussed."

BY now it is not exactly news that the US military has had a problem with suicide, depression, and other manifestations of PTSD (whose clinical-sounding name does no justice to the severity of the affliction). Suicides spiked sharply during the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, and most soldiers diagnosed with the disorder—more than 150,000 of them, according to one study— refused to seek counseling. They viewed it, in Dreazen's words, as "simply too dangerous for them to admit they had a problem."

But the problem represented the psychological equivalent of an IED, and the silent explosions were increasingly hard to ignore. In 2004, 67 US soldiers killed themselves, usually with guns. A year later, the number rose to 102. In 2008 there were 143 military suicides. In 2009, the year Dreazen met the Grahams, there were 162. Three years later, 349 American soldiers died by their own hand—more than were killed by the Taliban and other enemies combined. Murders and assaults also rose at a corresponding rate.

When Graham became the commanding officer of Fort Carson in 2007, he found it a cauldron of emotionally damaged soldiers and mostly unsympathetic officers. The colonel serving as chief of mental health at the base's military hospital had posted a memo on his office wall addressing "Common Mistakes Made When Dealing with Troubled/Problem Soldiers." (Sample comment: "We can't fix every Soldier, and neither can you. Everyone in life beyond babies, the insane, and the demented/mentally retarded have to be held accountable for what they do in life.") That same officer advised commanders to "Get rid of dead wood"—that is, soldiers who had received unfavorable evaluations, which he perceived as faking symptoms in order to mask their own inadequacies—as quickly as possible.

It wasn't just officers. Some regular infantrymen had designed a "Hurt Feelings Report" that they left near a sign-out sheet used by returning soldiers who hoped to see one of the doctors. Under "Reasons for filing this report," the choices included: "I am thin skinned; I am a pussy; I have woman-like hormones; I am a queer; I am a little bitch; I am a cry baby; I want my mommy; all of the above." There was also a space to fill in the "Name of 'Real Man' who hurt your sensitive feelings.'"

Graham, who understood the problem on a visceral level as well as an intellectual one, also had a mandate. When Admiral Mike Mullen, then chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, visited Fort Carson in 2008, he told him that the murder and suicide rates on the base were unacceptable. It was up to Graham to figure out ways to fix the problem.

"In the months to come, Mark would turn Fort Carson into a laboratory for testing new methods of eliminating the stigma around mental health issues and getting troubled soldiers the help they needed before it was too late," writes Dreazen.

MATT SLABY

"Some of the experiments would work, and some would not. But even Mark's detractors would come to understand the magnitude of the challenge he had taken on. Mark wasn't looking for a set of easy fixes. He was trying to change the culture of an entire base, and of the military itself."

Even before he became managing editor of *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, Dreazen had seen fighting. True, he was just a summer intern for *The Jerusalem Post* when he accompanied Israeli troops into southern Lebanon, but combat is combat, and bullets and IEDs don't discriminate. By the time the US invaded Iraq in 2003, he was an established reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*, which had hired him right after he graduated.

Part of his urge to cover the war was simple journalistic truth-telling—you don't get the real story about a firefight or a bombing or a civilian massacre from somebody at a lectern telling you what somebody else told him. The other part was an addiction to adrenaline.

"I'm a complete, total adventure junkie," Dreazen admits. He says it matter-of-factly, but quickly warms to the subject. "The idea of not being in a suit, and being in cargo pants and a T-shirt and having a beard because I haven't shaved in a month, and just being out during what was going to be potentially one of the coolest things I would see during my adult lifetime was just totally irresistible to me."

"I started seeing people turning around and look at me," says Graham. "They're starting to make the connection that I'm the guy that's in the paper that they're reading about."

Not that he had any illusions about what he would see. Covering the invasion itself wasn't that hard. There wasn't a whole lot of fighting, after all. But after he went back to Iraq at the end of 2003 and opened up the *Journal*'s Baghdad bureau with a colleague, the situation got very ugly, very fast. Suicide bombings became a daily experience. Just moving around, trying to see a friend for dinner, became virtually impossible.

"I started to have friends, both American and Iraqi, get hurt, get killed," says Dreazen. "That's shattering. But the part that I hadn't really expected was the loneliness and the inability to ever, ever calm down. Oftentimes the last thing I would hear at the end of the day would be an explosion somewhere in the city, or sirens. The first thing I would hear when I woke up in the morning was an explosion or sirens. There was a constant level of tension and stress and fear that quite literally never stopped."

Which did not stop him from going back, again and again. One night, as an embedded journalist in the nightmare that was Diyala province, he and about 100 American soldiers were jolted out of deep sleep when an alert infantryman on patrol noticed a long, thin wire leading to the house they had taken over.

"A sergeant starts screaming, *Get the fuck up! Get the fuck up! Get the fuck up!!*" he says. "I grabbed my stuff and followed this mass exit of people running out of the house and then diving into a ditch full of cow shit." (He apologizes for the language.) The insurgents had packed the house with carefully concealed explosives, and the only reason the Americans didn't get blown halfway to Samarra was because the cigarette at the other end of the wire had failed to ignite it.

Another time, a powerful suicide car-bomb exploded in a crowded part of Karbala, killing scores of civilians. Dreazen could only stand watching as anguished Iraqi women searched for loved ones in a makeshift morgue, pulling back the sheets that covered the bodies, one by one, until they found their son or husband, and collapsed in grief.

Dreazen saw some beautiful things in Iraq as well. He even met his future wife there, sort of. [See "From Fallujah with Love" on page 48.] But by the early part of 2009, by which time the action had shifted to Afghanistan, "it really hit me just how much damage this all had done and how different I was," he says. "I would be someplace, like playing basketball, and

somebody would shove me accidentally, and I'd have this flash of wanting to just pummel them. Or we'd be in a restaurant, and I would be given a table I didn't like, and I would want to just start screaming at the waiter. Or the table was too close to the windows at the front, and I would insist we be at the back, because I'm envisioning a bomb going off. I would hear a sound, and jump—literally." Then there was the sleep deprivation. "I couldn't sleep, which made it hard to function. If there was a noise, no matter how light, I would be awake instantaneously, and I couldn't go back to sleep." At one particularly difficult point in his life, he started to feel suicidal.

If the bottled-up stress was doing a number on his psyche, it also was giving him a pretty good idea of what some of the soldiers were going through—both in the symptoms of PTSD and in the response to it, which usually led to an agonizing reappraisal of self.

"I thought of myself as just a tougher guy than a lot of my colleagues," he says. "Most of my journalist friends were staying back in New York or Washington or wherever, and I was out getting shot at, or out in the heat doing whatever. I thought that being tough was just a question of will—*I'm going to will myself to do this.* So coming back I thought I would just will myself to stop being scared in a restaurant, or stop wanting to punch people, or stop being unable to sleep."

But it didn't work that way. "It took years, with the help of a lot of friends who were noticing this and being very worried about it, to understand that it wasn't simply a question of will; that there was something deep and fundamental that had changed, and that I couldn't change it. And, much more importantly, that acknowledging that and then getting help for it was not a sign that I was weak. That in its own way, there was a sign of strength to it. I mean, being a tough guy wasn't just pretending it wasn't a problem."

In the grim wake of his sons' deaths, Mark Graham had decided to retire from the army. But on the morning he was going to put in his retirement papers, Carol, who had been seeking solace from an old book of biblically inspired stories, read aloud from a parable by a Civil War-era minister about a general who was leading an important assault when he saw his son lying dead on the ground. The parable included this passage: *Weeping inconsolably forever beside a grave will never bring back the treasure of a lost one. We never completely recover from our greatest griefs and are never quite the same after having passed through them. Yet sorrow that is endured in the right spirit impacts our growth favorably and brings us a greater sense of compassion for others.*

"Mark understood that Carol was telling him that they, too, needed to put duty to others ahead of their own grief," writes Dreazen. Knowing how many wounded and emotionally damaged soldiers would be returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, they realized that remaining in the military "would give them the most—and best—opportunities to help."

Six months later, Mark finally got some good news: he was being promoted to brigadier general. The following year he would earn his second star for his exemplary work organizing the post-Katrina civilian evacuation of New Orleans.

Shortly after taking command at Fort Carson, he told a gathering of the base's highest-ranking officers that returning soldiers were not getting the treatment they deserved. Worse, they were being humiliated. One soldier who had requested an appointment with a psychiatrist was ordered to drink from a sink in the bathroom instead of the water fountain.

"You are all going to stop things like this from happening and you're going to stop it now," Graham told the officers. "You're going to pay attention and look after your soldiers." He then did something even more unheard of for a commanding officer: He told them about Kevin's suicide. It was, understandably, a moment of raw emotion, one that had been unthinkable for a general to display.

Most of the changes he made were practical and, by civilian standards, uncontroversial, such as starting a hotline system, increasing the number of mental-health staff, and creating mobile health teams. Meditation and yoga courses proved to be highly popular—and effective—as well. But there were also times when he intervened on behalf of individual soldiers whose commanders, he thought, were mistreating them. *The Invisible Front* has a number of scenes in which Graham butted heads with officers in charge of individual units, including some within the hospital and medical system. Some commanders took it personally, or as encroaching on their territory. Some just thought his compassion was misguided. This was the army, after all, and there was a war going on.

A sergeant who had been Graham's enlisted aide told Dreazen: "People in the hallways would talk about how Mark wanted to babysit all of these troops who should really be thrown out of the army ... They called him a 'limp dick' who wasn't tough enough to run the base during a war."

"Change is hard," says Graham philosophically. "I was asking commanders to look at these things differently than we had in the past." If someone was a good soldier before going to combat, he notes, and only started getting into trouble afterwards, it's pretty clear what the underlying issue is. The question, then, is what do you do about it?

"I always believed that once you put 'em in [combat] boots, they're in the family," Graham says. "So you've got to make sure they can get care—and help."

Like her husband, Carol felt an immediate trust with Dreazen when he came to interview them for his *Wall Street Journal* article.

"He told us that he'd been in Fallujah, where Jeffrey had been killed, and it instantly gave us a connection about Jeffrey," she says. "But his personality was so much more like Kevin. He listened to all our stories, looked at all the pictures of the children—we just had such a deep connection with him. It was years later before we knew that on the inside, he was struggling the way Kevin had been."

Mark was in the Colorado Springs airport one Saturday in March 2009 when Dreazen's story appeared in the weekend *Journal*. He was caught somewhat off guard.

"I didn't know for sure when it was going to come out," he says, "and we really didn't know what to expect. So I grab a *Wall Street Journal*, and sit down in the waiting area, and flip open I guess it was the second section." Above the fold was an illustration of a pair of combat boots and two dog-tags. The headline read: "A General's Personal Battle." There was also a photo of him and Carol, holding the two folded American flags given to them by the army, one for Jeff, the other for Kevin.

Though it was a long story by newspaper standards, it's fair to say that it held

his attention. When he finally stopped reading, he realized that some of the other passengers in the waiting room had copies of the *Journal*, too.

"I started seeing people kind of slowly turning around and look at me," he says. "They're starting to make the connection that I'm the guy that's in the paper that they're reading about. Of course, I'm trying to keep composed, because it's our story, and you know, nobody wants to be in the paper for a sad reason like we are. So—it was very impactful. I called Carol, and I said, 'You need to buy some copies of *The Wall Street Journal*.'"

Carol vividly remembers the phone call from her husband. "He was so emotional," she says. "His voice was kind of cracking as he was telling me. When I read it, what hit me is how Yochi captured the essence of both of our sons. Mark was talking about our family, but mostly he was talking about the army and what he was up against, with the suicides and everything going on at Fort Carson. As a mother, I was sharing about the boys on a personal level."

The next morning, Carol's mother was in church in Frankfort when several parishioners handed her copies of the *Journal*. She had not seen it till then. It was the first time there had been any public discussion of Kevin's death. At that point Carol realized that their story could be part of a much larger one, one that could connect with people—civilians as well as military—across the country.

"It was like the light was shining," she says. "Because we had had so much shame and guilt and all the stigma we'd felt in the hometown about Kevin's story—because Jeffrey's death was so heroic, and everybody could talk about it." She was stunned by how well Dreazen "intuitively understood" Kevin and his bond with Jeff.

The article touched something dark and pulsing in the psyche of the military and the country. "It got extraordinary, extraordinary feedback," Dreazen acknowledges. Online page views were "off the charts," and emails from readers were "well into the low thousands. It hit a nerve very clearly, inside and outside the military." He continued to write about military suicide and related issues for the *WSJ*, and in 2010, shortly after taking a new job with *National Journal*, he won the top award from the Military Reporters & Editors Association.

Literary agents began contacting Dreazen and the Grahams, telling them that the story should be expanded. But that would have to wait. As long as Mark was still in uniform, he had to watch what he said.

JONATHAN BARTLETT

THE CHANGES that Graham instituted at Fort Carson turned the base "into a model for the rest of the army," Dreazen writes. They also produced results. In contrast to the still-rising military suicide rates across the army, Fort Carson's actually dropped—from 66 per 100,000 in 2008, to 49 in 2009, to 31 in 2010.

"Mark had made large numbers of enemies at Fort Carson," writes Dreazen, "but he and Carol had no doubt the fights had been worth it."

Then, in 2011, Graham got a phone call from General James Thurman, his former boss. He had not been "selected to move forward to being a three-star," Thurman told him, adding simply: "I'm sorry." In the "up or out" system of the military, a declined promotion meant that Graham's 34-year military career was essentially over. He retired from the army the following May.

"Everyone I know who knows Mark believes he was passed over for a third star because of what he was doing on suicide," says Dreazen. "Mark, no matter how many times I've asked him that question in different ways, he can't bring himself to say that."

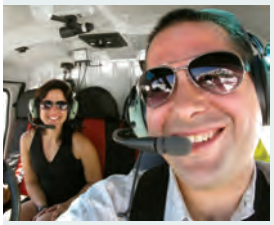
But he was free to talk.

"Yochi had said he'd always wanted to write a book, and asked if we had ever considered using our story in a book," says Mark. "And over the years, many people had asked us and recommended that we write a book. Carol and I talked about it, and frankly, we struggled with that. We didn't think we could write it." And even though they liked and trusted the young reporter, they were still unsure. "We knew that once you ring the bell, the bell's rung. We weren't sure what we were getting into. You kind of slice yourself open and bare your soul when you do a book like this. But when I got home the night I found out I was going to retire, Carol looked at me and said, 'Can I call Yochi?'"

There was still one person whose approval was essential: Melanie, now the Grahams' only child. This was her story, too, and she wanted to think about it. But after her husband, Joe Quinn, did some research on Dreazen, Carol recalls, "she called us back and said, 'You know, Mom, I think that's a great idea.'"

In 2012 Dreazen began to research and write the book. It is not a once-over-lightly piece of reportage. He spent several hundred hours just interviewing Mark and Carol, and many hours with Melanie and with Jeff's fiancée and other members of the Grahams' extended families, even a counselor at the University of Kentucky whom Kevin had seen before he killed himself. Then there were the childhood friends and the soldiers who served under Jeff and Mark, and the commanders, all the way up to Admiral Mullen and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. He also researched the history of combat trauma, from Homer's "Must you

FROM FALLUJAH WITH LOVE



Yochi Dreazen has been known to say that he and his wife Annie may be the only people in the world for whom the Iraq war led to something good.

By the summer of 2008, he had spent a lot of time in that war-ravaged country as *The Wall Street Journal*'s very active Baghdad bureau chief and embedded reporter. Annie Rosenzweig, who was working at the Pentagon and living in Washington, had volunteered to go to Fallujah to assist with the provincial elections. For a parent, having a daughter fly off to a region full of dangerous unknowns is a scary prospect. But there were certain matters that Loren Rosenzweig wasn't going to leave to chance.

"Before Annie left, her mom sent an email to all the Jewish chaplains in Iraq," Dreazen explains. "It said basically, 'My daughter's going to Iraq. She's single. I think she's very attractive, but I'm biased. Here's a photo so you can decide for yourself. And if you can think of a good Jewish boy in Iraq, please let me know.'" Needless to say, she didn't run that note by her daughter before she sent it.

The Jewish chaplain in Baghdad, Rabbi Andrew Shulman, "looked at the photo, and she *was* hot," says Dreazen. "And she was single. So he forwarded it to me with the subject line: 'Check out this crazy Jewish mother.'"

The email (which also went out to several other eligible young Jewish bachelors in Iraq and Washington) read: "Listen, I've got this Jewish mother wanting me to set up her daughter; she's 25, lives in D.C., works at the Pentagon—take a look at the photo, pretty hot …"

As it turns out, Dreazen and Rosenzweig already knew each other slightly, since they lived in the same neighborhood and were members of the same congregation. But now, piqued by the photo, the news of her eligibility, and the chaplain's, um, spiritual blessing, Dreazen was intrigued. Several months later, when she posted the news of her return from Iraq on Facebook, he suggested that they get together in Washington.

"I think my romantic opening line was, 'Hey, let's talk about adventures in Iraq,'" he recalls. "Because, I mean, what's more romantic?"

It's fair to say that they hit it off. In June 2010, while vacationing in British Columbia, Dreazen proposed to her at the foot of a glacial waterfall they had reached by helicopter. They were married the following May. And this past April, they celebrated the birth of their son, Jack.

The first group of people they called, of course, was their parents. The second was Mark, Carol, and Melanie Graham. *–S.H.*

carry the bloody horror of combat in your heart forever?" through the American Civil War, World War II, and Vietnam—and the callous way that doctors and the likes of General George S. Patton have dismissed it.

"I think it took him longer to write the book than he had imagined," says Mark. "He had so much information—I still don't know how he took all that information and boiled it down to 300 pages. He just had boxes and boxes of information and interviews. He told us, 'Look, there's a lot of really good things here that I could use, but I just can't put everything in.'"

THE INVISIBLE FRONT pulled in strong reviews when it was published last fall. "This vital book is a stirring call for action to better aid American soldiers who struggle alone with depression—and civilians who suffer from our most stigmatized disease as well," was the verdict of *The New York Times*, which added that Dreazen "offers a sophisticated examination of an act of ultimate despair that irreversibly wounds the living and remains hidden, stigmatized, and largely misunderstood." In *The Washington Times*, retired Army Colonel Kenneth Allard called it "superb" as well as "comprehensive and deeply thoughtful."

Dreazen was pleasantly surprised by the responses he's had from people in the military.

"It's generally been some variant of, 'This is a hard and painful issue, and we appreciate that you didn't shorthand it,'" he says. "But what's really struck me on book tours is how many people, military or nonmilitary, have come up to me, either in person or later by email or Twitter or whatever, to say that either they themselves had suffered depression or been suicidal, or someone they knew was. It was always, at most, one degree of separation."

By now the military is keenly aware of the problem, and is addressing it seriously. (The army, to cite just one effort, is spending $30 million to put soldiers through the Penn Resilience Program, created by the Positive Psychology Center.) Of course, there's still a long way to go.

"My overall feeling is that this issue is kind of where alcoholism was, not long ago—where it's known to be a problem, but there's still enough stigma around it, and people don't talk about it," says Dreazen. "In terms of where the military needs to go, on a scale of one to 10, I think we're at a seven and a half, maybe an eight. The military's like a giant ship—it takes forever to turn. But once it turns, it just steams full speed ahead."

It's now moving in the right direction, he adds. "There are programs in place. But unless and until you have generals talk about this the way Mark has, you won't get to 10. And we're nowhere near that."

Eleven years ago, when the Grahams were preparing to bury Jeff and they were both imploding with grief, Carol told Mark she didn't think she could ever know happiness again. His response, she told Dreazen, was: "We can let losing the boys be two tragic chapters in the book of our lives, or we can let it be the whole book."

Now another book has helped them write a new chapter, one in which they are powerful advocates for suicide prevention.

"We're thankful for Yochi, for telling our story in such a personal and caring way," says Mark, who may be a civilian now but is working as hard as ever for the soldiers still fighting those inner battles. "There's a lot of Kevins out there. And there's a lot of Jeffreys out there. If he would've survived that IED attack, he would've been an amputee, had PTSD, TBI [traumatic brain injury], would've been a burn victim and had all kinds of challenges. There's a lot of our members out there like that, and they—and their families—are struggling.

"We have a passion to be there for them," he adds. "That's why I'm doing what I'm doing. I can't stop. You've read the book, so you know why."◆

WHERE THE BLUNDERING CANNONS ROAR

EXCERPT

The sounds of the cannon blast echoed between the redbrick buildings of the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, the military's flagship hospital. It was 2005, and the century-old medical facility was struggling to keep pace with the thousands of veterans who had begun returning from Iraq and Afghanistan with PTSD or other emotional and psychological problems. Most of them were extraordinarily sensitive to loud noises, so the cannon blasts that marked the formal start of each new day at Walter Reed triggered unsettling memories of the explosions, ambushes, or carnage that had hospitalized them in the first place. The hospital's medical staff pleaded with Walter Reed's top military officials to silence the cannon, but they got nowhere. The base's commanders argued that Walter Reed, like any army post, needed to abide by the military protocols mandating that each morning begin with soldiers raising the American flag, snapping to attention, and standing in formation until the cannon blast sounded. Dr. John Bradley, a retired army colonel who was the head of Walter Reed's psychiatry program at the time, said that the hospital's top military doctor repeatedly petitioned its military commander to end the practice, only to be rebuffed each time. At a certain point the medical staff decided to take matters into their own hands. "Our hospital commander actually disabled the cannon so it couldn't fire," he said.

JONATHAN BARTLETT

The fight at Walter Reed was emblematic of a broader vicious circle within the military. Troubled soldiers were encouraged to admit that they had PTSD and seek help. Those who did, however, were forced to confront a system run by officers and sergeants who were either insensitive to them or openly hostile. Many of the troops were denied promotions and encouraged to leave the army voluntarily as soon as their time was up. ...

The military has spent years trying to persuade soldiers that they could seek help without risking their careers, but those efforts have yielded only mixed results. An army survey in 2003, for instance, found that 49 percent of the soldiers who screened positive for PTSD worried that they'd lose the confidence of their peers if they sought mental health counseling. The military spent tens of millions of dollars on new anti-stigma training for all of its troops, which brought the numbers down slightly. Seven years later, however, 41.8 percent of its at-risk soldiers still had that fear. Retired admiral Mike Mullen said in an interview for this book that stigma was "embedded" deep within the culture of the military itself. Troubled soldiers, Mullen said, have long feared both personal and professional consequences if they admit they have problems and seek assistance. "The career concern is a huge one in the military, where the perceived threat is that we could lose our security clearance—a professional death sentence," he said.

That wasn't an irrational fear. Question 21 on the military's security clearance form explicitly asked troops if they had consulted with mental health professionals or sought help for a mental health-related condition at any point over the previous seven years. Mullen and then defense secretary Bob Gates worried that troubled soldiers were refusing to seek help because they were afraid they'd lose their clearances if they answered question 21 honestly. They began to lobby to eliminate it. "I thought at the start, 'Well, we're just not going to use that question anymore,'" Gates said. "I was very naïve." ...

Some senior officers convey an even more damaging message through what they choose to keep quiet, not what they choose to say. The military has been at war for more than thirteen years, but virtually no generals or admirals were willing to admit that they'd suffered the same kinds of PTSD and depression as their troops. In a rank-conscious organization such as the military, that sent a simple and dangerous message: If you want to get promoted, keep your mouth shut. "In order to make strides in eliminating stigma, leadership must step forward and acknowledge their own [post-traumatic stress] while setting the example by visibly seeking help," Mullen said. "Some officers have done this, but far too few."

Gates was one of the senior officials who remained silent. Obama had asked Gates to stay on through the end of his second term, but the defense chief said no. He was haunted by the nearly three thousand condolence letters he'd written and by memories of the thousands of young soldiers and marines he's visited in military hospitals around the world as they recovered from losing limbs or suffering hideous burns on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan. The emotional toll was so heavy, Gates worried that he had suffered invisible wounds of his own.

"I think that there's a form of post-traumatic stress for those who are not directly involved in the battle but who see the consequences of the battle," he said in an interview two years after leaving the Pentagon. "I began to wonder, frankly, toward the end of my time, whether I had some measure of it myself." ◆