



Writing for and About the Military



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Let's Get Started

- If you want a copy of these slides – provide email and I will send
- Who can write about the military?
- What genres can include the military?
- How to research the military
- How to get the details right
- Transfer knowledge
- Where to publish about the military?

Who can write about the military?



Who can write about the military?

- The short answer is anyone can write about the military
- Examples (none of these authors served):
 - Alfred, Lord Tennyson [Charge of the Light Brigade]
 - Patrick O’Brian [Aubrey-Maturin novels]
 - Bernard Cornwell [Sharpe novels]
 - Tom Clancy [Cold War novels]
 - Mark Bowden [Black Hawk Down]
 - John Scalzi [Science Fiction]
 - Maya Banks [Romance]

What genres can include the military?

- Memoir or Biography
- History or Historical Fiction
- Adventure / Thriller
- Romance – especially with Navy pilots
- International Relations
- Domestic use of the military
- Leadership
- General Fiction
- Photography
- Humor

Memoir or Biography

- Can you write and capture what it was like on patrol in the jungles of Vietnam or the caves in Afghanistan?
 - You can probably get the facts correct
 - You can use your own feelings, e.g. fear, to then transpose to military characters in these settings
- Can you describe what your father / sibling / child felt when on a mission?
 - Do you think they really ever told you what really went on?
 - What is the purpose of writing about someone else?
 - Did they do an oral Veterans' History Project interview?
 - <https://www.loc.gov/vets/>
 - Or tell their stories on social media sites?
 - <https://navy.togetherweserved.com/usn/servlet/tws.webapp.WebApp.s?cmd=ShadowBoxProfile&type=Person&ID=442507>

History or Historical Fiction

- Is history still taught in schools?
 - If so, does it still include wars, battles, military coups, revolutions?
 - If they still teach history, then every non-military student learns about the military and has probably written about history
 - Some of the earliest books involve the military
 - *History of the Peloponnesian War* – Thucydides
- Kathleen Rogers fictionalizes her husband's military career and then writes about life as a military spouse
- Historical fiction offers interesting options for writers
 - Aubrey-Maturin model (20 novels) Courts Martial
 - Sharpe model (23 novels) Unexplained events

Adventure / Thriller

- James D. "Jim" Grant, A.K.A. Lee Childs, has written the commercially successful Jack Reacher series about a former U.S. military policeman
 - Lee Childs is British, never served, has never been in law enforcement, and gets criticized for being commercial
 - But he generally gets it exactly right
- Adventure and thrillers often involve the military due to high tech, neat weapons, dangerous locations, high stakes, etc.

Romance

- The most-read genre has its own listing in Goodreads: Popular Military Romance with 9,151 entries
- Amazon.com lists >60,000 books under Military Romance
- Anyone here ever see From Here to Eternity?
 - Do you all remember the scene on the beach with Sgt. Milton Warden [played by Burt Lancaster] and Karen Holmes [played by Deborah Kerr]?
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHYd9DRhh-c>
- Great opportunities to explore romance in exotic locations, cross-rank fraternization, “me too,” etc.

International Relations

- “War is an extension of politics by other means”
 - Carl von Clausewitz
- Diplomatic history often includes diplomacy breaking down and resuming once war ends
 - Current warfare in Ukraine or Gaza
- Deterrence includes a military component
- Does war have its own logic and rules once the combat begins?
- War Colleges instruct military officers about this connection

Domestic Use of the Military

- Army Corps of Engineers
- Disaster relief
 - Not just the National Guard
 - Must work well with private volunteer organizations (PVOs)
- War on illegal substances
 - Enforcement of 18th Amendment to the Constitution – a.k.a. The National Prohibition Act [Volstead Act]
- *Posse Comitatus* Act of 1878
 - March 10, 2009 deployment of Military Police to Samson, Alabama
- Ongoing border security
 - Federal vs. State roles
 - What if law enforcement and the National Guard cannot cope?

Leadership

- “Leadership is the art of inspiring, guiding, and directing bodies of men so that they ardently desire to do what the leader wishes.”
 - *War Instructions: United States Navy, 1944*
- Consider leadership at the pointy end of the spear
 - Is there a comparable parallel in the civilian sector?
 - Anyone read *Killer Angels*?
 - Colonel Chamberlin’s speech to his men about to leave Gettysburg?
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTZSwgnWtuA>
- What is the ideal Myers-Briggs profile for a:
 - Four star general or flag officer?
 - The CEO of a major corporation?
 - For a Colonel / Navy Captain?

General Fiction

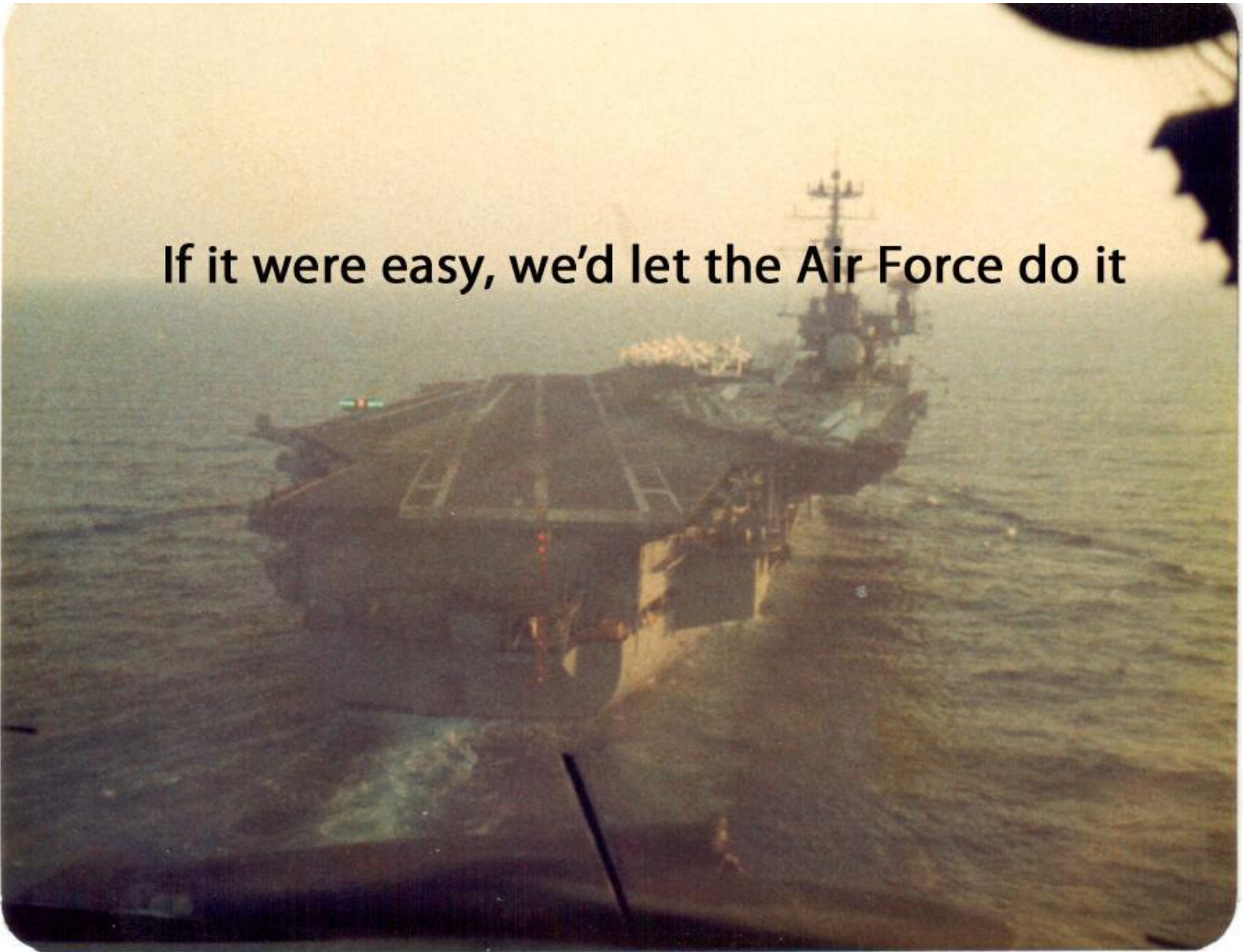
- Does mainstream fiction ever include the military?
 - *Slaughterhouse Five* – Kurt Vonnegut
 - *For Whom The Bell Tolls* – Ernest Hemingway
- Can you get a military short story published in the *New Yorker*?
 - A.I. and the Next Generation of Drone Warfare - Sue Halpern, September 15, 2023
 - Werner Herzog's Wondrous Novel of Nothingness in the Jungle – Dan Piepenbring, June 16, 2022
 - I'm gonna guess it is more likely mainstream fiction embraces more military literature than crime fiction

Photography

- Watch any pilot, any tank driver, any sailor when they find a photo book about their airplane, their tank, their ship, their unit
- Most historical photos can be obtained from the national archives or military historical centers for free
<https://www.archives.gov/research/military/ww2/photos>
- Package up the photos and then start doing the research to describe each photo
 - <https://www.amazon.com/Military-History-Definitive-Objects-Warfare/dp/0756698383/>
- Sell to members of unit or platform groups on Facebook
 - <https://www.amazon.com/Curtiss-SOC-Seagull-Naval-Fighters/dp/0984611428/>

Humor

- Who remembers the Humor in Uniform section of *Reader's Digest*?
 - Still being written <https://www.rd.com/jokes/military/>
- Anyone read Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*?
 - Or at least seen the movie?
- Is it more likely a combat veteran will tell you what it was really like or share a funny story with you?
- Does it make a difference if you poke fun at the military but never served?



If it were easy, we'd let the Air Force do it

How to research the military



But First Let's Take a Break



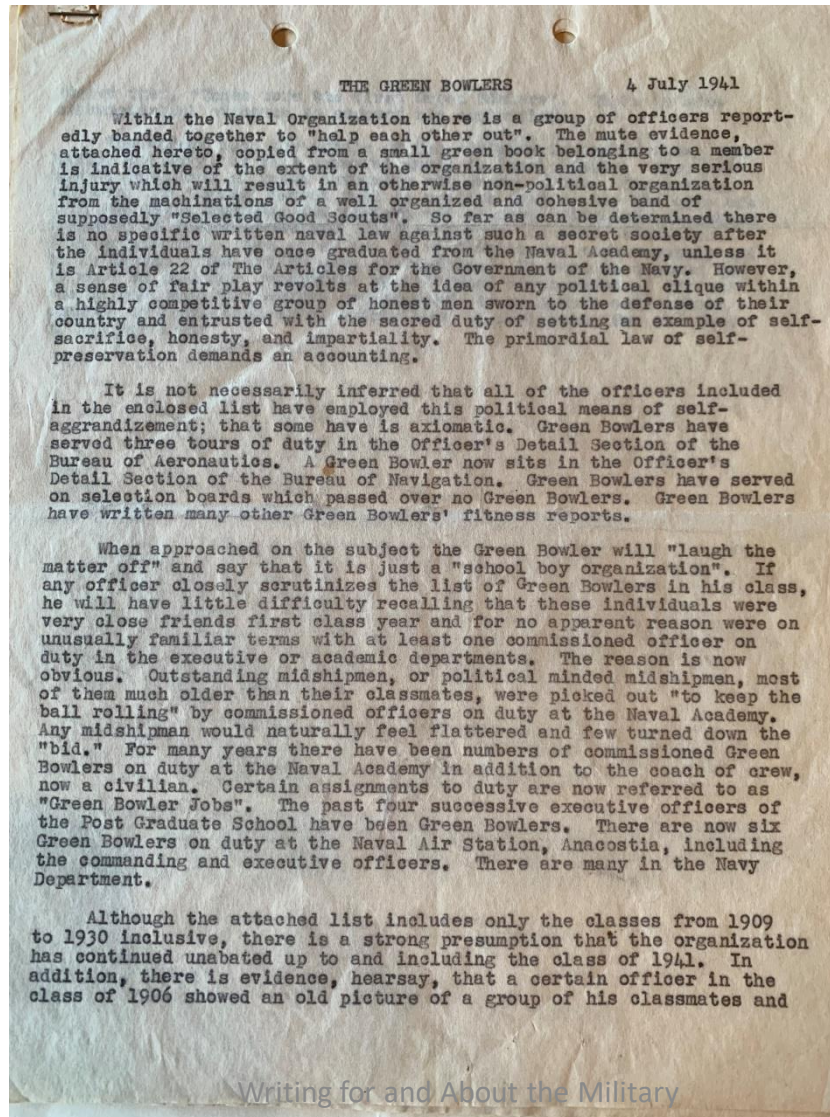
How to research the military



Logic of how to find the answer

- Owner served in World War II
- Uniform is U.S. Navy
- Google search for U.S. Navy uniforms World War II
 - Uniforms of the U.S. Navy 1942-1943
 - [wwii us navy uniform regulations](#)
- ww2 navy aviation uniform patches
 - <https://www.ebay.com/itm/NAVAL-AVIATION-AERIAL-GUNNER-US-Navy-WW2-Original-Uniform-Squadron-Patch-/163624663203?oid=163514448354>

How to research the military



Official Records

- <https://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records>
- <https://www.archives.gov/college-park>
- <https://www.history.navy.mil/>
- <https://www.archives.gov/>
- <https://www.togetherweserved.com/>
- *Caveat Emptor*
 - It is not all there

Other General Sources

- History books to get the context
 - What else was going on at the time and place
- Biographies, autobiographies, memoirs
- Subject matter books
 - E.g. books about specific weapons systems
- Web searches
- Movies
 - Excellent ways to “see” and hear dialog set at the time
 - *Caveat Emptor*

Is it any different?

- I submit your existing research skills are the same ones you will need to research military topics
- However
- No matter how hard you try, someone will find errors and point them out
 - <https://crimefictionbook.com/2016/04/21/10-things-authors-get-wrong-when-writing-about-the-military/>

How to get the details right

- How would you get the details right if writing police procedural?
 - Or history or historical fiction?
 - Or a non-fiction piece on fighting on the offense vs. fighting on the defense?
- You **need** a technical expert or access to technical information
- It will matter when they served and what military service or branch and where they were stationed

Examples of pesky details

- Uniforms
 - Correct for season – Summer or Winter?
 - Correct for time frame of writing – Navy greens
 - Correct for location – combat or embassy duty?
 - Appropriate awards
- Ranks
 - Why is the character called “Mister Roberts”?
 - Why is the first officer rank either an: O-1, and Ensign (ENS), a Second Lieutenant (2LT or a 2ndLt or a 2d Lt)
- Jargon
 - “Over” and “out”
 - “Roger” and ‘wilco”

More examples of pesky details

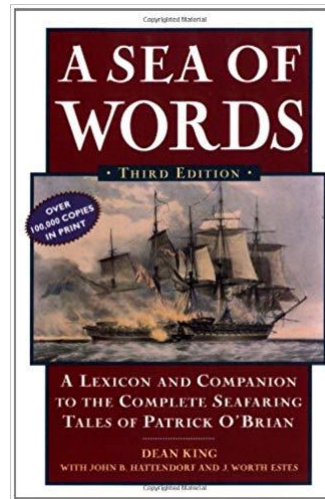
- In the Army and Marines, enlisted personnel above the rank of Corporal are some type of Sergeant
 - You cannot go wrong by calling them Sergeant
- In the Navy, above the rank of Seaman, the next three grades are Petty Officers
 - Third class, Second class, First Class, Chief, Senior Chief, Master Chief
 - They were called by their last names until they reach the rank of Chief Petty Officer
 - You rarely would call them Petty Officer unless at a formal function like a Captain's Mast or writing up for an award

Transfer knowledge

- If you have lived experiences similar to those for military characters, transfer the feelings
 - Afraid?
 - Accomplishment
 - Confused
 - Angry at the higher ups?
 - New guy in the organization
- Same as in any writing
- “Write what you know” includes your feelings

On the other hand

- Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey-Maturin novels include no real explanation of sails, rigging, and sometimes deck nomenclature
 - Prompting someone else to write a companion piece on how to understand Napoleonic-era naval terminology



Where to publish about the military?

- Military-oriented outlets
 - Hundreds of publishers, journals, blogs, newspapers
 - Search by service, warfare specialty, units, conflicts
- Non-military outlets
 - Memoir or Biography
 - History or Historical Fiction
 - Adventure / Thriller
 - Romance – especially with Navy pilots
 - International Relations
 - Domestic use of the military
 - Leadership
 - General Fiction
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The last slide

- **You** can do it
 - Tularosa 6th grader wrote poem to honor uncle who was a combat medic
- For more information, send me an email at jimtritten@comcast.net
- Attend the MWSA writing conference September 2024 in San Diego
 - <https://www.mwsadispatches.com/events/2024-conference>

