

Get published and enjoy making a difference

For most soldiers, the effort of writing has much in common with the possibility of "taking a bullet." It may be inevitable at some time in the future, but the experience will not be pleasant.

Although I shared those feelings at one time, it is no longer true. In fact, writing for publication has become my favorite hobby.

Writing provides enormous personal, professional and emotional rewards. For a professional soldier, there can be few better ways to use profitably your off-duty time — not to make money, but to make a positive, concrete contribution to our service — something I believe everyone wants to do.

Since the Army is so large, sometimes it is difficult to feel like we have any impact on the whole or even part of our organization. Although this is perhaps a true statement for all but the most senior officers, it is not true for the military writer, regardless of grade. Military writers can and do have an impact.

Most military newspaper, magazine and journal editors judge the quality of positions and arguments presented in an article, and not the grade or position of the author. Although it may sound overly simplistic, anyone who is willing to work at it can write well. And the more you write, the better writer you become.

The printed page is still one of the great American

equalizers. This is no less true for military writers. What rank insignia you wear is not of overriding importance. What you have to say could be.

If you have an opinion, put it on paper and send it to an editor. In addition, writing is a great way to vent frustration with a sometimes imposing and seemingly unfeeling bureaucracy.

There are three general markets for the military writer — scholarly academic, informational and opinion-editorials. The majority of the pieces appearing in scholarly academic journals are highly footnoted, reflecting a great deal of research and individual effort. Publication in such places can be tough but potentially rewarding.

Informational publications accept articles on a variety of military and national topics. They include historical, contemporary personnel and pay issues, as well as international affairs articles.

The branch magazines are perfect forums for the discussion of branch-specific issues, tactics for employment and other professional subjects. They are read by a relatively small community, but if you have a recommendation to make about how to do something better in your field, branch magazines are a great place to start.

Opinion pieces and editorials are an excellent way to get a point across or to vent frustration. Often I have found that when an issue interests or angers me, it interests or angers others as well. And finding that others support your position and ideas can be enormously gratifying.

When I'm angry or frustrated, I often find myself heading for the word processor to write about it. The writing process compels me to examine my anger in the light of cold, hard facts.

Sometimes I do not get beyond the second or third page before realizing my feelings were based on something other than the issue at hand. Deeply felt emotions can make for good writing.

Unexpectedly, I have found writing therapeutic. Writing, knowing others might read my words, compels me to think clearly, articulate my position, and make a convincing argument. By the time I finish an article, the an-

ger is replaced with a kind of simple satisfaction. Bottom line: Even if nobody ever reads my articles, I feel better having written them.

The act of writing an opinion piece, in particular, allows one to be emotional and passionate in stating a position. If it is done well, facts will often come out as well. Opinions without facts are just opinions. Opinion editors are not just looking for opinion, but "informed" opinion.

Although military writing and publishing will not get one promoted, the research and additional reading required cannot hurt. Many successful senior officers are also prolific military writers.

Another benefit of writing for publication should be obvious: As one grows more senior, writing and editorial duties will grow. Senior officers and NCOs spend a great deal of time composing official documents, orders and efficiency reports. The better you write, the more effectively you will do your job. Most people only have to overcome their initial fear of writing.

Current ethics rules do not permit officers to accept payment for the articles they publish, but no such impediment exists after retirement or for NCOs. Many magazines and newspapers pay writers for their efforts. Personally, money was never a prime motivation for writing and publishing for me. Having an impact was always more important.

In examining my personal motivation to write, I find the most meaningful reason is a desire to change things and to make a difference. I think many people feel the way I do, but they are perhaps frustrated by the feeling that they are alone in an enormous organization.

Writing can provide an outlet — a way to make a positive concrete contribution. Whatever your feelings, you are probably not alone. Writing for publication is a way to prove that to yourself.

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