Graphic novel helps corpsmen cope with combat-related stress

By Valerie Kremer, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery Public Affairs

The Naval Health Research Center (NHRC) recently produced a 200-page graphic novel called "*The Docs*" as a communication tool to help Navy corpsmen with the stresses of combat deployments.

The graphic novel tells the stories of four fictional corpsmen serving in Iraq at the height of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"Since the start of combat operations in the Middle East, Navy Medicine recognized that expeditionary hospital corpsmen have extremely high exposure to the many significant stressors of war, both acute and chronic," said Capt. Greg Utz, NHRC commanding officer. "Their dual roles as caregivers and combatants puts them at high risk for stress injuries, so we developed this graphic novel as an innovative way to help our Sailors prepare for and interpret situations they may see in theater."

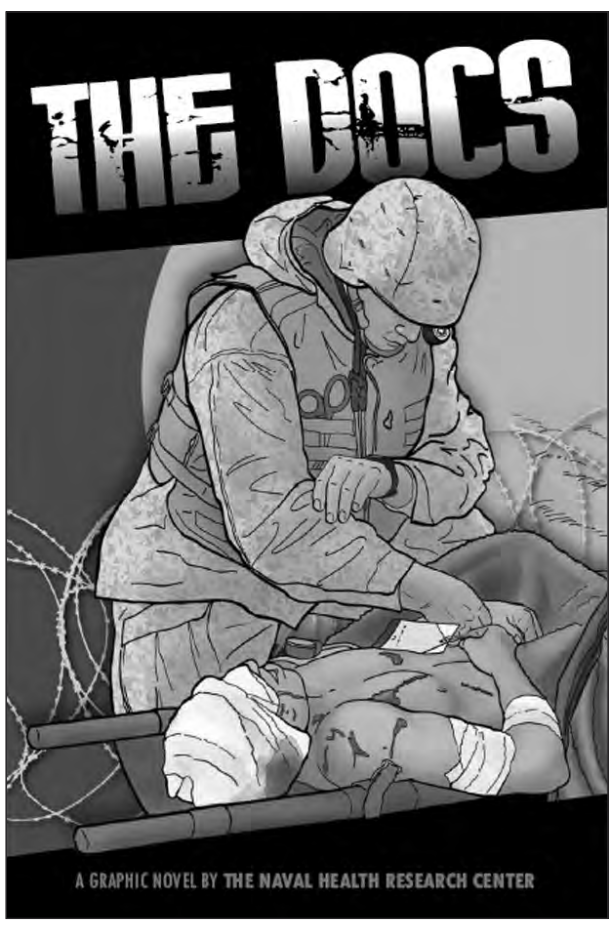
"*The Docs*" portrays four expeditionary Corpsmen from both active duty and Reserve components, who are deployed with Marine Corps and seabee units.

The story follows them as they grapple with having to kill enemy forces; struggle to save the lives of wounded Sailors and Marines; encounter home front problems such as injuries to their children, and other concerns that test their resilience.

In addition, they battle the stigma of seeking mental health care for their patients and for themselves, and gain greater awareness of their need to care for one another.

"The goal for this story is to provide an entertaining and community-appropriate message of the importance of caring for the caregiver, and the responsibility shared in that endeavor," said Utz.

As an integral part of the Navy Medicine Care for the Caregiver program, "*The Docs*" was developed with the intent to instill realistic expectations of possible deployment stressors, and to provide examples for corpsmen on helpful techniques for in-theater care of stress injuries.



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Graphic novels tell stories through use of sequential art in a traditional comic format, but have a beginning, middle and end, as with traditional text novels. This format was chosen specifically for its appeal to the targeted age group and its value in providing thought-provoking content for discussion in training scenarios.

Jerry Larson, Ph.D., NHRC chief scientist for behavioral health, said the format works in helping provide corpsmen with tools they will need in high stress situations. Initial feedback from the Hospital Corps has been positive.

"Addressing the psychological toll of combat and creating the expectation of recovery is one of the most critical things we can achieve in Navy Medicine," said Larson. "While sometimes recovery requires assistance from mental health providers, nevertheless the expectation of recovery must be instilled."

Larson said copies of the "*The Docs*" will be distributed to corpsmen preparing to deploy. The primary audience for distribution is the Naval Expeditionary Medical Training Institute, and field medical training battalions - both of which are located on Marine Corps bases.

Navy and Marine Corps personnel can order a free copy by visiting the Marine Corps Combat and Operational Stress Control website at: http://bhin.usmc-mccs.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=c_user.dsp_browse&cat_id=1.

The graphic novel is also available for online viewing and download at: http://www.med.navy.mil/Navy%20Medicine%20Media%20Room/Pages/Publications.aspx and plans are underway to animate the story for viewing on portable phones and computers.

TRICARE recognizes National Breast Cancer Awareness Month

By Sharon Foster, TRICARE Management Activity

October is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. It is a great opportunity for TRICARE to promote the importance of early detection and prompt treatment. Early diagnosis is key to beating breast cancer.

According to the National Cancer Institute (NCI), each year in the United States more than 192,000 women are diagnosed with breast cancer. When detected early, the five-year survival rate of patients diagnosed with Stage I breast cancer is 95 to 98 percent. Regular screening by mammogram can lead to early detection of breast cancer and improve survival, according to the NCI.

TRICARE officials encourage women to conduct breast self-exams and get annual mammograms.

"Mammograms are important because they play a key role in early breast cancer detection and help decrease breast cancer deaths," said Kathie McCracken, Health Affairs program director for Patient Advocacy, Medical Ethics and Women's Health Issues. "They can be used to check for breast cancer in women who have no signs or symptoms of the disease or to check for breast cancer after a lump or other sign or symptom of the disease has been found."

To encourage women to get mammograms, TRICARE beneficiaries in specific age and risk categories have no copayment for mammograms.

TRICARE beneficiaries are entitled to an annual mammogram starting at age 40 and at a doctor's discretion for women younger than 40 who are at high risk of developing breast cancer. Beneficiaries identified as high risk for breast cancer (due to family history, etc.) are covered for annual mammograms beginning at age 35.

In March 2007, TRICARE added breast magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to the battery of cancer screenings it covers. TRICARE Prime beneficiaries age 30 or older and TRICARE Standard beneficiaries age 35 or older, can have a breast MRI as an annual screening procedure if, according to American Cancer Society guidelines, they are considered at high risk of developing breast cancer.

After taking every preventive measure against breast cancer, a patient could still hear these four words from a doctor: "You have breast cancer."

This diagnosis can be very shocking and scary, but thanks to treatment, millions of women are cancer survivors.

Following a diagnosis, the doctor will likely give several choices for treatment. TRICARE covers: mastectomy, radiation therapy and chemotherapy.

TRICARE beneficiaries can find more information about breast cancer exams and screening at www.tricare.mil. For more information about breast cancer, visit www.cancer.gov.

The editor asks:

"Did you know, the press release will turn 108 years old at the end of this month? On Oct. 28, 1906, approximately 50 people lost their lives when a Pennsylvania Railroad three-car train jumped a trestle in Atlantic City, N.J., and plunged into a nearby creek.

"That afternoon, Ivy Ledbetter Lee, who some consider to be the father of modern public relations, created the first press release. Following the accident, Lee convinced the railroad company to distribute a public statement.

"A major New York newspaper company was so impressed with this innovative approach to corporate communications that it printed the first press release — verbatim Oct. 30, 1906 as a 'Statement from the Road.' In the weeks that followed, both newspapers and public officials praised Pennsylvania Railroad for its openness and honesty.

"The following spring, Lee was hired to represent coal operators during a strike. When he mailed out the second press release, journalists started expressing hostility, calling it an ad disguised as a story sent to manipulate news coverage.

"Lee then issued a 'Declaration of Principles' that stated, 'This is not a secret press bureau. All our work is done in the open. We aim to supply news. If you think any of our matter ought properly to go to your business office, do not use it.'

"His Declaration of Principles added, 'Our matter is accurate. Further details on any subject treated will be supplied promptly, and any editor will be assisted most cheerfully in verifying directly any statement of fact. In brief, our plan is, frankly and openly, on behalf of business concerns and public institutions, to supply to the press and public of the United States prompt and accurate information concerning subjects which it is of value and interest to the public to know about.'

"More than a hundred years later, some things are significantly different, but others are remarkably unchanged.

"Now, in addition to the traditional press release disseminated by fax or e-mail, their is the 'social media press release' with online news search engines offering the likes of such websites as Facebook, Twitter, del.icio.us, Technorati and Digg, to name a few."