

How to write personal military stories for veterans.

Do Bar Fights Count? How To Write Your Military Stories

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Do Bar Fights Count?

How To Write Your Military Stories

PART I

WRITER BASIC TRAINING

Chapter 1

Do Bar Fights Count?

Thank you for serving your country. If I am the first person to thank you, I am honored.

This book grew out of the class I taught for three years, *Writing War Stories*. While writing this book, I realize the reason I developed the class and this book grew from two basic emotions—love and anger. Love for the sacrifices my fellow veterans made and anger for how veterans have been treated in this country the past 85+ years.

When I get angry, watch out. I take action. Trying to convince folks I'm just a cupcake with weapons training doesn't seem to work. I'm a warrior woman writer. The universe has been put on notice. For the veteran who wants to learn how to write, this book is for you.

Veterans made personal sacrifices every day in the military, whether in combat, underwater in submarines, risking the challenge of high mountain climbing, watching for blips on radar screens in the Aleutians, or preparing mess hall food in a tent. What you did and do is important. I want the rest of the nation to know what it takes to defend freedom, day in and day out. To do that, I would ask you to write down your military experiences.

This book is my way to thank my fellow veterans for preserving the freedom I love. If thank you is enough and you don't want to write, that's fine. I have accomplished my mission. But, if you do want to write, here is how I taught the class. Let's go over some rules of the road before we get down to writing. You know, that SOP stuff.

Standard Operating Procedures

To answer the chapter title: do bar fights count as part of military service? You bet your ass bar fights count. War time AND peace time service count. Every veteran counts. When the *Writing War Stories* classes started in 1997, I knew it would be important to let veterans know their experiences mattered. Telling their stories made a difference to them. I didn't know then how much I was underestimating the simple act of recognition.

When I first decided to develop the class, I told a former Navy co-worker, Charlie Smith, about the course.

“What's the class called?” he asked.

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“Writing War Stories.”

He paused. “Do bar fights count?”

“Of course,” I stated emphatically.

“I didn’t see much action bobbing off the coast of Vietnam on an aircraft carrier,” he said. “But there were times when planes didn’t quite make it back or smashed into the carrier.” Charlie has other war stories, beyond the bar fights, but he hasn’t written his stories yet.

Everyone who served in the military has “war” stories. Hugh joined my first *Writing War Stories* class. Hugh went into France on D-Day plus two. He was bombed and strafed. He helped carry the wounded and processed prisoners of war. A stevedore, Hugh insisted he was a non-combatant. By the end of the class, we got him to admit he experienced combat. He also didn’t sit off to one side of the class anymore, physically removed from the combat veterans.

Through teaching I discovered my own stories made a difference, both as a woman Army private and later as a reserve Air Force officer. Scholars say we teach what we need to learn. So it was in my case.

It is clear to me every Army, Navy, Marine, Air Force, Reserve, National Guard, Coast Guard, and Merchant Marine service member made a difference. Every man, woman and animal, whether black or white, Native American or Asian, male or female, gay, straight or four-footed matters. Our service guaranteed the freedom we enjoy today and that we must continue to defend.

The legacy of the Korean and Vietnam Wars left many veterans feeling their sacrifices were not important to the citizens of the United States.

In 1975 I only wore my dress green Army uniform in an airport one time. Complete strangers gave me hostile looks. I was carrying a stuffed pink elephant, on my way home from basic and advanced training. How bad a person did they think I was? I always wore my “civvies” when I traveled after that. I learned to be an invisible vet, especially easy for a woman veteran.

Do not doubt the power of putting these stories on paper. Their touch reaches beyond boundaries. I have had veterans send the yearly anthology book we published to their unit historians, and then receive a call from a long lost buddy who read the tale. One veteran was contacted by the children of a soldier who died in Vietnam. They wanted to learn what kind of man their father was through the stories of the last man to see him alive.

Who defines a veteran? I don’t use the Veterans Affairs or Department of Defense categories. To my way of thinking, veterans served with the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, Merchant Marine, Active Duty,

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Reserve, National Guard, Women's Air Service Pilots, WAVES, WAM, WACs, Army Air Corps, Flying Tigers, Native American scouts, Buffalo Soldiers, and military combat artists and photographers.

Men and women also served with dogs in the canine corps, mules hauling equipment, dolphins for undersea duty, even a few elephants and camels have their stories to be told. The heartbreaking story of the U.S. military dogs abandoned at the end of the Vietnam War haunts their handlers to this day. War seems to be an equal opportunity employer; man, woman, and beast.

Who defines wars? Forget all the categories, in-country, out-of-country, peacetime, humanitarian mission, on-planet and off-planet (military astronauts). If you served in the military or the other services, you are a vet by my definition, with stories to tell. I find peacetime a misnomer—we lost 268 military members in Beirut, Lebanon, 40 in Panama, 19 in Grenada and 8 in Somalia, plus 20 in El Salvador, 1 in Honduras and 1 in Libya, 28 due to terrorism and 148 in the Persian Gulf in 1987--all during peacetime. There are also training accidents, like the 10 Air National Guard crew members of King 56 lost in Oregon, with one survivor, in 1996. In 2000, 17 men and women lost their lives in the terrorist attack on the U.S.S. *Cole* in Yemen.

Then September 11, 2001. We lost innocents, families, children, civilians, veterans, FDNY, NYPD, Port Authority Police, emergency medical workers, a canine police dog, active duty military personnel, Department of Defense workers, and our national innocence. Several days later on September 21, Prisoner of War/Missing In Action Day, I realized we had MIAs buried in the rubble of The Pentagon. This book became even more important for me to finish.

Veterans have always known this country was vulnerable to attack, but none of us could envision such horrific events on 9-11. That day I saw the 1,000 yard stare in co-workers eyes I had only seen before in vet's eyes. I knew we were a nation rocked to our gut. I also knew we had the best men and women in the Armed Forces out kicking butt and taking prisoners—only because prisoners might give information to stop further terrorism.

Veterans have been dealing with tragic loss since before this nation was born. I've had men cry in my class fifty years after a battle. It's okay. These memories do not go away in a year, five years or ten.

Wars claimed 408,306 men and women in World War II, 54,246 in the Korean War, 58,219 in the Vietnam War and 363 during Desert Shield and Desert Storm. We've lost more than 254 Americans in Operation Enduring Freedom and 2,240 in Operation Iraq Freedom, with more than 17,097 wounded in action, as of Jan. 22, 2006. (Figures from www.iava.org)

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Combat veterans know who they are and I honor them. Those of us who have not been in combat have still experienced loss and death. The increasing reliance on the Reserves and National Guard ensures everyone has war stories, even during peacetime. At one point in my peacetime Army career, eight soldiers died in training accidents in two months. Stupid accidents, but preparing for war is a dangerous business and people get hurt and killed in training.

Getting Started

When you are ready to begin, write whatever you want to about your military experiences. Tell it as truthfully as you remember. It will be the truth, as you experienced and recall it.

Most veterans start writing for their families. So let's consider you are writing a true-life, non-fiction personal history. The combat veterans in my first class thought "memoir" sounded uppity. Or maybe you prefer writing fiction, dressing up your personal experiences. Writing fiction can free a new writer from feeling someone is looking over his or her shoulder. After all, it's not "real." Change the names, physical descriptions, some places and you're home free. Anyone with fiction questions, take a look at Richard Marcinko's books—after his first non-fiction book *Rogue Warrior*, most are labeled fiction.

We've defined "war stories," now let's move onto the writing challenge itself. To begin, let me say "Congratulations." It takes courage to write. My hat is off to those who try the writer's journey.

Whether a few words or a few lines, a paragraph or a book, this is such important work to let others know the toll and the triumphs of military service. If I can help by providing guidelines as you start, I will frolic. It is very little to contribute considering what every one of you has already given.

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

We need to talk about some special considerations when writing war stories. I told my classes, "I run the Clint Eastwood school of writing; we talk and write about the good, the bad and the ugly." To be truthful, one cannot be politically correct. So, let loose. War and keeping the peace are nasty businesses at best and strong human emotions are involved.

A writer holds his or her readers to a story with emotion. Writers live life twice, once when they experience it, again when they write about it. For some veterans, emotions are the last thing they want to drag up about a war or military experience.

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Here is my caveat emptor—buyer beware. Once you open the memory bag and start writing about your experiences, events long forgotten may emerge. Most likely you will experience dreams and perhaps nightmares, symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress. **If at any time these images begin to scare or overwhelm you, please visit a counselor.** I have worked closely with the Veterans Outreach Centers in Portland and Salem, Oregon. I have experienced depression and dreams not only from my own experiences, but from listening to and reading veteran's stories. It happens. Called "vicarious traumatization" or "secondary stress" in counseling circles, I knew the stories would eventually catch up to me after I started teaching the class, but when they did I was still surprised. I was able to deal with the nightmares by reducing my writing classes from two to one.

A World War II combat veteran began having nightmares near the end of the ten-week course. He would write his stories and cry at his computer. "Why is it happening now? It's been more than 50 years since Pearl Harbor. I've never had this problem before," he told me. "Even after I was left in a pile of dead sailors on the ship, until somebody spotted me breathing."

We discussed intrusive memories. "It's happening because you are going back there." He went to see the Vet Center counselors. It helped him to find out he was having a normal reaction to Post Traumatic Stress. Military members don't have time to fully grieve or process events when they happen—survival depends on sucking it up and moving on to the next fight.

In 2000, the crew of the U.S.S. *Cole* had to fight to keep their ship afloat, aid the wounded and locate the dead while still being on alert for another attack. Months or even years will need to pass before these veterans can contemplate revisiting those experiences and sorting them out. Survival takes priority.

That is why I believe Desert Shield and Desert Storm veterans' stories will begin to trickle out now, more than fifteen years after the war. Of course, Gulf War II also kicked in memories for us Desert Storm veterans. Korean and Vietnam War veterans are also finally claiming the importance of their never-told stories.

My wish is for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans to start writing now to help them process their experiences, whether rage or numbness.

Time can be merciful. I encourage veteran writers to use the Veterans Affairs Outreach Centers. Heaven knows you've earned the right. I always gave a Vet Center brochure to each veteran at the beginning of class. A list of Veteran Outreach Centers and a copy of the brochure can be found in

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Appendix B. Please use them. If nothing else, to have them tell you it is normal to experience these things.

Some veterans who are dealing with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) have found writing can be a healing way to deal with memories. I encourage PTSD veterans to start or join writing groups at Vet Centers with their counselors; this includes Vet Center counselors treating incarcerated veterans in prisons.

After three years of teaching ten classes, I have experienced and seen the positive healing, forgiveness and pride that comes from writing down these stories and reading them out loud amongst other veterans. It is one way to deal with the pain and joy of the military.

Veterans who are seeking health claims from the Department of Veterans' Affairs many times have only other veterans to rely upon for documentation.

But the power of stories reaches way beyond recounting facts and figures. The connections made through stories can be helpful in a practical way. But perhaps most important, veteran's children and grandchildren need to know these stories to discover the legacy of freedom and the sacrifice required to keep and maintain it.

Which brings us back to the good, the bad and the ugly. Veterans are not perfect. Veterans are not saints. But, veterans are veterans, most doing the best they can. It is hard to explain the experience of being a veteran. The special bond of combat veterans is impossible for the rest of us to understand. But that is exactly why it is so important for combat veterans to write their stories, IF THEY WANT TO. The rest of us need to know, lest we forget.

Book Structure

This book is set up with chapters 1 through 13 the ten-week course on writer basic training. Chapters 14 through 26 illustrate specific veteran groups whose stories are under-represented, in my opinion. Based on personal experiences I've had with these veterans, I encourage them to write their often forgotten stories. Chapters 27 through 30 discuss the effects of trauma and the use of writing to heal. Chapter 31 is my swan song, complete with a personal wish list. Appendix A gives class guidelines for teachers.

I use my personal and family military experiences as examples, because I'm lazy, and there are copyright issues with my former students' work. It also gives the reader a way to get to know me; always important for any reader.

Everyone Is A Writer

Time for the first lesson. My favorite book to read out loud on the first night of class is Brenda Ueland's classic, *If You Want To Write*.

“Everybody is talented because everybody who is human has something to express. Everybody is original, if he tells the truth, if he speaks from himself. But it must be from his true self and not from the self he thinks he should be. So remember these two things: you are talented and you are original. Be sure of that. I say this because self-trust is one of the very most important things in writing.”

Brenda was so right. The night of my first *Writing War Stories* class, I gave the veterans their in-class assignment. When they were finished, I told them they would read their stories out loud.

It was easy to see they would have been more comfortable being sent into a firefight with a spoon. But they obeyed orders, did a great job, and found out they had much in common—rather like getting their heads shaved in basic or women recruits being forced into ugly fitting uniforms.

Brenda Ueland goes on to explain how we have acquired a fear of writing.

“How does the creative impulse die in us? The English teacher who wrote fiercely on the margin of your theme in blue pencil: “Trite, rewrite,” helped to kill it. Critics kill it, your family. Families are great murderers of the creative impulse.... Older brothers sneer at younger brothers and kill it. There is that American pastime known as ‘kidding,’ - with the result that everyone is ashamed and hang-dog about the slightest enthusiasm or passion or sincere feeling about anything.”

Brenda knew about the critics and the creativity killers. I am not the grammar or spelling police. What a beginning writer needs to know is every effort to write is valuable. The effort is half the battle. When I edit or comment on veteran's work, I use purple ink, for several reasons.

My long-suffering novel writing instructor Dee Lopez served in the Red Cross in Europe during World War II. She taught me to receive her constructive writing critiques using purple ink. Purple is a nice color. Besides being connected to the Purple Heart and royalty, I think it held me in good stead with my students too. Red or blue ink jars and reminds one of school. So, think purple when you self-edit your work. Be kind with your beginning efforts.

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From the first class, I noticed all of the veterans started writing at a high level. I believe the greatest reason is they write from the heart. They also know I will not pounce on their efforts and shred them before the morning sun. A bond of trust is created between the beginning writer and instructor. This must be true if you join a writing class, develop your own critique group, or write on your own. The forestry management writing method of slash and burn is NOT the way to teach beginning writers. Brenda says so.

all people who try to write .. become anxious, timid, contracted, become perfectionists, so terribly afraid that they may put something down that is not as good as Shakespeare.

And so no wonder you don't write and put it off month after month, decade after decade. For when you write, if it is to be any good at all, you must feel free, - free and not anxious. The only good teachers for you are those friends who love you, who think you are interesting, or very important, or wonderfully funny; whose attitude is:

“Tell me more. Tell me all you can. I want to understand more about everything you feel and know and all the changes inside and out of you. Let more come out.”

Welcome to Writer Basic Training

Writer Basic Training is not an easy job.

Writing about personal experiences is like performing heart surgery on one's self, but the rewards can be great. You will start out as a new recruit and end up a trained writing machine. Or as my Vietnam guys would say, you're an FNG now, but stick with it and you too can be an old guy writer. For those of you not familiar with the FNG term, let me explain it does not stand for “Fun New Girl” as one woman informed me while I was on a biker trip to participate in Rolling Thunder. “Fuckin New Guy” is a Vietnam acronym.

Before I go too far down the road of instruction, a note to my fellow women veterans. I've had a couple women veteran writers in my class. They are a joy, especially when we fell into the most divisive topic—swearing. More about swearing in chapter five, women veterans in chapter 18.

There are more than 1.2 million women veterans in the United States. Their stories must be recorded for history and accuracy, to quote my favorite historian, Sharon Nesbit, from the Troutdale Historical Society in Oregon. “Historians kill for these kinds of personal accounts,” she emphasized to my first class. **“If you don't write these stories down, somebody who wasn't there will and they will get it wrong.”**

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I never thought it unique to go into the Army at eighteen. My mother had served as a Marine during World War II and my dad was in the Army Air Corps. Perhaps their greatest gift to me as a child, besides all the TAB paperback books I could order at school, was the confidence I could do anything I wanted to do.

This may have been a shock to some of the men I ran into in the post-Vietnam Army in 1975, but I didn't even see my being a woman as an obstacle, so I assumed there were none. I almost pity the Fourth Infantry Division when I look back. But, they did survive me. That is part of my story as a woman veteran. What is yours?

Writing Goals

If you want to write only one paragraph—great! A twelve-page story? Terrific. A book? You go to it. It's all done one word at a time.

There are steps and tricks to writing, but no secret handshakes to learn. Really. There is also no one "right" way to write. This book describes what worked in my classes, so it might work for you.

Learning to write stories is like building a house—first you need excavation, then a good foundation, you build the walls and fill in the details like wall paint, fixtures and picking out carpet. (Spelling and grammar are paint and carpet, by the way. Don't even think about them. We are going to work on the foundation—the stories.)

Perhaps this book was given to you as a gift and you don't want to write your military stories. That's okay. Use this book as a doorstop or pass it along to another vet. Every writer decides to write or not. Your choice. Unlike in Basic Training, you can say no to writing.

If you do want to write, come along with us through Writer's Basic Training. Forward, H'arch!

Assignment One

Write down three paragraphs about the best or worst advice you ever received from someone in the military. Do it right now. If you have trouble starting, write me a letter.

Dear Kim, The best advice ...

Finished? Good job! Now, read it out loud. It helps if you have a veteran writing buddy or group, but you can do it alone. (Editing tip—reading out loud is the one sure way to find out if a story doesn't work, sounds wrong or a

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sentence is too long—you can't breathe!) Excellent. How did it sound? We have just taken the hardest step. Now we're ready to start the writer's journey. One boot step at a time.

Assignment Two

List five scenes or events you want to write about from your military days.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Now pick one of these events, the one that interests you the most. Write three paragraphs about it. Take your time. When you have finished this assignment, move on to Chapter Two. Great job. Isn't this more fun than passing a Physical Training test?

Resources:

If You Want To Write, by Brenda Ueland

Rogue Warrior, by Richard Marcinko with John Weisman

How to write personal military stories for veterans.

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