The Invisible Front: Love and Loss in an Era of Endless War
By: Yochi Dreazen (Crown Publishers, 2014)
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In the United States, war has been a regular part of our country’s daily fabric over the past thirteen years. The challenges that were borne by the United States military as part of Operation Enduring Freedom (10/7/01 – present) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (3/20/03 – 12/15/11) have been, and continue to be, impacting the lives of our service members and their families. Major General Mark Graham and his wife Carol know all too well about these challenges. There are lots of battles being waged every single day, some in combat, others in the homes and workplaces here in the States, and the Graham’s are intimately familiar with both battle settings. Yochi Dreazen skillfully pens this family biography in a way that captures the trials, tribulations, traumas, and successes.

The famous quote of General William Tecumseh Sherman about war being hell (actual quote was “Some of you young men think that war is all glamour and glory, but let me tell you, boys, it is all hell!”) can be applied both to combat and mental illness. Dreazen transports readers into the lives of Maj. Gen. Graham, his wife Carol, and their three children (Kevin, , and Jeffrey). In the span of just 8 months, both of the Graham sons would lose their lives. Kevin died by suicide on June 21, 2003 despite having found a medication that was successfully assisting him in his battle with Major Depressive Disorder. Unfortunately, the treatment that was yielding positive benefits had a severe, unnecessary, side effect as Kevin learned that if his ROTC command had known about his need for antidepressant medication he would have “lost his scholarship and be deemed ‘mentally ill and not fit for military duty’” (pg. 85). Kevin’s battle was laborious and entailed waxing and waning periods of hope and connection amongst the deep, heavy weight of his depression.

Meanwhile, Kevin’s older brother kept flourishing in his own military career and was sent to one of the most volatile and dangerous parts of Afghanistan. Second Lieutenant Jeffery Graham died on February 19, 2004 near Habbaniyah, Afghanistan due to injuries from small arms fire and an improvised explosive device (IED). Could tragedy really befall the same family, twice, in such a short duration of time? Yes.

In the wake of these dual tragedies, Major General Graham continued in his own impressive military career, being detailed to some of the most challenging positions a leader could encounter. In 2005, it was to Graham’s lap that fell the daunting challenge of evacuating an entire U.S. city (New Orleans) in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. If rising to this challenge had not been daunting enough, he was later assigned as commander of the Fort Carson Army Installation in Colorado. It was at this base where he and wife Carol confronted a painful reminder and challenge as the base was recognized to have “a serious suicide problem” (p 227). It was here that the Graham’s dedicated themselves to changing the culture within the military regarding the tragic public health condition of suicide. Confronting how the military omitted soldiers from recognition from those who died while serving their country and weighing in on decisions that, from a hierarchical standpoint, were the purview of the Colonels under his command, were just a few of drastic changes Graham addressed.

The Graham story, as touchingly articulated by the skillful penmanship of Yochi Dreazen, will resonate with those across the suicide prevention spectrum. Clinicians working with men (particularly “traditional” males), administrators looking for a “beacon of light” on how to facilitate change, and those who have been impacted by suicide, can all benefit from this
tale of challenge, loss, survival, and growth. While Major General Graham and his wife have left the military installations and service, their broader mission of facilitating understanding, healing, and overall suicide prevention continues.