Focus Questions for The Invisible Front: Love and Loss in an Era of Endless War

These focus questions are intended to aid you in the active reading of Yochi Dreazen’s book “The Invisible Front: Love and Loss in an Era of Endless War.” This book was selected by Professor Elizabeth Kubala.

The questions are written with the intention of helping you. You won’t be tested on your answers and you can feel free to read the book without them should you choose. And there aren’t any correct answers for these questions. It’s more important to question the text and reflect on what the answers might be than to seek for a definitive “correct” answer.

The questions are designed to model the process of active reading, which is a skill with which you should already be familiar. Active reading is a crucial skill for doing well in law school, and the more adept you become at it before you come to school, the better you will do during your time here. If you would like to learn more about active reading, there is content discussing the topic in more depth on the Legal Writer’s Toolkit site.

You shouldn’t assume that these questions indicate a point of view or that they’re trying to steer you to answer them in a particular way. Rather, they’re intended to provoke you to think critically about what you read and to help you form your own conclusions, based on the information the author gives you about the topics discussed in the book.

We hope you find The Invisible Front interesting and thought-provoking, and we look forward to meeting you and working with you over the course of the next few years.
NOTE

TRIGGER WARNING. This is not an easy book to read. It is a book about the devastating effects of depression, mental illness, and war. If you are, or believe you will be, susceptible to depression, if you have suffered, or are suffering, from Post-Traumatic Stress, or believe that you will be negatively affected in any way by this book or its discussion of these issues you should not read this book or any of the accompanying materials, including these focus questions. If you believe you are suffering from any symptoms of mental illness or have any concerns that you might suffer from these symptoms in the future you should immediately speak to someone and seek professional help.

At Syracuse, you can receive help from:

A. Barnes Center at the Arch:
   i. 24-Hour Support: Call 315.443.8000

Syracuse University students experiencing a mental health crisis, seeking support for sexual assault or relationship violence, or needing medical consultation can receive free confidential services 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling 315.443.8000. Please note, routine consultations should hold until the next business day;

   ii. Schedule an Appointment: Call 315.443.8000

B. Lawyer Assistance Program [https://nysba.org/lawyer-assistance-program/](https://nysba.org/lawyer-assistance-program/)

The Lawyer Assistance Program (LAP) of the New York State Bar Association was established in 1990 to assist attorneys, judges, and law school students who are affected by alcoholism, drug abuse, stress, depression, and other mental health issues. LAP also provides support services to families, law firms and others in the legal community who are concerned about mental health issues among attorneys.
PROLOGUE

1. The author writes that depression is viewed as a sign of weakness in the military. Is this true in other areas as well? Is it true in general society?

2. Do you have any knowledge of post-traumatic stress disorder? Have you heard the term before? Did you know the military’s suicide rate had jumped 80% in seven years? Before you read further, think about why this might be and what steps you believe the military is taking, or should take, to combat this problem.

CHAPTER ONE

1. The author describes the fairly typical life of a college student in the 1970s. Was your experience similar? Dissimilar? In what ways?

2. The author describes the role of family histories play in cases of depression and suicide. Were you aware that family history is an important piece of information for those who treat mental health problems?

CHAPTER TWO

1. Are you surprised to learn of the state of the army in 1978? Were you aware of the discipline issues the author describes? How do you think the army of today compares with the post-Vietnam era army the author describes here?

2. Were you aware of the effect of post-traumatic stress from the Vietnam war? Is this issue discussed along with other aspects of the war or is it ignored? Is the Vietnam war something about which you are familiar or is it something about which students of your generation are only dimly aware of, if at all?

3. Post-traumatic stress is not a new phenomenon. Are you surprised to read of its symptoms being mentioned in the Iliad and the Odyssey? If it has been known about for so long, why has it taken so long for it to become an accepted and recognized condition?

4. Based on what you know of the deaths of the Grahams’ two sons, what role did PTSD play in them? If they did not suffer from PTSD, why is the author spending so much time talking about the condition in this chapter? Do you expect the author to tie this information into the text later in the book? How will you feel if that expectation is not realized?
5. The author discusses the incidence of “fragging” during the Vietnam war. Do you know why the problem has that name? Are you surprised to learn that there were 333 cases of fragging in 1971? That one expert estimates that 20% of American officers who died during Vietnam died at the hands of their own soldiers?

5. Is fragging a new phenomenon? If so, what was different about the Vietnam war that it led to the development of this phenomenon? If not, what percentage of casualties do you think were due to this practice in previous conflicts? Why has the author not told us about the history of this practice before Vietnam? If fragging was known before Vietnam, would not the change in frequency of such acts be the most significant statistic for us to learn?

CHAPTER THREE

1. How much do you know of the Iraq war of 1991?

2. Did you grow up as the child of military parents? One parent? Is the Grahams’ life, described here, similar to your childhood? How do you think that life has affected you as an adult? If you didn’t grow up in this way, can you imagine what that life must be like?

CHAPTER FOUR

1. The author spends this chapter telling us a lot about Jeff Graham and his school days. Why does he do this? What is the purpose of this chapter when we already know what will happen to Jeff Graham? Is this level of detail important to your understanding of what will come later in this book? What expectations do you have about this book based on the level of detail you’re getting in this and other chapters?
CHAPTER FIVE

1. The author describes a lot of thoughts and conversations Jeff Graham had. How did the author learn about these? Is the author inventing these things based on what he knows, or believes he knows, about Jeff Graham or does he have a source that allows him to write these things?

2. The author's focus appears to be on Jeff Graham in this and the previous few chapters. Will we learn more about Kevin Graham as well?

3. Were you in the ROTC? Does the experience the author describes sound familiar to you? If you were not in the ROTC, does this experience sound pleasurable or difficult to you? Did you know anyone in ROTC when you were an undergraduate? Did you imagine they were going through something like the author describes here?

CHAPTER SIX

1. Is the author blaming Kevin Graham's parents for not spotting his depression earlier? For not identifying his drinking problem sooner? Is this the author's opinion or is he reflecting the opinions of Kevin Graham's parents? If you were Kevin Graham's close friend, would you have spotted his depression or drinking problem? If you had, what would you have done about it?

2. Based on what the author told you about Kevin Graham, do you think his life would have been significantly different if he had gone to a different college?
CHAPTER SEVEN

1. TRIGGER WARNING. This chapter deals with the circumstances that led to Kevin Graham’s suicide. If you think you will find this information disturbing or difficult you should avoid reading it.

2. Why might ROTC students not be allowed to take drugs like Ritalin? What are drugs like Ritalin? What effect do they have?

3. The author says that Kevin Graham “panicked” when he responded to his brother’s call about Ritalin. How does the author know this?

CHAPTER EIGHT

1. The author describes the reactions of many people to Kevin Graham’s suicide. Why does he spend so much time discussing this? Are you surprised by some of the reactions to Kevin Graham’s death?

CHAPTER NINE

1. TRIGGER WARNING. This chapter deals graphically with some of the horrors of war. You should be prepared for this and if you are concerned about how you might react to it you should avoid reading this chapter.

CHAPTER TEN

1. This chapter begins with a description of what Jeff Graham did on the day he died. How does the author know these details? If he is assuming what someone in Jeff Graham’s situation would do when, for example, waking up in the morning, does this make the author less credible as a source of information, because you can’t tell what he knows and what he’s making up, or does that have no effect on his credibility?

2. The author has made clear that the patrol Jeff Graham will lead in this chapter will lead to his death, but he then leads us on a multi-page discussion of the base where the platoon is staying and the nature of relations with those living close to the base. Why does the author
do this? Do you see how the author has complete control of the narrative, and you, and can speed you through the narrative or slow it down at will? Is he slowing things down here intentionally? How do you react to this? Is this the author’s intended result?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

1. The author describes the army’s process for notifying next-of-kin of a soldier’s death. Are you surprised that the process could take so long? Could it be done in a different, faster, way? Is it appropriate for the army to be so methodical about the notification process?

2. The author reports what was said at Jeff Graham’s memorial service at Camp Manhattan. The author report verbatim quotes from the service. Given the possibility that he previously invented some facts or thoughts that are believable, or even likely, but for which he might not have concrete support, do you believe these quotes are accurate? Note that there is an author’s note at the back of the book that explains his process for developing support for the material in the book.

3. The author describes the Grahams’ pain at the different ways in which people react to the deaths of their two sons. This observation comes more than halfway through the book, and yet it was revealed as one of the central themes in the book early on in the book’s prologue. Why has it taken so long for the author to reach this observation? Was it necessary to spend so much time learning about the Grahams so that we would understand the parent’s reactions to their sons’ deaths?

CHAPTER TWELVE

1. TRIGGER WARNING. Again, this chapter deals with the suicide of someone we learn about in some detail. If you think you will find this information disturbing or difficult you should avoid reading it.

2. This chapter spends some time discussing Mike and Stephanie Pelkey and their lives. Does this seem to you to be similar to the way the author introduced you to Jeff and Kevin Graham? Do you have a sense of foreboding about what is to come?

3. Do the symptoms Mike Pelkey suffered from after returning from Iraq seem like the symptoms of PTSD you have learned about? If so, why was it difficult for him to get an
appointment with an army psychologist or psychiatrist? If PTSD has been a condition recognized since Vietnam, and significantly before that, why is the army not better prepared to deal with soldiers returning from combat?

4. The author tells us that Stephanie Pelkey was an officer in the army but had not heard of PTSD. How is this possible? Why would the army not tell its soldiers about the condition so they would recognize it in themselves or others?

5. Why would the military not agree to relocate the behavioral health clinic to the hospital, thereby removing a visible sign that a soldier was seeking treatment for mental health problems?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

1. How much do you know about Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath? Do you remember it? Did you study it in school?

2. Were you aware of the number of suicides the military experienced during the period the author describes? Are you surprised that the suicide rate was lower before the increase in suicides the author describes? Given what you have learned about the experiences soldiers go through, are you surprised to learn of this increase?

3. The circumstances surrounding Kevin Graham’s suicide and those of the soldiers at Fort Bragg, and elsewhere, appear to be different. How will the author connect them?

4. At the end of this chapter the author reveals the connections he seeks to draw between the incidence of suicides in the military and the suicide of Kevin Graham. Is the connection successful? Why would the military be unprepared for the “flood” of PTSD and TBI cases during and after the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts when it had the experience of Vietnam and previous wars to suggest that those injuries would be coming?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

1. Had you considered the impact that a less-than-honorable discharge can have on a member of the military? Do you see why such a discharge could be particularly devastating to someone suffering from PTSD or other combat-related medical conditions?

2. Do you recall the story, told earlier in this book, about how General Patton treated a soldier suffering from what was then termed as “battle fatigue?” Reading the author’s
description of the way soldiers suffering from PTSD were treated after returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, consider whether anything had changed in the more than 60 years since Patton’s behavior.

3. Are you surprised to learn that senior officers, and even civilians who have not been directly affected by combat, can experience PTSD symptoms? Why would that be surprising?

4. Do you see how a PTSD diagnosis could affect a soldier’s chances for promotion? Why such a diagnosis prevents pilots from flying? The author notes that women who have been traumatized by sexual assault are injured twice; personally, by the assault, and professionally, by the military’s response to the injury. Is this a problem limited just to the military? Are there answers to these problems? Is there any justification for the military’s behavior? Can criminal sentencing take into account the effect of a crime on the victim? Could such an enhancement be applied even after the perpetrator is sentenced? Would such an enhancement be Constitutional?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

1. The author discusses the QPR – question, persuade, and refer – initiative. Having read this book, will you be more aware of potential signs of depression or hopelessness in others and be prepared to question, persuade, and refer someone who is displaying such symptoms?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

1. Try to place yourself in Mark Graham’s position and imagine what steps you could take to lower the number of murders and suicides at Fort Carson. Remember that you also must face the military’s deep-seated beliefs and prejudices about suicide and mental health issues. What do you think the consequences for someone making such changes might be?
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

1. The author describes the measures Mark Graham took to change the way things worked at Fort Carson. What do you think of the changes he made? Were the changes you thought about in the previous chapter similar? Do you see why some of the changes he made caused resentment among some of the soldiers? Were these resentments justified, especially in a military setting? Given that some soldiers resented Mark Graham’s approach, are these changes things that could be applied in all military settings?

2. The author notes the response of one officer who resented Mark Graham’s intervention in one case, noting that preventing officers from holding a soldier “accountable to the standards and values of our institution.” Are these standards and values a strength or weakness for an institution like the army? As you consider your answer, remember and reflect on both what the army is required to do and the circumstances under which it is required to operate, and also the effect those circumstances can have on soldiers. Should the standards and values of the army change?

3. Are you surprised to learn that a trained medical professional held views of PTSD that were diametrically opposed to Mark Graham’s views? Does it concern you that this book has been written almost completely from the Grahams’ perspective? Would you have liked to hear a more balanced presentation that allowed opposing viewpoints to be heard? Or do you think there is only one legitimate view of PTSD and that the book’s presentation was sufficiently unbiased?

EPILOGUE

1. The author notes the steps the military and Department of Veterans Affairs have taken to change the way it approaches personnel who are suffering from mental health problems. Are these steps sufficient? Should more be done? What steps would you add?

2. The author discusses the incidence of suicide in the general population. Had you considered that this was information we hadn’t read before? Should suicide in the military be treated as its own, separate, issue or should it be considered in the context of suicide in contemporary society?

3. Are you surprised to learn that antianxiety and antidepressant medications can cause “an initial spike in suicidal thinking?”

4. There is no mention of ways in which the law and lawyers might be used to alleviate the problems outlined in this book. Does the law have a role to play? What might that role be?