

Peter Molin's Strike Through the Mask!: "So Say We All and the Veterans Writing Workshop"



Justin Hudnall, the founder and director of the San Diego-based performative writing-and-reading collective So Say We All, asked me to lead a Zoom writing workshop for veterans and veteran-affiliated writers. (The event was co-sponsored by The Wrath-Bearing Tree.) I first met Hudnall many years ago at a writing conference and have long admired what he has achieved with So Say We All. Judging from their social media posts, their readings are very well-attended and lively and fun. They are not always centered on veterans writing, but many have been, and Hudnall has sponsored several writing series specifically for veterans and has published anthologies of vet-writing.

Hudnall asked nice, and I wasn't about to say "no." The thing is, though, I'm not much of a creative writer or a memoirist. I do teach writing, but it's college composition and research papers, not imaginative literature. Nor have I have attended an MFA program. I didn't feel completely unqualified, because I have participated and led vet-writing workshops before. But compared to vet-writers such as Ron Capps, Matt Gallagher, and Tracy Crow, authors with many published books who have led dozens and hundreds of writing classes, I knew I didn't bring much experience or authority to the endeavor. But Hudnall believed in me, and I was intrigued.

One reason I was intrigued is that vet-writing workshops have been huge forces in contemporary war-writing. Organizations

such as Warrior Writers, Veterans Writing Project, Words After War, The War Horse, and Voices from War have been instrumental in helping veterans discover their writing voices, find outlets for publication, and build audiences. Situated structurally midway between isolated amateurs in the hinterlands and professional publication in New York City or elsewhere, writing workshops, along with online vet-writing journals, form the material core of the vet-writing scene.

The evening of my workshop, I logged on to find ten participants waiting. The mix was evenly split between men and women. Two Vietnam vets were in attendance; the others were post-9/11. A few had not served in uniform, but had family members who were vets or had worked for the military. I knew a couple, and learned that several had published before, while others were just beginning their writing journeys. The subtitle of our workshop was "Finding Your Voice," which suggests that it was aimed at beginning writers, but I had prepared writing prompts meant to engage both new and experienced writers, veterans and civilians alike. We had two hours, and so I had crafted four prompts, thinking we'd probably have time for three, with one in reserve.

The prompts were designed to preclude dark or graphic responses, which was somewhat disingenuous given that's exactly what many vets want to explore in their writing. Still, good work could be done, I thought, helping participants connect physical detail with emotional resonance in regard to less sensational subjects. I allotted fifteen minutes for writing on each subject, with ten-to-fifteen minutes following to discuss and share.

The first prompt I borrowed from a Warrior Writers workshop I had attended: "Write about an article of uniform or piece of equipment that was important to you and still lingers in your memory." I've seen this prompt used in other places, too, and there's even been contests built around the theme. It's also a staple subject of vet social-media threads, so I thought it

would be a good one to start with.

I wrote to this prompt alongside the attendees. In truth, I had been thinking about the prompt all day and then wrote my passage an hour or so before the actual workshop. Be that as it may, I wrote about Leatherman utility knives:

When I first joined the Army I noticed that many soldiers more experienced than me carried on their belt not just a jackknife, but a particular kind of multi-purpose tool called a Leatherman. The Leatherman resembled a Swiss Army Knife, but without the elegance of design. Where a Swiss Army knife seems like, well, it was made by Swiss artisans, a Leatherman was dull black and seemed forged out of cheap or leftover tin. It wasn't even all that functional. When I got my hands on one for the first time, I noticed right away that the blade was neither long nor sharp, the bottle and can openers marginally useful, and the scissors and saw functions pathetic. A saw? The only function that seemed like it could be useful were the pliers, but how often was that going to be necessary? Plus, when I priced a Leatherman in the local military gear store, it seemed very expensive for what you were getting.

But that's the thing—the idea was not to buy a Leatherman with your own money, but to obtain one through your unit supply shop. Leathermans were cool; the soldiers who had them whipped them out with panache and were always all the time finding some little task to do that could only be performed with one of the multitools. And not only did all the cool guys have a Leatherman, they were able to obtain them for free, because they knew someone in supply with whom they had made a deal to get one off-the-books. To actually have to buy a Leatherman was evidence that you weren't yet worthy enough to wield one. If you were a newbie in the unit, not having a Leatherman was a sign of exactly how new you were.

And so it was for the first twenty years of my military career. No Leatherman for me, just ordinary old pocket-knives

of one brand or another. But then, in training at Fort Riley prior to deployment to Afghanistan, we drew a lot of personal gear. In fact, we drew gear three times at three different places, and there were individual issues as well. And every time we opened our bag to receive new equipment, the supply guy would drop in a Leatherman. Not once, not twice, not three times. By the time I packed my duffle bags to fly to Afghanistan I had four Leathermans.

I didn't think I was now cool, but something had changed, and things were different.

I shared this vignette and we discussed it for a few minutes. A participant then volunteered to read his vignette, which against my expectations, turned out to be very graphic. I offered comments meant to be supportive while also returning things to a less intense place. Other participants either had not written anything or were not ready to share, so we talked generally about the prompt and writing process.

The second prompt invited participants to write on a trip they had made in the military, or just before or just after. This prompt was inspired by a University of California summer writing-intensive for veterans I had once co-taught. At the writing-intensive, a student-veteran of Chinese-Uighur descent had written about a trip he had made cross-country from Fort Benning, GA, to California after completing his service. His short essay, which described the places and people he had met on this long trip, with the residue of Army-service and his family in China on his mind, had many of us in tears when he read it at our final group event.

I hoped to capture some of this magic, and indeed this prompt was more of a hit than the first one. Most of the attendees either read their vignette or chimed in with comments about memorable military journeys. One vignette described a bus ride while on leave through the wilds of New Jersey and New York. Another described deploying into the Middle East at the

beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom on a military landing craft. I didn't write on this prompt, but read a classic Brian Turner poem, "Night in Blue," about flying home from war:

*At seven thousand feet and looking back, running lights
blacked out under the wings and America waiting.
a year of my life disappears at midnight,
the sky a deep viridian, the houselights below
small as match heads burned down to embers....*

We only had time for one more prompt, so I posted one that occurred to me from reading the veteran fiction and short-stories: I asked participants to describe a memorable character they had met while in the military. Like the second prompt, this one generated a vibrant response. Everyone either read or spoke about a larger-than-life person they had known in the military. In some cases the vignettes were light-hearted and affectionate. More seriously, one was about someone who had been important in the author's life at one point but who had since drifted away or perhaps was no longer alive.

As a model for consideration, I deliberated between two vignettes from contemporary novels. One was from Nico Walker's novel *Cherry* in which Walker describes the death of a platoon-mate named Jimenez:

The battle roster number was EAJ-0888, and we were trying to think of who that was. We knew it was a guy from First Platoon because Staff Sergeant White had called it in. We knew it wasn't Specialist Jackson, First Platoon's medic, since line medics weren't attached to Bravo from HHC and if the dead guy were Jackson the battle roster number would have started with HHC and not E. The first initial A wasn't much help as we weren't in the habit of calling one another by our first name.

It took us the better part of ten minutes to come up with a guy from Third Platoon whose last name started with the letter J...

The last time I saw him was about eight hours before Haji killed him. He'd been boxing Staff Sergeant Castro in the weight room, sparring, and Castro had popped him on the nose pretty good so his nose was bleeding—not broken or anything, just bleeding...

Jimenez was a cherry...

The other passage was from Stephen Markley's novel *Ohio*. Markley's not a veteran and *Ohio*'s not exactly about the military and war, but two soldiers who fought overseas are central characters. In one place, Markley describes a group of soldiers reminiscing about a deceased comrade named Greg Coyle who referred to everything as a "MacDougal," as in "Bring that MacDougal over here" or "And then this MacDougal said...":

When they stood for inspections, Dan, like everyone, would get ripped, maybe because he'd stored his compression bandages in the wrong place or always tried to get away with not wearing the side plates of his body armor (those heavy, awkward five-by-five bastards). Greg Coyle, no matter how goofy he was, never got ripped, was always on point. Coyle, who referred to everything as a "MacDougal." A bore snake, pliers, a target at the range, military-age males, MREs, ops, battalion—they were all just MacDougals to him. To the dismay of the whole company, within weeks of their deployment everyone was saying it.

"We're getting those up-armored MacDougals next month."

"Those powdered MacDougals—goddamn! Better than Mom's homemade MacDougal."

"That other MacDougal was getting rocked by IEMacDougals."

They landed in Iraq in 2006, when the country was no joke, but that joke worked right through rocket attacks and EFPs.

The second thing Dan did after he got out and visited Rudy in the hospital was attend Bren Della Terza's wedding in Austin, Texas. A lot of his friends from Iraq were there, guys he hadn't seen in a while because they'd gotten out after two tours. Badamier, Lieutenant Holt, Cleary, Wong, Doc Laymon, Drake in his wheelchair, "Other James" Streiss, now with two robot hands. They of course got drunk and began referring to everything as a "MacDougal," annoying the hell out of those piqued Texas bridesmaids. Decent, churchgoing women who had never seen soldiers cut loose. How hilariously stupid they could be. In his buzz, Dan found himself wishing to return to 2006, to be back on patrol with his friends.

Ultimately, I chose the *Ohio* passage; the death of Jimenez passage from *Cherry* is fantastic but also both graphic and full of Army infantry jargon I was not sure everyone would get.

At this point, nearing the end, everyone except one participant had shared at least one vignette. This last participant now volunteered to read his passage in response to the first prompt, about a piece of military equipment. As he read, I could see why he had hesitated at first. The piece was brooding and complex; the piece of equipment was intimately connected with a serious family event, but widely separated by the passage of time. For such a short piece, it really packed a punch; it was both very moving and also very accomplished. I was glad the author shared it with us, and I hope he finds means to share it more widely in the future.

And with that our time was up. "You're up, you're moving, you're down," as we used to say in the Army to describe the quickness with which infantry soldiers must pop up-and-down when charging against enemy fire. I didn't offer many pearls of writing wisdom, nor tips for professional success. The main

thing was to make the event absorbing in the moment. Writing is an individualistic endeavor at heart, but I wanted to convey how meaningful writing can also be inspired by the company of sympathetic fellow authors.

As I reflected on the event in the days following, I realized I had not availed myself of two very worthy vet-writing handbooks: Ron Capps' *Writing War: A Guide to Telling Your Own Story* (2011) and Tracy Crow's *On Point: A Guide to Writing the Military Story* (2015). Both are full of sensible advice, inspiring examples, and creative writing prompts. *Writing War* includes many excerpts from classic and contemporary published war-writing, while *On Point* offers more personal modeling of how the events of one's life might be transformed into memorable prose relatable to all. But each is highly recommended.

So, to end, thank you Justin Hudnall. Other workshops in the So Say We All/Wrath-Bearing Tree series have been led by Andria Williams, Abbey Murray, and Halle Shilling. I don't know Shilling, but I can vouch that Williams and Murray are both authors and teachers with much to offer students and emerging writers.

Another author in the war-writing scene, Jesse Goolsby, once wrote, "There are blank pages in front of us all. If one wants a different war story then go write it, and I wish you well." I like the spirit of that, and I hope that the So Say We All/Wrath-Bearing Tree collaboration continues. Here's to all the leaders of vet-writing workshops and to all who participate in them.

Works mentioned in this article:

Ron Capps, *Writing War: A Guide to Telling Your Own Story*. CreateSpace, 2011.

Tracy Crow: *On Point: A Guide to Writing the Military Story*. Potomac, 2015.

Stephen Markley, *Ohio*. Simon and Schuster, 2019.

Brian Turner, "Night in Blue," *Here, Bullet*. Alice James, 2005.

Nico Walker, *Cherry*. Knopf, 2018.

