

The commander's shared scars

Maj. Gen. Mark Graham, Fort Carson's compassionate new leader, has borne the hardship of losing two sons.

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Major General Mark Graham is photographed in his office next to two photos of his late sons. In the pictures: Kevin Graham is on the left and Jeffrey Graham is on the right. (Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post)

FORT CARSON — On the underside of the two stars that rest on each shoulder of Fort Carson's top general, the names "Kevin" and "Jeff" are engraved.

This is one way Maj. Gen. Mark Graham honors his sons, two young men who did not live long enough to see their father pin on those stars.

Second Lt. Jeff Graham, 23, died Feb. 19, 2004, when a roadside bomb exploded in Kalidiyah, Iraq, while the young leader protected his platoon.

Kevin Graham, 21, a top ROTC cadet at the University of Kentucky, hanged himself June 21, 2003, from a ceiling fan in his apartment. No one saw the lethality of his depression.

"They both fought different enemies," Graham said during a recent interview.

For a man who is not sure why he joined



Carol Graham, wife of Maj. Gen. Mark Graham, shows the dog tags memorializing her sons, 2nd Lt. Jeff Graham, left, and Kevin Graham. Jeff was killed in Iraq, and Kevin committed suicide. (Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post)

the military more than 30 years ago, no general in today's Army has a more intimate understanding of war's hardships and the mental-health issues that follow than Fort Carson's commander.

Not a day goes by that he doesn't think about his sons. Their loss, he said, has made him a more compassionate officer.

"The easy thing would be to curl up in a corner and do nothing and not get out of bed in the morning," Graham said. "Getting up some days is real hard, and most people never see it because I put a smile on my face usually. That's the way I was.

"Happy is different now than it ever was before."

Back in June 2003, as he and his wife, Carol, drove away from Kevin's funeral, Graham told her: "We can either let this be the tragic, horrible book of our life, or we can make it one bad chapter in the book of our life."

When they lost Jeff, they added a second bad chapter.

Now they are trying to change the story.

Served in Desert Storm

Carol Graham spends countless hours talking to people about suicide. She is a national board member of Suicide Prevention Action Network.

Commissioned a second lieutenant in 1977, Mark Graham served in Desert Storm and years later led the military's evacuation effort of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.

In 2006 and 2007, Fort Carson had been under fire for its treatment of wounded soldiers. Veterans' advocacy groups claimed too many soldiers were not receiving good care. They claimed soldiers were being discharged for infractions such as drug use and going AWOL after they were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Since Graham arrived at Fort Carson in September, his mantra has been this: provide the best care possible for his soldiers. He constantly encourages troops to seek the help they need.

That get-down-to-business attitude was evident from his earliest days at Murray State University in Murray, Ky., said Jeff Hohman. The two met during their freshman year, when Graham was elected president of the pledge class for Kappa Alpha.

"Mark, right from the beginning, he was the fast-talking Yankee from Florissant, Mo.," Hohman said. "He really took charge right off the bat. He was just the kind of guy; he was inspirational in a way that didn't offend you."

A frame containing pictures of Kevin and Jeff on Graham's walnut desk reminds him of his battles, both past and present.

Kevin, a top student in his ROTC class, wanted to be an Army doctor. He had graduated from airborne school. One day he called his mother and said he thought he had depression.

Kevin saw a doctor, who prescribed Prozac; he visited a counselor at the university. When Jeff graduated from UK on May 10, 2003, his parents noticed how good Kevin looked. He'd been running and lifting weights.

"He did not look depressed," said Carol Graham, who has a master's degree in counseling.

Exercise can increase the serotonin level in the brain, which can ease the symptoms of depression. Kevin was preparing to go to ROTC advanced camp — his parents said he was embarrassed to admit he was taking Prozac, even though the Army has no problem with soldiers taking the drug — when he stopped the medication cold turkey.

"I'm absolutely convinced that Kevin would be alive today if he had felt like the military would have accepted that illness as an illness and not as a weakness," said Hohman, who is best friends with Mark Graham.

At Fort Carson, Graham said, he continually encourages soldiers to get help for mental-health issues.

"The stigma is terrible for depression," he said. "You're supposed to be tough, tough people. I think the stigma is harder on men than it is on women. Guys, you raise them up to be tough, suck it up, come on, get beyond it, get through it."

Kevin's sister found his body

Jeff and Kevin were supposed to play golf on the morning of June 21, 2003. When Kevin didn't show, Jeff called his sister, Melanie, who lived with Kevin in an apartment off campus. She found him in his bedroom.

The Grahams flew to Kentucky from Korea. At the funeral home, Jeff stood alongside his brother's casket.

"Jeffrey looked at me and said, 'I just want to crawl in there with him,' " Hohman remembered.

Jeff was always the cool one, an athlete who always had a smile and an attitude that the glass was always more than full.

After he graduated, he went to Fort Knox. The Army told him he didn't have to deploy to Iraq, that he could stay stateside and train other soldiers.

"Jeff . . . told his fiancée that the only thing worse than being at war was being a soldier and not being at war," Graham said.

Second Lt. Jeff Graham was on foot patrol in Kalidiyah, outside of Fallujah, when he ordered his platoon to split, a group on either side of the road. He noticed something odd, with a wire protruding from it, resting on a guardrail. He stopped his platoon. As he turned to grab his radio to alert his troops, the bomb blew.

At their home in Fort Sill, Okla., Carol Graham woke at 5:30 a.m. She read on the Internet that two soldiers were killed in Kalidiyah.

"Mark, would we know by now if that was Jeffrey or not?" she asked her husband. He said it was too soon to know.

"I had this feeling," she said. Later, they found out one of the dead was Jeff.

"All I could think of was, when that bomb went off, Kevin was right there and he caught him. And they're together."

Oversees 21,000 at Carson

From his office overlooking the Mountain Post, Maj. Gen. Graham is responsible for more than 21,000 Fort Carson employees; only the governor has more workers under his supervision in Colorado.

He oversees Division West, which trains 190,000 National Guard and Reserve soldiers west of the Mississippi. Graham directs more than \$1.9 billion in construction projects through 2013 and Fort Carson's effort to expand Piñon Canyon Maneuver Site near Trinidad. He's also preparing for the move of 10,000 troops from the 4th Infantry Division in Fort Hood, Texas, to Fort Carson.

Yet each week, regardless of the demands of the day, Graham, 53, visits wounded soldiers assigned to the Warrior Transition Unit, where soldiers have one mission: to get well.

Some of the people who were once Fort Carson's harshest critics say Graham is approachable, a listener and a doer.

"I see Gen. Graham as a leader who carries the weight of an awesome responsibility, both from an operational responsibility and from the standpoint of being human and maintaining his humanity. I think he's doing a great job," said Andrew Pogany, a special investigator for the National Veterans Legal Services Program, a nonprofit organization providing pro bono legal services for veterans and active-duty troops.

Pogany said he has met with the general several times to talk about individual soldiers. After listening, Graham ensured that one soldier would receive a higher quality of care and that others who were injured did not deploy to Iraq.

A difficult duty

In November 2007, after six weeks on the post, Graham announced a new Warrior and Family Community Partnership program. He asked experts locally and nationally to offer recommendations to Fort Carson on how to provide comprehensive care for soldiers and families.

One of his more difficult duties is to speak at Welcome Home ceremonies for soldiers returning from war. They are joyful events. Wives wave "I love you" signs, and children run exuberantly into open arms of their fathers.

The Grahams believe the family was fortunate after Kevin's death, that no family member blamed another for not recognizing the depression — a problem that fractures many families after a suicide.

"What was so hard, when you have a child die by suicide, you feel like the worst parents in the world. You feel like such a failure," Carol Graham said. "And then you have one that dies trying to save his platoon, and then everybody's like: 'Oh, my God, you raised this American hero.' It's almost like they're elevating the parents.

"They were both really, really great sons. It wasn't like we had one bad son or one good son. They were both heroes."

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Biography:

Maj. Gen. Mark Graham

Military service

- Commander of Division West and Fort Carson in September 2007
- U.S. Army North (5th Army) deputy commanding general, Fort Sam Houston, Texas, in 2005
- Directed largest military evacuation following the Hurricane Katrina devastation in New Orleans, including the Superdome, the I-10 Causeway and the convention center. Received the Defense Meritorious Service and Humanitarian Service medals for his efforts.
- Served as executive officer to the commander in chief, United Nations Command/Combined Forces Command/U.S. Forces Korea.
- Served in numerous command and staff field artillery positions in Baumholder, Germany; Fort Sill, Okla.; Los Angeles; and Alexandria, Va.
- Commissioned a second lieutenant of field artillery at Murray State University in 1977.

Education

- Murray State University, bachelor's degree in political science
- Oklahoma City University, master's degree in business administration
- National Defense University, master's degree in national security and strategic studies
- U.S. Army Command and General Staff College
- National War College

Awards

- Defense Superior Service Medal
- Two Legion of Merit medals (two oak leaf clusters)
- Bronze Star Medal
- Six Meritorious Service medals
- Joint Service Commendation Medal
- Five Army Commendation medals (four oak leaf clusters)

- Army Achievement Medal

Personal

- Grew up in Belleview, Ill.
- Married fellow MSU student Carol Shroat; three children, Jeff and Kevin, deceased, and Melanie