Major General Mark Graham

A Legacy of Hope

By Maureen Rose  ★  Reprinted from The Turret, the official publication of Fort Knox

In opening senior leadership training July 24, Major General Mark Graham, the commander of Division West, 1st Army at Fort Carson, Colorado, quoted Oswald Chambers, a 19th century Scottish theologian.

"We say there ought to be no sorrow but there is sorrow, and to survive we have to find ourselves in it. If we try to evade sorrow, refuse to lay our account with it, we are foolish. Sorrow is one of the biggest facts of life."

The grief of losing two sons - both in military service - drove Graham to the brink of early retirement. He did not think he could continue serving the Army. The day he planned to turn in his official paperwork, Carol read a passage to him from Streams in the Desert by L.B. Cowan. It changed their lives. It read, in part:

"Yesterday you experienced a great sorrow and now your home seems empty. Your impulse is to give up amid your dashed hopes. Yet, you must defy that temptation for you are at the front lines of battle and the crisis is at hand. Faltering for even one moment would put God's interest at risk. Other lives will be harmed by your hesitation and His work will suffer if you simply fold your hands. You must not linger at this point, even to indulge your grief."

The Grahams took that devotion as a sign that there was still a mission for them and a purpose for remaining in the Army family. Although they continued to grieve, they learned to take one day at a time, and eventually they realized their mission more clearly.

"More Soldiers were killed in Iraq and others died in car accidents and by suicide," he said. "It occurred to us that maybe this was the reason we were meant to continue to serve. We personally knew the pain these families were feeling and we could genuinely connect in a way we never could have before. As we tried to comfort the broken hearts of the people God put in our path, an amazing phenomenon occurred. We received more healing in our spirits than we gave. Others seemed to help us more than we helped them."

Although still healing, the Grahams have become advocates for Soldiers who suffer with post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, and other mental health illnesses.

"From our personal tragedies, my wife Carol and our daughter Melanie and I have come to realize that in order to survive, we had to use our brokenness to reach out and openly share our story and try to give hope to others," said Graham. "As an Army and as a nation, we must get in front of suicide, work to prevent it by action, not just figure it out after the fact."

The pain in Graham's voice lends validity to his call for Army leaders to find a way to help mentally ill Soldiers returning from deployments or facing subsequent deployments.

"I am here to tell you that we cannot be quiet any longer. We cannot take that hushed tone when speaking of suicide, and we cannot ignore the warning signs," he said. "People are hurting. They need to be helped, not judged.
My wife Carol and I missed the warning signs of our son's depression and just could not see that his illness—if left untreated—was potentially as deadly as if he had had cancer or heart disease. While the Grahams continue to advocate for increased help to Soldiers with mental health problems, it comes with a price.

"Even though Carol and I both made this commitment to keep going, it has not been easy," Graham explained. "I made speeches as Soldiers deployed and redeployed. We celebrated at the welcome home ceremonies and watched as families were reunited after long separations... which left us always wondering how the world could even keep turning without Jeffrey and Kevin in it. At church we tried desperately to hold back the tears as other people's prayers seemingly were answered."

Graham also shared that one of many sources of comfort for his family has been the friendship and support of his then-boss, Lieutenant General David Vlcourt, now the deputy commander at the Training and Doctrine Command. Although Vlcourt had the horrible job of notifying Graham of his son's death in Iraq, he demonstrated his understanding of the Grahams' pain. When Graham was promoted, Vlcourt was there to pin the stars on Graham's uniform. But he had engraved a special message on the back of the stars. Kevin's name is engraved on one star and Jeffrey's name is on the other. At the promotion ceremony, Vlcourt told Graham, "Your boys will always be with you."

Graham acknowledged that now he wears the stars on his uniform to represent his sons.

"We have pledged to use Kevin's death to raise awareness in the military to the dangers of untreated depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injuries, and other mental health issues," he said. "We are compelled to speak out for all of the 'Kevins' of the world who have no voice."

Graham said there is still a terrible stigma associated with suicide in the Army and in society in general. He asked the leaders in the audience to empower the Army and communities with the education and tools to break through the fear and stigma surrounding suicide.

In closing, Graham asked his audience to remember wounded Soldiers—those with visible wounds as well as those with invisible wounds.

"It has been said that depression is the slow bleeding of the soul, and we must continue to encourage Soldiers to reach out and get help," he said. "Be the tourniquet that stops the bleeding of these priceless souls."

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**Mark and Carol Graham's Work with TAPS**

In the TAPS family we know the devastating sorrow of losing a loved one, but few of us have had the experience of burying not one, but two, sons. Mark and Carol Graham, along with their remaining daughter, Melanie, have carried this extra burden for more than six years, first losing Kevin to suicide in 2003, and then Jeffrey eight months later in combat. The Grahams have seen firsthand how differently the public responds to the circumstances of death.

In the beginning, the Grahams focused on setting up suicide prevention programs on college campuses. But after being invited to talk about Kevin's death at the 2007 TAPS National Military Survivor Seminar, they began to speak openly in the military about suicide prevention.

"TAPS has given us a way to channel our grief in a positive way. Before we connected with TAPS, I was holding my pain on the inside. TAPS connected me with other dads who were carrying the same pain and loss as I was. Finding TAPS was a huge turning point in our lives," said Mark.

The Grahams are committed to raising awareness to the dangers of untreated depression, post traumatic stress disorder, and other mental health issues, regardless of their own continuing pain. They have also supported TAPS by hosting and giving the keynote addresses for two regional seminars.

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at Fort Carson, Colorado, in addition to attending the 2009 Gary Morris Invitational Golf Tournament, and the 2009 TAPS Gala where Mark was presented with the TAPS Honor Guard Leadership Award.

"We desperately needed a safe place to share stories about both Jeffrey and Kevin, a place where we could laugh and cry if we needed to. There is so much love and acceptance in our TAPS family that we can truly share Kevin's story as much as Jeffrey's. And by reaching out to others and helping them to heal, I have found healing myself."

~ Carol Graham