

# MHS Profiles

MILITARY HEALTH SYSTEM



## OVERCOMING THE STIGMA

*A Maj. Gen.'s Impassioned Campaign to Prevent Suicide*

by Elizabeth M. Lockwood



# OVERCOMING THE STIGMA


*A Maj. Gen.'s Impassioned Campaign to Prevent Suicide*

by Elizabeth M. Lockwood

**A Somber Message:**  
Maj. Gen. Graham  
and his wife, Carol, sit  
at home holding the  
flags displayed at their  
sons' funerals. (Cover  
photo and above photo  
courtesy of Matt Slaby)







**// Depression is an illness. Not just in the military, but in civilian communities too. This is bigger than the Army. //**

*Although this is a story about Army Maj. Gen. Mark Graham, his wife Carol and their tireless work to prevent suicide, this is a story that transcends rank, class, race and gender. It is a story about survival.*

Working in the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff, U.S. Forces Command, Maj. Gen. Graham oversees about 85 percent of the Army's operational forces. The job would be a full-time position for anybody else, but Maj. Gen. Graham finds time to travel around the nation with his wife, Carol, speaking about suicide prevention and the stigma associated with seeking mental health care.

The drive to spread these messages comes from within. In 2003 the Grahams' son Kevin, a senior ROTC cadet at the University of Kentucky, died by suicide in the apartment he shared with his two siblings. In an unforeseeable and cruel twist, seven months after Kevin's death, his brother—the Grahams' eldest son—2nd Lt. Jeffrey Graham, was killed in Iraq by an IED.

Jeffrey died with Kevin's driver's license in his pocket. "We've experienced the shame and the guilt and the embarrassment of feeling like the worst parents in the world," Carol says. "And then seven months later, experienced everything that comes with a son that dies trying to warn his platoon about an IED."

While losing a child is a parent's worst nightmare, the Grahams—and indeed most proud American citizens—see an element of honor in Jeffrey's death. As Maj. Gen. Graham says, "He was fighting. He was doing what he wanted to do. He was doing what the nation called him to do. He was serving, and he was killed."

Kevin, on the other hand, was fighting a different kind of battle. One that was too large to fight alone and perhaps too embarrassing to admit to others. After having gone through a routine depression screening at his university, Kevin was prescribed antidepressants. He called his parents, who were stationed





### The Sons at Home:

The Grahams keep memories of their sons alive on a desk at home that contains mementos of the boys. (Photo courtesy of Matt Slaby)

in South Korea at the time, and asked them: Did you know that depression is an illness and not just a feeling?

The Grahams didn't know. Although experts on the subject now—and always ready to share—they didn't know then that every 17 minutes someone

in the United States commits suicide. They didn't know that the second highest cause of death among 18- to 24-year olds, behind only car accidents, is suicide. They didn't know that “depression is an illness,” as Maj. Gen. Graham himself now tells people. “Not just in the military, but in civilian

communities too. This is bigger than the Army.”

Because they didn't know, they didn't recognize the danger when Kevin stopped taking his medicine. He was studying to become an Army doctor and had already completed Airborne school.





// I'm sad that this is our story,  
but I just have to believe in what we  
do with our story—maybe we can help  
save somebody else's child. //

There is a stigma associated with depression, both in the military and in the surrounding civilian communities. It silently invades conversations and prevents honesty. It discourages some from seeking help, and it influences the way those around them provide support.

Although he says it pains him to admit it, Maj. Gen. Graham didn't see what his son was going through. "As a parent, I didn't want my child to be depressed," he says. "I didn't want people to say, 'Oh, man, your son has got depression.' The stigma was part of me too, whether subconsciously or not."

Carol echoes his sentiments. "We didn't understand—or maybe we didn't want to," she says. "We were the stigma too. We did not really want to have a child that was depressed. It's almost like you think, 'Wow. I'm not a good enough parent. Why would my son be so depressed?'"

The Grahams are determined to use their story to help create more awareness

about suicide prevention. They want to educate the public, the military, families, communities—everyone. They want to provide credible information that will assist others in recognizing the symptoms of depression. They want to teach family members and battle buddies what to do if someone is depressed. They want to share useful resources with everyone involved. Most importantly, they want to eliminate the stigma that surrounds mental illness.

Maj. Gen. Graham understands that if he had known more, been better educated, or not felt the stigma so much, his son Kevin might still be alive today.

"I was always pretty aware and sensitive," he says, "but I lost my own son to suicide and I didn't see it coming. I missed it. We missed it. You can make mistakes in life, but this is a mistake we can never get back. We lost our son because we didn't know about depression."

He had been selected to go to Germany as a cadet and was then accepted to live in the German House on campus at the University of Kentucky. When it came time to attend ROTC Advanced Camp, Kevin didn't want the Army to know he was depressed. So he stopped taking his anti-depressants.



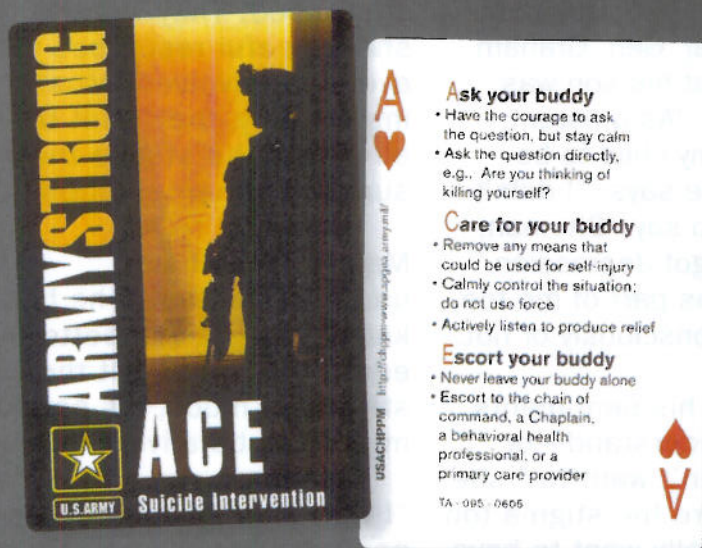


## SAVE LIVES: *Ask. Care. Escort.*

The Army's ACE Card is designed for soldiers to remember the three critical steps towards saving someone's life. It lists them on an easy, pocket-sized card, allowing everybody to carry this important reminder with them at all times.

The first step is to Ask. The program encourages service members to reach out to a battle buddy or friend that may be in pain or having trouble at work or at home. By asking them how they feel or whether they are feeling suicidal, friends and loved ones can address the issue head-on and work towards saving a life.

Next, the card reminds service members to treat that friend or family member with Care. It teaches people to remove items that could be used to cause self-injury, to speak with the friend often and to care for them through words and actions.



Finally—and most importantly, in the Grahams' opinion—the card instructs battle buddies, friends and families to Escort their loved one to get help. Do not leave them alone, it says, but help them get the help they need, whether that comes in the form of a commanding officer, a chaplain or a mental health professional.

Designed and distributed by the Army's Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine, the ACE Card is issued to every soldier, along with a training session on how to prevent suicides.

Teaching others has become a way for the Graham family to reconnect with each other and to stay connected to their missing sons.

"I'm sad that this is our story," Carol says, "but I just have to believe in what we do with our story—maybe we can help save somebody else's child."

The Grahams are on the front lines of the fight against suicide. Together, they speak at both military and civilian events around the country as varied as the annual DoD-VA Suicide Prevention Conference, the National Conference of State Legislature's Annual Legislative Summit and an event for Oregon Partnership, which runs the state's crisis hotline.

Depression awareness has become suicide prevention, and the Grahams aren't embarrassed to talk about it. "People get embarrassed by mental health issues," Maj. Gen. Graham says. "Embarrassed that a family member died by suicide. What we need to do is get in front of it and help to educate people. Education is the key."

To ensure that people have access to mental health treatment and care, the Grahams started a memorial fund at the University of Kentucky that sponsors QPR training—Question, Persuade, Refer—the civilian form of the Army's ACE card (which itself is described in the sidebar at left). The QPR training at



// As a parent, I didn't want my child to be depressed. I didn't want people to say, 'Oh, man, your son has got depression.' The stigma was part of me too, whether subconsciously or not. //



**Strong Couple :** *The Grahams continue to speak around the nation, teaching people through their story about the importance of fighting the stigma associated with depression. (Photo courtesy of the Graham family)*

**A Family Christmas:** *Christmas 2002 was a good one for the Grahams; the three children were visiting their parents in Korea, spending time with each other and celebrating the holiday as a family. (Photo courtesy of the Graham family)*



**Kevin (bottom left):** *Taken just after getting his Airborne wings in summer 2002, Kevin had everything to be proud of. As Carol put it, "Looking at photos of the boys, you never would have known which one suffered from depression." (Photo courtesy of the Graham family)*

**Jeffrey (bottom right):** *After Kevin's death, Jeffrey had the opportunity to stay home for a stateside assignment. He decided that he wanted to be deployed and finish the job he had started. This photo was taken in February 2004. (Photo courtesy of the Graham family)*



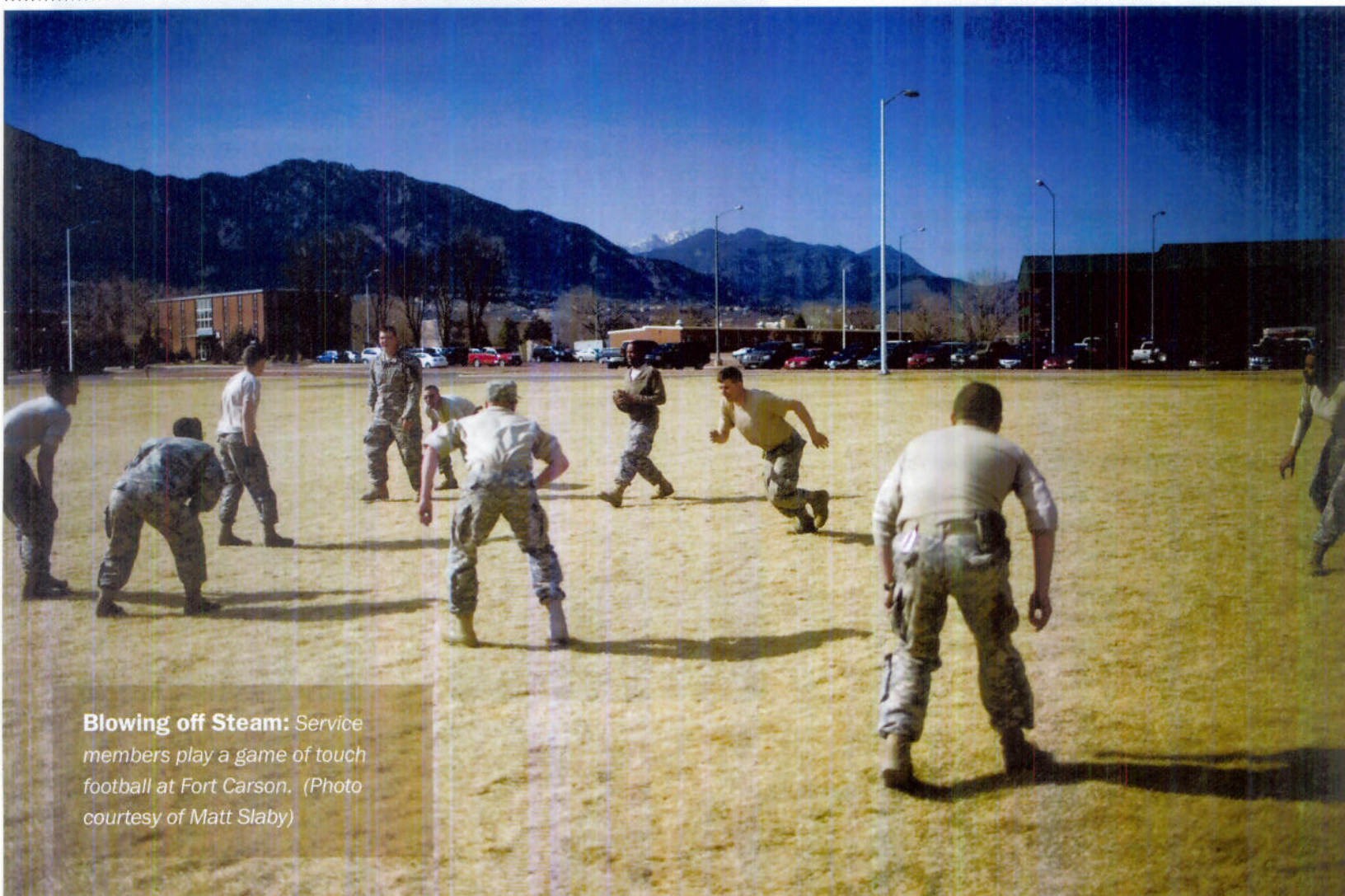


// There are soldiers alive today because of programs the Army has put in place. You won't find that number, you won't find that document and frankly, you won't find people talking about it. But I know—in my heart—that there are a lot of people alive today because of the efforts put forth by the military overall. //

the university targets both students and their parents and encourages them to talk about mental health and suicide prevention.

"Families sit around and talk about drugs, drinking and unprotected sex," Maj. Gen. Graham says. "But they don't like to talk much about depression."

Maj. Gen. Graham is convinced that if he and Carol can get families talking more about suicide prevention, they can help to gradually decrease the stigma surrounding the issue and that more lives will be saved.



**Blowing off Steam:** Service members play a game of touch football at Fort Carson. (Photo courtesy of Matt Slaby)



Every Army base has a suicide prevention program, Maj. Gen. Graham explains, but what the Commanding General chooses to do with it can make all the difference. When he served as the Commanding General at Fort Carson from 2007 through July 2009, he spent an enormous amount of energy on suicide prevention efforts, because there were nine suicides in 15 months on the military base between 2008 and 2009.

He established a hotline at Fort Carson that is answered 24 hours a day, seven days a week by the same person. He repeatedly told everyone, from the senior leaders to the lowest level in the chain of command, about the importance of seeking help if you need it. "You'd hear me say often," he recalls, "it is a sign of strength—not weakness—to come forward and get help."

He established a team that involved people at all levels of the chain of command to research risk factors for soldiers. They created posters and hung them in visible places around post that advertised the Army's ACE program. Maj. Gen. Graham fully supported all of these efforts because he wanted to make it clear that not seeking help could potentially lead to suicide.

His most resonant message? "You can die from this. You can die from depression."

# SPEAK UP, REACH OUT

## *Where to Get Help*

*Suicide prevention is the responsibility of the entire community—military and civilian. If you are going through something difficult, or if you suspect that someone you love is talking or thinking about suicide, it is important to talk to someone and ask for help. There are resources available for you or your loved one, including the following:*

### **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**

- Dial (800) 273-TALK or (800) 273-8255, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- Press "1" if you are in the military to get connected to a regional center that understands the military
- Visit [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

### **Military OneSource**

- Dial (800) 342-9647, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- Visit [www.militaryonesource.com](http://www.militaryonesource.com)

### **The Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury's Outreach Center**

- Dial (866) 966-1020, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- Visit [www.dcoe.health.mil](http://www.dcoe.health.mil)

### **The Real Warriors Campaign**

- Visit [www.realwarriors.net](http://www.realwarriors.net)

### **Service-Specific Suicide Prevention Programs**

- Army: [www.armyg1.army.mil/hr/suicide](http://www.armyg1.army.mil/hr/suicide)
- Navy: [www.npc.navy.mil/CommandSupport/SuicidePrevention/](http://www.npc.navy.mil/CommandSupport/SuicidePrevention/)
- Air Force: [afspp.afms.mil](http://afspp.afms.mil)
- Marines: [www.usmc-mccs.org/suicideprevent](http://www.usmc-mccs.org/suicideprevent)

*You can also visit [health.mil](http://health.mil)'s suicide prevention landing page for information and resources related to suicide prevention: [www.health.mil/suicide](http://www.health.mil/suicide)*

*Additionally, you can see videos related to the importance of suicide prevention awareness, including:*

**Shoulder to Shoulder: I will never quit on life:**

<http://bit.ly/9876XW>

**Shoulder to Shoulder: DA civilian training**

<http://bit.ly/atcM5d>



No matter how urgent the message, if no one listens, no one can learn. The Grahams believe, however, that the tide is turning. "This is serious and people are starting to realize it now," Maj. Gen. Graham says. "The stigma is getting better. But we still have a long way to go and it's going to take time." The media often relays stories about soldiers committing suicide; they don't, however, always cover the topic in its entirety. Telling the full story would include talking about lives saved, people who sought and received help, got

promoted and went to school. Many times these stories go unnoticed and their messages of redemption are lost. The Grahams have made it their mission to uncover and share these untold stories.

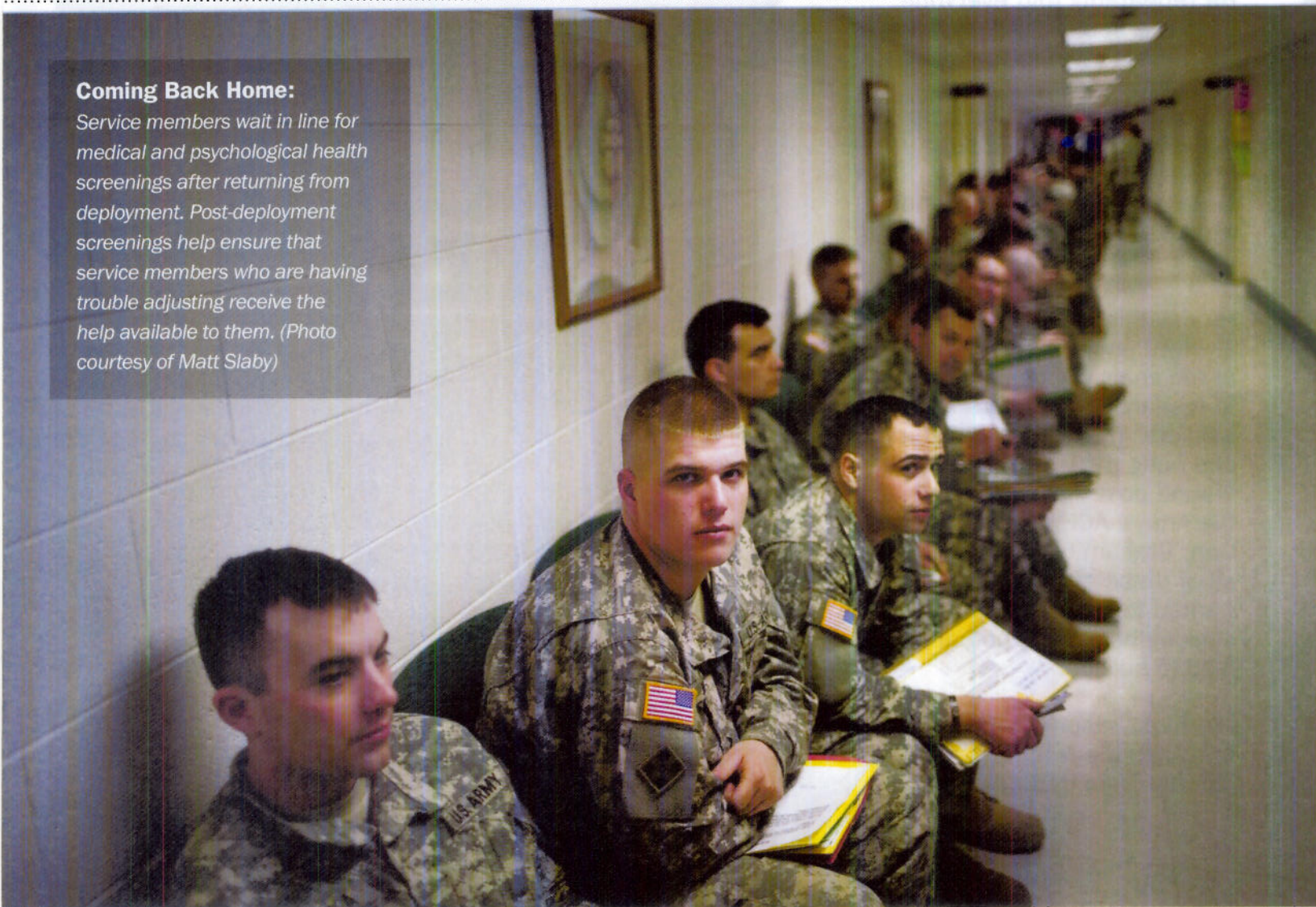
"I've seen many good advances," Maj. Gen. Graham says. "There are a lot of soldiers alive today because of the programs the Army has put in place. You won't find that number, you won't find that document and frankly, you won't find many people talking about it. But I know—for a fact—in

my heart, that there are a lot of people alive today because of the efforts put forth by the Army and the military overall." So the Grahams continue to talk. They continue to talk to whoever will listen about suicide prevention and awareness. Maj. Gen. Graham and Carol introduce themselves to strangers, have conversations with seatmates on airplanes, talk to audience members at large events, shake hands and spread the word.

There have been many small victories: a man who was

#### **Coming Back Home:**

*Service members wait in line for medical and psychological health screenings after returning from deployment. Post-deployment screenings help ensure that service members who are having trouble adjusting receive the help available to them. (Photo courtesy of Matt Slaby)*





# SUICIDE RATES RISE, THE ARMY RESPONDS

*New report shows some positive signs, such as more are seeking care*

The suicide rate among soldiers is hitting record highs, but the Army's efforts to reduce levels by encouraging health treatment are starting to show some encouraging signs, according to a recent 350-page report.

The Army Suicide Prevention Task Force's 15-month study found that while historically the Army's suicide rate has been lower than the civilian rate—which typically is about 19 per 100,000—its rate began to rise in 2004, and in 2008 it exceeded the national average, hitting a record 20.2 per 100,000. In fiscal year 2009 the Army had 239 suicide deaths, 160 of whom were active duty.

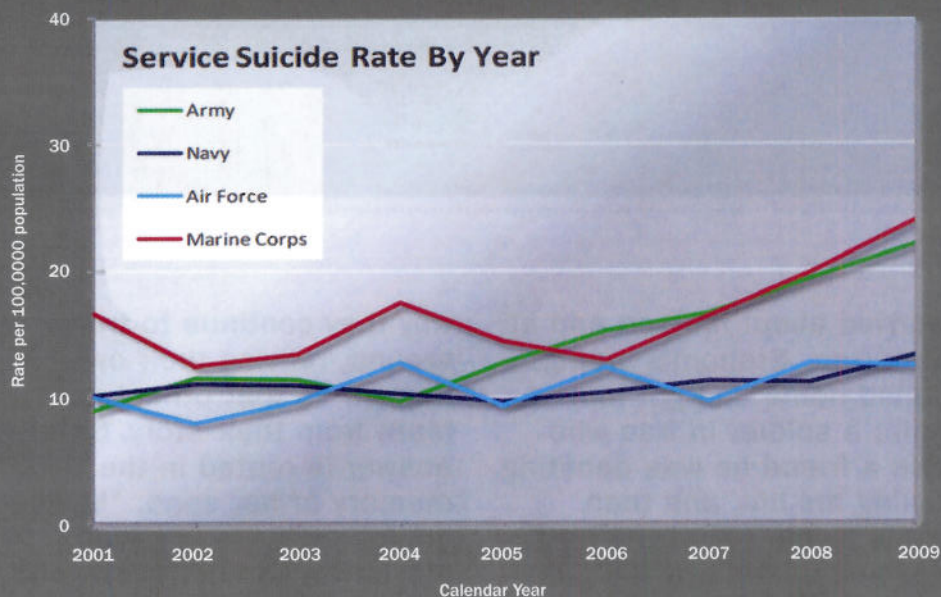
These numbers could have been higher—were it not for the intervention of concerned friends and family. For instance, in 2008 alone there were 1,713 known attempted suicides. “The difference between these suicide attempts and another soldier death often was measured only by the timeliness of life-saving leader/buddy and medical interventions,” according to the report, entitled, *Health Promotion, Risk Reduction and Suicide Prevention*. “For some, the rigors of service, repeated deployments, injuries and separations from family resulted in a sense of isolation, hopelessness and life fatigue.”

Part of the cause for what the Army calls its “alarming rate of suicides”—and for the rising rate among all of the services (as the chart below indicates)—is the reluctance by service members to seek professional help. “The stigma attached to seeking mental health treatment is not just an Army problem ... this is a societal problem that we all have to wrestle with,” says Army Chief of Staff Gen. George W. Casey Jr. In fact, 51% of both officer and enlisted soldiers believe that seeking behavioral health counseling will harm their careers.

Still, there are positive developments. Soldiers are seeking

behavioral health care in record numbers with more than 225,000 behavioral health contacts, which indicates that the Army's pro-active efforts to emphasize the importance of behavioral health are working.

In 2009, the Army launched the Campaign Plan for Health Promotion, Risk Reduction and Suicide Prevention, which provides guidance to commanders in the field to help drive change. “While stigma associated with seeking behavioral health treatment remains a problem in the military, there is evidence that the current anti-stigma communications campaign is improving perceptions,” notes the report.



*The suicide rate for both the Army and Marine Corps has increased steadily in recent years, while the rates in the Navy and Air Force have risen slightly.*





worried about his son and at Maj. Gen. Graham's urging, called home and got him help; a soldier in Iraq who told a friend he was debating taking his life, and then came to his friend the next day and asked why his gun wouldn't fire when he tried to shoot himself. The friend had removed the gun's firing pin. When questioned about

why they continue to travel around, reliving their own horrors so that others can learn from their story, Carol's answer is rooted in the memory of her sons. "Maybe somebody's life is saved. Maybe we can help someone get help. Maybe something in memory of Kevin, and actually in memory of Jeffrey," says Carol. "If we can help

somebody else's kids grow up and get married and have kids and live fulfilling lives..."

And in the blink of an eye, after only the slightest of pauses, the grieving mother was gone. In her place was a strong and cheerful woman, determined to change the world. With conviction and a smile, she rattled



**//** I was always pretty aware and sensitive, but I lost my own son to suicide and I didn't see it coming. We missed it. We lost our son because we didn't know about depression. **//**

off statistics, asserted the widespread reach of depression and promised the Army was spending millions on research that would benefit the nation.

Grief hasn't brought this couple down, but has made them stronger. They have been strengthened

through understanding—understanding each other, their struggles and their grief, and understanding Kevin's pain and even Jeffrey's determination. By teaching an entire Army how to understand and seek help for depression, they are saving lives one listener—and one survivor—at a time. ■

**Picture Perfect:** *The three Graham children—Jeffrey, Kevin and Melanie—were incredibly close, playing together as children and then living together as adults. Melanie, who follows in her parents' footsteps by channeling her grief into action, now works as a neurology nurse in Boston. (Photo courtesy of Matt Slaby)*

**Always With Him:** *When Maj. Gen. Graham was promoted to a two-star general, a friend had his two stars engraved with the names of his sons. The Major General now carries the stars with him as he travels the country talking about the dangers of untreated depression. (Photo courtesy of Matt Slaby)*





