

Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": Spotlight on MilSpeak and Middle West Presses

Major publishing house enthusiasm for war, mil, and vet-themed books has noticeably waned in the past few years, but two small presses, MilSpeak Foundation and Middle West Press, have emerged to fill much of the void. Between them MilSpeak and Middle West have recently published a remarkable number of interesting titles by new and established vet and vet-adjacent authors: MilSpeak published six titles in 2022 alone, with more coming this year, while Middle West has been nearly as prolific. The energetic output reflects the passion and vision of MilSpeak and Middle West's current executives, Tracy Crow and Randy Brown, respectively, both veterans and accomplished authors themselves. The vet-writer community is something of a subculture and vet-writing is something of a genre, but subcultures and genres require material manifestation. In this regard, MilSpeak and Middle West are carrying far more than their fair share of the load by publishing so much mil-writing. Frankly, their presence, let alone their accomplishment, within the contemporary war-writing scene has been a blessing. We are lucky to have them.

Tracy Crow is a former Marine and college writing instructor whose memoir *Eyes Right: Confessions from a Woman Marine* and craft-guide *On Point: A Guide to Writing the Military Memoir* are well-worth pursuing. As good as these books are, I'm even more struck by Crow's publishing vision and eye for talent—she seems motivated by recognition that there is a surfeit of talent in the war-writing community that is underserved by the publishing industry. I first met Crow in 2018 at the War, Literature, and the Arts conference at the United States Air

Force Academy, which featured an astonishing number of contemporary vet-and-mil authors. Crow may well have been recruiting, for a number of authors present at the conference have since been published by MilSpeak or have books on the way.

Randy Brown, aka “Charlie Sherpa,” is also a contemporary war-writing plank-holder, early-on offering war-writing commentary on his blog Red Bull Rising and frequently organizing panels at the annual Association of Writers and Writing Program conference. In those early years, Brown was still in uniform in the Iowa National Guard, with whom he later deployed to Afghanistan post-service as an embedded journalist. Along the line, Brown stood-up Middle West Press as an outlet first for his own writing. Soon came his poetry volume *Welcome to FOB Haiku* and then *Twelve O’Clock Haiku*, as well as the vet-writing anthologies *Why We Write: Craft Essays on Writing War* and *Our Best War Stories*. Later came titles by other vets and fellow-travelers, with an emphasis on poetry, and more vet-centric anthologies.

I recently asked Crow and Brown to answer a short set of questions about their enterprises, and each responded fulsomely with shrewd and entertaining responses. Their stories offer lively insights into military press publishing and each is packed with guidance for aspiring writers. Crow answered each of my questions as I proposed them, while Brown composed a narrative that riffs on my questions. Read them below, please, and join me in saluting their efforts:

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Interview with Tracy Crow, President of MilSpeak Foundation

When you became President of MilSpeak, what was your sense of its potential? What was your vision for it?

My vision for MilSpeak is constantly evolving. In 2017 when I became president, my vision was limited to relaunching the Foundation's dormant writing workshop component. I'd already been leading workshops for women veterans and women military family members when MilSpeak's founder, Sally Parmer, a retired, disabled Marine Corps veteran, encouraged me to merge my workshop program with the Foundation's. A year later, we secured the Foundation's first grant, which was from Wounded Warrior Project® for the funding of two weekend writing retreats for women veterans and family members that could accommodate 200 participants and 11 faculty, each of whom was a vet or spouse with creative writing teaching experience and published books.

But Sally's vision when she founded MilSpeak in 2009 had included *two* components—writing workshops and book publishing. Her retired status had afforded her the time to manage both from 2009 to 2013, and MilSpeak's titles from this era are still available on our archived website and on Smashwords. In 2020, I received an unexpected, generous donation from a friend who had seen me lead workshops and wanted to fund others; when I suggested we use her donation to relaunch the Foundation's publishing component, she was overjoyed to do so, and has been actively involved ever since as our CFO.

In 2022, MilSpeak released 6 books in paperback and ebook formats, and will release 5 in 2023, and at least 4 in 2024. Meanwhile, we continue to offer writing workshops, mostly online since the start of the pandemic.

Today my vision for the Foundation is so much larger than I'd dared to dream in 2017. Using Graywolf Press as a model, I hope to evolve MilSpeak Books and our newest imprint, Family of Light Books, as presses recognized for their artful efforts to explore and elevate our understanding of human consciousness.

What are the rewards of being a small-press publisher?

The rewards are numerous. The greatest reward, however, is being able to say yes to a writer with a meaningful, high-quality manuscript who has felt marginalized and shut out by other traditional publishers, and then the collaboration with that writer from copyediting to cover design, and beyond. Our team of freelance editors and designers work hard to ensure our authors enjoy every aspect of their publishing experience.

What catches your eye in regard to proposals/drafts submitted to you for possible publication?

While MilSpeak publishes books authored by veterans and family members, not all our books are *about* the military or even mention the military. Our mission is to support the creative endeavors from within our community, period. However, the quality of the manuscript—and I'm referring to everything from sentence level writing to use of sensory language, pacing, character development, and a narrative arc—determines whether we'll make an offer.

We've published an excellent coming-of-age debut memoir by Norris Comer, a military family member, who spent his first summer after high school graduation salmon fishing in Alaska, and earned a lifetime of lessons. His memoir, *Salmon in the Seine: Alaskan Memories of Life, Death, & Everything In-Between*, has received so many awards this year I've lost count.

Another family member, Karen Donley-Hayes, reveals the heartbreaking story in her debut memoir, *Falling Off Horses*, of a friendship that began in high school over a mutual love for horses that survives numerous falls, a rollercoaster of love losses and triumphs, and finally, a heartbreaking diagnosis of a fatal illness.

Navy spouse, Samantha Otto Brown, author of the debut memoir, *Sub Wife: A Memoir From The Homefront*, lifts the curtain on nuclear submarine life, revealing how she and fellow wives

keep themselves afloat during the occasional excruciating silence during their husbands' sub deployments.

Amber Jensen, wife of a National Guardsman, reveals the loneliness of pregnancy when her husband is deployed to Iraq, and the marital strains for a couple when a loved one returns from deployment, forever changed, in her debut memoir, *The Smoke of You: A Memoir of Love During & After Deployment*.

Our new imprint, Family of Light Books, has released a brilliant young adult novel, *American Delphi*, by military family member M.C. Armstrong, in which his main character, fifteen-year-old Zora Box, sets out to discover the true history of her family, including her father's secretive military mission, and finds herself at the center of an activist movement with international hashtag status following the tragic death of her best friend, a trans-teen. The Greensboro, North Carolina, Library selected *American Delphi* for its summer reading program, and Kirkus Review described the book as "An intriguing kaleidoscope...compelling...An engaging story of current events and social justice for teen readers."

And of course we've published books written by veterans about the military experience, such as Lauren Kay Johnson's memoir, *The Fine Art of Camouflage*, about her service in Afghanistan as a public affairs officer, Kevin C. Jones's short-story collection, *Collateral Damage*; RLynn Johnson's debut novel, *Cry of the Heart*; and Jennifer Orth-Veillon's collection, *Beyond Their Limits of Longing: Contemporary Writers & Veterans on the Lingering Stories of WWI*.

What have you learned about trying to market war-and-military themed books? What do books about war-and-military themes have to offer a general reading public?

As for the actual marketing, MilSpeak supports its authors and their releases as best as our financial and personnel

resources allow, but we've also discovered that the most successful approach *for us* tends to follow an organic unfolding. I can't say enough about the unwavering support from the military writing community, and this includes military publications as well. Our authors have also appeared on local television programming, podcasts, book clubs, book fairs, etc.

From a business aspect, MilSpeak boosts the success potential of its releases by offering the same wholesale discount to retailers as the large traditional publishers offer, and the same return policy for unsold books. Not many small presses can do this if they're profit driven. As a nonprofit, everything from our sales after paying royalties to our authors gets earmarked for the publication process of another book by a veteran and family member.

I've been closely examining the cross-generational impact of military service for more than a decade now, especially the impact of combat service on families. My sincere hope is that human consciousness will more quickly evolve toward conflict resolution that never includes war, and so our books tend to reflect the lesser known, yet gut-wrenching, aspects of how and why our world mindset seems trapped inside a warmongering matrix.

What MilSpeak titles are forthcoming? What is exciting about them?

In the fall, we're releasing two novels:

Releasing October 15 is *The Waiting World*, by Andria Williams, author of *The Longest Night* that earned a starred Kirkus Review, and that Entertainment Weekly described as "A stunning debut." In *The Waiting World*, Andria takes us back to the era just after WWI, and explores the seedy underworld of an American business tycoon, and that of his two Irish servant girls and their chauffeur-friend who are intent on forging a

life on their terms, no matter the risks.

Releasing November 15 is *Changelings: Insurgence*, a captivating science-fiction thriller by Navy veteran and Cal Poly Pomona professor, Liam Corley, who shares that he drew from his experiences as a humanities professor and his overseas deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq to portray a futuristic world with a potentially harmful outcome for humanity *if* it eliminates what makes it truly human.

Spring 2024, we're releasing three titles—*The Celdan Heresies* (a fantasy) by Megan Carnes; *Shoalie's Crow* (a young adult novel by Karen Donley-Hayes); and *Hills Hide Mountains* (a novel) by Travis Klempan.

Fall 2024, we're releasing a collection of essays and poems about a family's cross-generational military service, *The Indignity of Knowing*, by University of Tennessee-Knoxville professor, Amber Nicole Albritton.



Randy Brown on the history and vision of Middle West Press:

I started Middle West Press as a sole proprietorship in 2003. I had been editor of a number of national Better Homes and Gardens-brand "how-to" newsstand magazines, and I continued to provide freelance writing, editing, and editorial project-management services to that sector, while also pursuing a graduate degree in architectural studies. My architecture thesis involved something you might call cultural-terrain analysis. Emplacing an object of public art as grit in the community oyster, to see what develops.

In 2008, my family and I started preparing for a deployment to Afghanistan. I was an Iowa National Guard citizen-soldier with one previous overseas deployment. Preparing for war, my

daytime Army job involved internal communications and organizational lessons-learned. It wasn't public affairs—although I often worked alongside the Public Affairs officer and NCO—but the brigade commander kept asking us all for ideas on best-practices and -policies regarding soldiers' off-duty blogs and social media. The Internet was the Wild West back then. Sometimes, I didn't know what to tell him.

There weren't any training manuals, so I started my own off-duty blog under the pseudonym "Charlie Sherpa." The exercise was equal parts "learn by doing" and "ask forgiveness, not permission." People still call me "Sherpa," particularly in veteran circles. It helps people find my published work. It also helps differentiate between my efforts as a veteran-activist, and as a for-hire writing and editing professional.

I ended up not deploying to Afghanistan. Got the word about 10 days before Mobilization-day. I retired instead. However, I eventually went to Afghanistan on my own, embedding as civilian media with my former unit. That story became an essay, and has even been re-told in comic book form (*True War Stories*, Z2 Comics).

In 2015, I registered Middle West Press as a limited liability corporation in the State of Iowa, and expanded business operations as an independent book publisher of journalism, non-fiction, and poetry. Poet Lisa Stice joined us as an associate editor in 2023. In the past, we've also had the pleasure of working with guest editors such as the *Line of Advance* journal's Christopher Lyke, and Steve Leonard—the creator of the military-themed DoctrineMan!! cartoon.

We call ourselves a "micro-press"—we publish only one to four titles annually, and our projects can be driven as much by intellectual curiosity and artistic exploration as by potential profit. Our bottom line: We like to complicate and enrich readers' insights into the people, places, and history of the American Midwest—and the U.S. military.

What's the connection between "military" and "midwest"? Both are often overlooked by ivory tower academics, big city publishers, and others who seem to have their own pre-conceptions about what being a Midwesterner or veteran must mean. The truth is, not all veterans are "heroes." Neither are all veterans "broken." Reality is more center-mass than those tropes; reality is equal parts sublime, mundane, and human. To paraphrase Walt Whitman: We contain multitudes.

Veterancy shouldn't be flyover country—a place viewed from 40,000 feet every November 11. War poets—a term that can include veterans and mil-fam and anyone else willing to do the work—can short-circuit expected narratives with amazing, everyday insights into hurt and loss and growth and reconciliation. I've often said that every U.S. citizen has a connection with the military, even if only as a voter and taxpayer. The fight for hearts and minds and empathy for what it means to go to war is out here. In the hinterlands. In the boonies.

Middle West Press published our first book of poetry for the same reason Sherpa started a blog: Learn by doing. Once we learn how to something—and to do it well—we try to teach others. The Army would call it "lessons-learned integration." In 2022, I tried to capture the philosophy in a short prose-poetry-memoir, *Twelve O'Clock Haiku*.

(Another lessons-learned tie-in: After the unit returned from Afghanistan, Middle West Press also worked with my former brigade public affairs colleagues, compiling and publishing a 668-page organizational history titled *Reporting for Duty: U.S. Citizen-Soldier Journalism from the Afghan Surge, 2010-2011*.)

Since 2015, we've serendipitously developed an expertise in curating and promoting "21st century war poetry." Many of these soldier-poets—but not all—are rooted in the American Middle West. Each collection we publish is intended to disrupt

stereotypes of what it means to be an American veteran, or to be a member of a military family. After all, we're not all Navy SEALs and American Snipers. Some of us are F-16 pilots. Or Navy Corpsmen. Or Coast Guard mustangs. Or Army logistics soldiers.

We use poetry to build bridges of mutual empathy and understanding, between "military" and "civilian" audiences. Every poem is a conversation.

Our collections usually comprise more than 50 poems. In considering manuscripts, we look for unique voices, life-experiences, and perspectives. We also like to see lots of chewy intersections and contradictions within a poet's veteran-identity. People are not just uniforms, after all—they are parents, spouses, hikers, professors, nurses, etc.

From a business standpoint, poetry books provide low-stakes opportunities for experimentation. We are a traditional-model publisher; in other words, we pay our authors—they never pay us. We don't fund our operations via submissions-fees or "contests." We don't ask our authors to pimp their friends and families for pre-sales. And, when we publish, we use Print-on-Demand (POD) technology—wherever it is sold in the world, a copy of a book is printed only when it is purchased. That way, no one ends up with 500 extra copies sitting in a garage or basement.

Our starting goal with poetry books is to sell more than 100 copies. Because we run on bootstrap-budgets, that covers most everything but editorial labor. Our poetry books are priced to be accessible: Usually about \$12 recommended cover price.

With our first books, we ended up doing more than break-even, and we've been able to replicate those successes a number of times over. By the end of 2023, we'll have published 13 individual poetry collections, as well as anthologies of military-themed prose, poetry, and non-fiction.

Our poetry books are eye-catching, award-winning, and best-selling. One forthcoming collection is by a U.S. Navy Reserve intelligence officer, who also teaches American literature. One is by a U.S. Army veteran of Iraq, who now also writes gritty (and funny) crime fiction [Liam Corley, who is mentioned above by Tracy Crow]. A third is an Army veteran of Afghanistan—she's a divorced single-parent who recently gender-transitioned, after years of sobriety and therapy.

Our books can be found on the shelves of such places as the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, the Dean F. Echenberg War Poetry Collection at the University of Texas-Austin, and even the Library of Congress.

We're particularly excited about an anthology forthcoming this November, *The Things We Carry Still: Poems & Micro-Stories about Military Gear*. Showcasing the work of approximately 60 war writers, the book will also feature a set of 10 discussion topics and writing prompts inspired by the book's content. The foreword is written by Vicki Hudson, a former U.S. Army officer who advocated dismantling "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policies.

We've got some crazy things planned for 2024 and beyond. For example, Middle West Press recently opened a call for a "Giant Robot Poems" anthology that will engage themes related to culture, war, and technology. Everything from Predator Drones to R2D2. We're also conceptualizing a potential first call for an anthology of short war fiction; it would likely be organized around a particular geographic or genre theme.

I continue to volunteer as poetry editor for the national non-profit Military Experience & the Arts' literary journal *As You Were*—a post I've held since about 2015. Editor-in-Chief David Ervin and other editors work hard to make that publication a welcoming, inclusive space. It's a great market for war-writers who are just starting to explore their stories on the page. They love working with established writers, too.

Middle West Press also underwrites a community of practice called The Aiming Circle (www.aimingcircle.com), a resource for writers who regularly engage military themes and topics. Our coverage helps writers identify potential book publishers, literary journals, academic publications, and other markets for their work. The Wrath-Bearing Tree is one of our most-recommended literary markets.

So that's a quick history of Middle West Press: Grit in the oyster. Learn by doing. Then teach others. Along the way, build bridges and disrupt stereotypes.

Wash, rinse, repeat.

Middle West Press: <http://www.middlewestpress.com/>

MilSpeak Foundation: <https://milspeakfoundation.org/>

Full disclosure: I have an essay in the MilSpeak anthology *Beyond The Limits of Their Longing* and another under consideration for an upcoming Middle West anthology.

Representation: An interview with new literary agent Tracy Crow



Tracy Crow, with her corgi puppy, Hope. The puppy is the

newest furry member of the household, but hope is always something Crow looks for in the writing she represents.

Two years ago, Tracy Crow, an author, former Marine, invited me to be a part of the MilSpeak Foundation ON POINT Women Warriors Writing Workshops she took around the country, offering a free weekend of writing instruction to women veterans and veteran family members. The workshops, in Tampa and Charlotte, were creatively inspiring and a hell of a lot of fun, not only for those who attended but for the cadre of instructors she'd pulled together. I'll never forget being a part of that team.

At every venue we met scores of women writers, many of whom had already met Tracy in one capacity or another. They'd either attended a previous workshop, had hired her for her book doctoring skills, or had served with her in uniform. And at each location she added more people to the list of writers she offered to coach, inviting them to join online workshop groups or to send her their manuscript for one-on-one review. She seemed tireless.

The workshops were for writers who'd never taken any serious writing instruction as well as writers who had already been published a number of times. For Crow, it seemed a desire to be creative and to improve your skills was the only requirement for her attention.

Crow has often helped writers with finished manuscripts find homes for them. She'd also applied her skillful pen to help guide a manuscript from unsellable to sought after. Eventually, she realized she'd been on a pathway that led to one thing—officially becoming an advocate for writers and their work. Tracy has now opened the doors to Tracy Crow Literary Agency, LLC and is now representing more than a dozen authors. I wanted to talk to her about that.

While I spoke to Tracy over the phone, she apologized for the hullabaloo her furry friends were making in the background.

Since they are often the subjects of her social media posts, I already knew there were any number of things a black lab, a yellow lab, a beagle-anatolian shepherd, and a corgi puppy can get into when their mom's back is turned. Most of the time, I couldn't actually hear them through the connection, but evidently, as soon as we started to converse, they had all decided it was time to gnaw on their bone chews. I can only imagine what that sounded like.

How many books have you helped bring to the market?

I can tell you that just prior to my making a decision to become an agent, I had helped place four books in eighteen months. And that was when I really started thinking seriously about it. But what helped me make the decision, was when [an author] I was working with asked me if I'd feel comfortable opening the door for her for a particular publisher. Just prior to that, a different author's book had come out and I realized that something in this book had been left out. I felt, at the time, that it wasn't for me to say anything and I figured the publisher would catch it, but they didn't and that left me feeling responsible. The writer didn't have an agent, but I'd turned her over to the publisher, assuming they would take care [of the missing piece] but they didn't. The bottom line is, when [the new author] asked me to help her with a publisher, I told her I was at the stage where I really felt guilty if I wasn't able to walk a writer through the entire process. If I'm not an agent, I can't represent the writers the way they deserve.

I did end up helping [the author] get her book in front of [the publisher], giving her instructions to call me with any questions because it can be a complicated process. So now, her book is with them and in their publishing pipeline. A few months later, I realized I was ready. So I formed the LLC and I haven't looked back.

Are you mostly getting submissions from word-of-mouth or are

you on Agentquery.com or any of the other agent solicitation sites?

I'm on Publishers Marketplace, but I'm getting as many manuscripts as I can comfortably handle. When you've gone through an MFA program and all of your MFA writing friends realize they have an agent among them, things can go a little crazy. They all start sending you their manuscripts and they all start referring their friends. And these are all excellent writers. I mean, really, really good writers. So it's not like I have to go digging and searching as a lot of new agents might have to do. A lot of good work is coming my way. Of course I follow the latest trends, but I don't really need to go searching for manuscripts. In fact I have to be very selective. I'm boutique. It's just me. So far. And there are only so many hours in a day, only so much I can read at a time. And I have this thing—that is, if I say I'm going to read your work, that doesn't mean you're going to hear from me in six months. You're going to hear from me within 10 days. Ten days to two weeks at the most. That's a pipeline I need to keep moving. I can only read so many, and handle all of the other work I do during the day, like sending out pitches to publishers, doing research to find the right strategy and the right fit with publishing houses and certain editors and their preferences with what I have as clients.

I also have a number of clients in various stages. I have some who are finished and their work has been pitched and their manuscripts are being read by the large houses. I have several who are finishing first drafts, but because they have already written or published heavily elsewhere and I know their work and their quality, I have agreed to sign them for their new book.

Then I have one young man, who is only 22, brilliant, came to me as a referral but the work needs a lot of editing. But because the concept for this six-book series is so brilliant, I couldn't say no. I told him that this is going to be a six-

month-long, intensive, MFA-level instruction and revision effort, and if he was up for that, then I would sign him. So this is intensive for both of us. Every day I have a couple of hours of editing and instruction for him. But the concept [for his series] is so brilliant. I was pleased that he had gotten 455 pages to this point, but we just have to up the diction, up the level of quality of the storytelling. The story is all there.

So I have all of these different clients in various stages. It's like having a bunch of plates spinning at different speeds, and you've got to keep each one spinning at the right speed for that particular client. It's a little crazy.

You're not just representing writers, teaching writing, you are doing developmental editing as well. You can't get much more full service than that.

Yes. It used to be that I would charge for developmental editing. I can't charge for that anymore since forming the literary agency, and that was a big part of my financial income that I had to give away in order to do the agent thing. From an ethical standard, as an agent, I can't charge someone for any sort of reading or editing. I either agree to represent you and take the work as it is and we work on it from there or we don't. Anything else is unethical. There's a lot of developmental editing projects I've had to walk away from because I knew the writer wanted to be my client at some point, but I couldn't do both.

I've told others to go through an additional rewrite, and bring it to me and if we're that much further along, then I can do it. It's just this one, young 22-year-old that I've agreed to go this heavy with.

What kind of work are you most attracted to?

The kind of work that I would have the easiest success in placing would be military writers, or writers with military

stories, because that's what I know the best and that's where I have the most contacts, and the community for support and all of that. But I have clients who are writing science fiction or fantasy that I'm excited about. I have clients that are writing upmarket women's fiction. I have a romance novelist and a cozy mystery writer. The only things that I'm not interested in representing are crime or anything horror related, or anything that's too violent.

Recently I had to turn away the cleanest manuscript I've ever seen in my writing life by a very, very famous writer because there was so much gratuitous stuff that I knew I couldn't advocate for it.. Then the next day, I'm saying yes to this young kid whose quality of writing is not there but the story is brilliant, and I want to help prepare him and get his work ready for the world. Some decisions are pretty easy and simple to make, but most of them are hard. Anytime I have to say no, it gets me in the gut because I've been on that end and I know what that feels like.

Of course, I'm receiving no's all day. I'm sending pitches all day to editors and hearing ... 'you know that's great but it's not quite close enough to what we want for a romance,' or 'It's on the fence,' or 'If it was only this,' or 'If it was only that.' I'm getting rejections all day, which just means I have to switch up my pitch or find a new way to approach it. And that's usually what it takes, just the right moment of timing.

It's like when I was selling real estate (in the 1990s). It feels a little like finding that perfect buyer for that perfect home. When it happens, it's a no brainer and the buyer says 'of course it's this house'. Connecting a manuscript with the right editor and publisher feels a little like that.

What kind of things would a writer do that would cause you to reject the manuscript?

A lot of writers, especially if they're new, will completely ignore what you've put out there as instruction for how you wish to be contacted. I understand it, because I've been at every stage of this. I understand how hard it can be, so I'm very forgiving and I don't automatically reject anyone ... unless they describe the work as a crime thriller ... because I'm not subjecting myself to that. I'm not into hard crime and horror.

Aside from that, it's the writing. I had to turn away a fellow grad school friend because the manuscript was fairly well written but the story didn't hold together. I know that in order for me to help that writer get the manuscript to a level that I could represent it would require a lot of work from me. So when I'm looking at a manuscript, I have to ask myself, how much do I love this work? How much of myself am I willing to give to it?

I'm beginning to understand why so many people are getting rejections. If the work isn't slam dunk there, agents don't have the time or they don't have the skill to give the work the developmental edit it needs.

I should mention that Tracy is a former assistant professor of creative writing and journalism and has years of experience guiding authors to greatness. She told me a story about one writer whose work was under consideration with an editor she knew. The editor told her he'd read the manuscript but was going to reject it because he felt something was missing. When Tracy read the work, she said the problem looked obvious to her. She consulted with the writer and made a few thematic suggestions. The writer made the changes, and now the book is in the publishing pipeline. She went on to say this:

How many agents have the time or the developmental chops to make something like that happen? I understand now why so many writers are receiving rejection after rejection. No. No. No. No., and they have no idea how to fix something that could be

great work. Agents and editors simply don't have the time, or a teaching background in most cases, so the writer never hears from them about what is missing.

And this is what I thought I could gift to my clients. If I see really solid promise in the writing, the language, the way the writer makes connections, the way the writer develops characters on the page, if they're indelible to me, if they speak to me—yet certain holes are obvious—then I'm going to give it everything I've got. If the writer demonstrates the ability to take it to the next level, then I'm open to it. Most agents would not have the time or energy for that.

When did you officially start as an agent?

I formed the LLC at the end of May. Since then the manuscripts have come in, I have had all this reading to do and I had to decide who would be my first clients. The first few weeks were just reading, reading, reading. I started pitching around early August, so we're just really in the first weeks of this. We have gotten really close already. There was a lot of talking and back and forth, and I thought we would be getting an offer from one, but it turned out to not be the right fit. I feel really good about this manuscript and it's being considered at several other houses right now.

All of this takes time. And editors will take weeks to read something, then they send it to others to read, then it goes to marketing and they have all of these discussions before they ever contact me. So even though we started pitching in August, we're just beginning to hear back from editors and publishers.

What about marketing? When you look at the manuscript, you look for good writing, good character development, but are you looking at marketability in terms of how much money the book could make? There's a lot of literary work that is wonderful, but will never make any money. How much does that impact your

decision?

There are publishers who will entertain books like that and I would go there first with a certain type of manuscript. I don't really think in terms of market because it's so slippery and I'm not following exact trends. I'm looking for the best story, the one that's going to stick with me. If I can remember the details and the characters, then I know there will be other readers who will feel the same thing. If it's the kind of book that would make a good book club discussion, then I feel that a number, at least a handful of publishers might be interested in it. So it's just a matter of finding the right one. The perfect buyer for the perfect home.

I know it's always frustrating for a writer when they find out that the marketing department was involved in the reject. They think, how am I going to compete with that? I just think that every book will find its way into the world. I know it may sound really woo woo—I tell my clients, if you're going to play with me, you're going to have to understand the woo woo parts—I tell them, if this is all about money for you, you're going to be disappointed. If this is about getting your work into the right vehicle to get it into the world, I'm your agent. We're going to find a vehicle that makes sense for your work. We also have to allow for the mystery of it. We can't force it. The only thing I can force is to make sure I'm working every day for these writers. I can only ensure I'm opening as many doors and making as many opportunities for these writers as I can, since I'm the gatekeeper—the only way they're going to get to these publishers.

This is a background kind of question but, I was just wondering. Why did you join the Marine Corps?

Well, I actually wanted to join the Air Force, because I thought I'd look better in blue. They had military police and police dogs, and I wanted to get involved with that. But I found out there was a six-month waiting period. I didn't have

the patience for that. So then I went down the hall and talked to the Navy recruiter. Same thing. Six-month waiting period. Then I went to talk to the Army recruiters and they also had a six-month waiting period. I was actually walking out of the building when the Marine recruiter stopped me and said, "You've checked out everybody else all morning. Aren't you even going to ask me any questions?"

Remember, this is 1977, I'd never had a single family member in the military. I looked at this recruiter and said, "You have women in the Marine Corps?" And he said, "Come on in here. Let me show you a film." Three weeks later I'm at Parris Island.

How long were you in the Marines?

Ten years.



Tracy Crow, center, with attendees of an On Point writing workshop.

Back to the agent stuff. Do you think you're close to placing something now?

I feel like I'm getting so much good feedback from my romance writer's book. It's the military version of The Ya Ya Sisterhood. It's really intriguing, it's really good, and it's written by the first woman JAG (Judge Advocate General) officer to go into combat and it was down in Panama. It's her first book. I met her in one of my workshops we held in Tampa. She's been workshopping with me for a year. When she finished the book, she came to me.

I do these free workshops every month ... four pro-bono workshops every month with these different women veterans groups including military spouses. So, she'd been working on

this book for a year and she asked if I would look at it in terms of something I might want to represent. I told her I absolutely want to represent this.

She's also writing a cozy mystery ... it's not bloody ... it's not violent and it also has some amazing redeeming qualities in terms of the storyline that I'm always looking for. I like it when the story demonstrates a higher purpose. What's the point? Are we just adding to the noise out there, or are we enhancing something?

But this author is really in her lane with the cozy mysteries and I expect she will write one a year and will eventually sign a multiple-book contract with someone.

I'm close with several books, but I know that my authors are counting the days and anticipating my weekly emails.

I do something that I don't think any other agents are doing. When I've had agents, I could go months without ever hearing from anybody. So, I send every one of my clients a Thursday weekly update. They're going to hear from me every Thursday. They're going to know what pitches went out and who we heard back from. Now, if I have an editor that is showing interest, I'm not going to make them wait until Thursday for that. Every one of my clients will be getting their Thursday updates.

That's unheard of!

I know. It's not fun when you don't have a bunch of good news. It's not fun when you have rejections to report but at least they know. Those who have had agents before, they're blown away by the level of access and weekly check-ins. Now, the clients that have never had an agent, they don't have anything to compare it to, so they're just ...'Thanks for the update!'

I know what they're feeling. Every time they check their email. Is there going to be something? I know that feeling. But at the same time I want them to have access and know they

have an agent who is working for them every day and every week and they're not just a client. They matter to me.

You also have to prepare them because sometimes this process can be slow, and other times it feels like it happens overnight. Editors move, they change publishing houses, and then all of a sudden that editor who I knew there who had to say no, can suddenly say yes to something over here. You just have to wait and you have to have faith in your work and faith in one another and give it that time to find its right, perfect vehicle into the world.

It sounds like this is exactly what Tracy Crow should be doing right now. Is that how it feels?

Since I got my MFA in 2005, I've had at least a dozen friends say that I really should be an agent. My husband would ask me why I wasn't an agent. I have to tell you this feels really good, to feel like I'm the champion of these writers and I can go around telling people, 'You've got to read this.' It feels so good to cheerlead and to champion on behalf of writers who maybe would have been rejected maybe dozens and dozens of times because the market is so flooded with stuff. It's joyful. It really is.

Is there anything you wish I'd asked that I haven't asked you?

I'm really impressed with what I'm reading today, as opposed to what I was reading in 2005. Back in 2005, when I would read that writers were getting rejected, it was like they wanted to jump off a bridge or something. Now, what I'm reading is that writers are like ... Next? They may not know why they were rejected but they're not giving up. They have stories to tell and I'm seeing a difference in attitude. It's almost like writers today, and I'm sure I'm generalizing too much, writers almost have this attitude now, that they're going to write regardless. And maybe it's because of the freedom the self-publishing pathway has opened up and offered. It's almost like

they will try the traditional way but the traditional way is not going to be the final gatekeeper. And I love that. I applaud that. I want to encourage that. I tell all my writers, look, we may be going this route, but let's not get so hung up on this that we miss other possibilities. Stay open to however it unfolds. I just admire how many people know they are good writers. They know they have stories to tell. I just admire the attitude of writers today, which is ... 'I'm gonna go write another book.' That the most important thing is being creative and allowing that creative opportunity, and not allowing people like agents or editors to steal your joy from that.

I'm wondering if the discipline you're seeing and this determination is because your clients have some kind of military connection. Do you think it's because of that, that they are so determined?

At this point, the dogs went berserk. There was barking, the sound of nails sliding across the floor and a brief bit of chaos. Tracy was shooing them out of the room, telling me to hold on because she really wanted to answer that question. When she came back, I didn't have to remind her what the question was. She jumped right in.

What I'm seeing in various chatroom groups, various Facebook groups, there's a level of frustration at times, yes. But I'm noticing that people are saying, 'I'm still writing, I'm still going,' and these people aren't military. It's just a major change. I have friends who stopped writing after their first rejection. They haven't written since 2005. Now, it's almost like I'm seeing a different attitude that what is more important is the creativity. And they're saying, what if things fall apart and nobody ever gives them this validation they think they need to continue their work ... and I've been there, I've needed that validation too. They still know they have a self-publishing pathway that is gaining in esteem if the work is good.

[Self-publishing is] no longer considered so negative. In 2011, I published my first book that way and was scared to death my academic creative writing colleagues would discover that I had, and I would lose my job. I just think the self-publishing avenue has taken a little bit of the pressure off because they know there's still a way they can do it. They know they can still reach readers and still find their own market. I love it!

It's clear that Tracy loves the work. You can see the amount of heart she gives when she's with writers in her workshops or any writer gatherings. People flock to her and appreciate the energy, joy, and support she gives. This agent thing is the right path for her.

Tracy says if you'd like to query her, send her a synopsis of your work. She'll give it a read and if she feels like it's something she can advocate for, she will ask for the manuscript. She said she's reading queries and manuscripts from writers all the time. Contact her at Tracy@TracyCrow.com and include QUERY in the subject line.

✘ **Tracy Crow** is host and producer of the podcast, Accept Your Gifts: The 22-Minute Podcast for Inspiring Your Most Creative Life, a twice-weekly program with listeners in 12 countries.

She is also the founder of Tracy Crow Literary Agency, LLC, and the president and CEO of MilSpeak Foundation, Inc., a 501 (c) 3 organization dedicated toward supporting the creative endeavors of military servicemembers, veterans, and their families.

Tracy is the author/editor of six books to include the novella, *Cooper's Hawk: The Remembering*; the popular history, *It's My Country Too: Women's Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan* with co-author Jerri Bell;

the award-winning memoir, *Eyes Right: Confessions from a Woman Marine*; the military conspiracy thriller, *An Unlawful Order*, under her pen name, Carver Greene; the true story collection, *Red, White, & True: Stories from Veterans and Families, WWII to Present*; and the breakthrough writing text, *On Point: A Guide to Writing the Military Story*, in which Tracy combines her skills and experience as a former Marine Corps officer, award-winning military journalist, author, editor, and assistant professor of creative writing and journalism. Tracy's short stories and essays have also appeared in a number of literary journals and anthologies.

She has a B.A. in creative writing from Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, and an MFA in creative writing from Queens University of Charlotte in North Carolina. She and her husband, Mark Weidemaier, an MLB lifer, live on ten storybook acres in central North Carolina with their four dogs – Cash, Fenway, Hadley, and Hope.

The interviewer- M. L. Doyle

✘ M.L. Doyle calls on her years of serving as an Army Reservist to write about women in combat boots. Mary is the author of *The Peacekeeper's Photograph*, *The Sapper's Plot* and *The General's Ambition* in her Master Sergeant Harper mystery series. She has also penned *The Bonding Spell* and *The Bonding Blade*, in a planned three-book *Desert Goddess* urban fantasy series. *Limited Partnerships*, is her four-novella erotic romance series.

She co-authored the memoirs of two brave soldiers to ensure their stories keep their proper place in history. The memoir, *I'm Still Standing: From Captured Soldier to Free Citizen, My Journey Home* (Touchstone, 2010) with Spec. (Ret) Shoshana Johnson, an African-American POW of the Iraq War, was finalist in the NAACP Image Award. She also co-authored with Brig. Gen (Ret.) Julia Cleckley the story of her rise through Army ranks from humble beginnings despite great personal tragedy. A

Promise Fulfilled, My Life as a Wife and Mother, Soldier and General Officer was published in 2015.

Mary's essays, reviews and interviews have appeared in The War Horse, The Goodman project, and O-Dark Thirty. She is part of the fiction editorial panel of The Wrath-Bearing Tree.

Book Review by Eric Chandler: IT'S MY COUNTRY, TOO



This happened in the 1980's. Maybe it was after I joined the military or before, when I was thinking about it. In either case, I was sitting in a cabin in New Gloucester, Maine with my Aunt Helen and my cousin, Kim. Somehow, we got into the topic of women in combat. I made some comment that we needed to decide if that's really what we wanted as a country. My cousin and my aunt both snorted.

I don't remember the exact words, but my Aunt Helen said something like, "Who the hell is 'we'?"

It sticks out in my memory like I got slapped. Even as a self-centered, male teenager, I had to admit they had a point.

I'm still trying to remove myself from the center of the universe and imagine what life is like from someone else's perspective. I read a book during Women's History Month called [*It's My Country Too: Women's Military Stories from the American Revolution to Afghanistan*](#) (Potomac Books, 2017). It's filled with stories that address a question my aunt might have asked, "Why should it be so difficult for a woman to serve her country?"

I served alongside women in uniform from 1985 to 2013. In peacetime and in combat. Officers and enlisted. Pilots and ground personnel. Active Duty and Air National Guard. I went to the Air Force Academy not long after women were first admitted there. When I first joined the Air Force, women weren't allowed to fly fighters. I eventually served in units where women were flying in formations with me. I'm married to a retired Air Force veteran and Air Force Academy graduate. Her older sister, also a grad, retired as a major general in the Air Force. I should already have a first-hand appreciation for what strides women have made and the challenges they've faced in military service. But Jerri Bell and Tracy Crow, the editors of this book, gave me a new perspective on where my three decades fit into the larger scheme of things.

It was a new perspective that I needed, for a couple of reasons. For one, my wife had a positive experience in military service. She's tough, but quiet. When I push her on the topic, to find some hidden story of struggle or discrimination or mistreatment, she has almost nothing bad to say. Frankly, she seems like an exception. Secondly, I served in the US Air Force. My perspective is limited to my branch of service.

In *It's My Country Too*, there are stories about women in all the branches of military service, even disguised as men so they could fight. There's even a story about a woman who served in the US Lighthouse Service. The breadth and depth of the stories the editors included is remarkable. There are

uplifting stories and ones that are ugly. Another thing that makes these stories compelling is that they are first-person accounts. There's a lot of background provided by the editors, but the stories come from the women themselves. This is a great accomplishment, because, as it says in the book regarding Korean War nurses (but the sentiment is true for women's stories in general), "None published memoirs."

The editors mention Louisa May Alcott who wrote *Hospital Sketches* about her time as a civil war nurse. She served under a woman at the Union Hotel Hospital named [Hannah Chandler Ropes](#), my relative. Ropes is buried in the town where my parents live in Maine, the same town where my aunt schooled me about what "we" means. Her writings were published in [Civil War Nurse: The Diary and Letters of Hannah Ropes](#) (The University of Tennessee Press, 1980) edited by John R. Brumgardt. Bell and Crow inspired me to pull this book down off my shelf for another look. I was disappointed to see that my copy, that I read years ago, didn't have a single dog-eared page. Say what you will about desecrating physical books, but mangled pages are how I leave breadcrumbs. I read it again.

Ropes served as a volunteer nurse in that hospital in Georgetown. She showed up there on June 25, 1862, the day that the Battle of the Seven Days started. Her nephew Charles Peleg Chandler died fighting at Glendale during that battle on June 30, 1862, the same week she arrived. In a July letter, she says she's worried about both Charles P. and Charles Lyon Chandler, his cousin. I've been researching Charles P. and Charles L. Discovering that their aunt wrote a letter wondering whether her nephews were okay was like getting an electric shock. I have Bell and Crow to thank for helping me learn what I should've known already. In a strange convergence, it was Charles P. who inadvertently motivated Ropes to become a nurse when, two years before, he sent her a book about nursing written by Florence Nightingale. Sadly, Ropes and her two nephews would never see the end of the war.

At one point as the head matron of the hospital, Ropes was so horrified at the mistreatment of the enlisted men who were patients, she complained to the head surgeon. Getting nowhere, she went in person directly to the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton. Once Stanton verified what my relative said was true, he threw both the head steward and the head surgeon into prison. Things improved at the hospital. I was a squadron commander once, so it stings a little to read how she went around the chain of command. But she cared more about the treatment of the patients than how she was perceived. She was also a single mother after being abandoned by her husband in the 1840's. In the 1850's she moved to Kansas as part of the freesoil, anti-slavery movement to help make it a free state, but that's another story. The point is that she was well past being bashful or "proper."

The very last thing that Ropes wrote was a letter to her daughter on Jan 11, 1863 where she let her know that she was ill along with many of the nurses she supervised. She said "Miss Alcott" was "under orders from me not to leave her room." Both of them had typhoid pneumonia. Hannah Ropes died on January 20, 1863 at the age of 54. My son and I ran by her headstone the last time we were in Maine. Louisa May Alcott pulled through and wrote *Little Women*. Funny how lives circle around and intersect in the past and the present.

Two stories struck me in *It's My Country Too* because they seemed universal to me, regardless of the sex of the author. One was the moving piece by Lori Imsdahl. Maybe it was because it dealt with Afghanistan, where I've looked down on scenes like this from the air and yearned to know what it was like on the ground. Or maybe it was because she talks about luck. Or maybe it was simply because I was transported there by her outstanding writing.

I'm a pilot, so another passage that hit me hard was by Cornelia Fort, who dodged enemy aircraft in her plane as the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor (another incredible story). But

this next bit was universal for a pilot, whether you're a man or a woman:

None of us can put into words why we fly. It is something different for each of us. I can't say exactly why I fly but I know why as I've never known anything in my life.

I knew it when I saw my plane silhouetted against the clouds framed by a circular rainbow. I knew it when I flew up into the extinct volcano Haleakala on the island of Maui and saw the gray-green pineapple fields slope down to the cloud-dappled blueness of the Pacific. But I know it otherwise than in beauty. I know it in dignity and self-sufficiency and in the pride of skill. I know it in the satisfaction of usefulness.

When I read this passage by Fort and the story by Imsdahl, I don't feel like a man or a woman. I feel like a human being.

Which reminds me of something Hannah Ropes wrote on December 26, 1862. Her hospital was overflowing with injured soldiers from the Battle of Fredericksburg. The dead and the dying and the amputated limbs. She wrote: "The cause is not of either North or South—it is the cause of, and the special work of the nineteenth century, to take the race up into broader vantage ground and on to broader freedom."

Is she talking about emancipation? She was a vocal abolitionist. Is she talking about the advancement of women? Her writings are clearly feminist. I read all around the quote in that letter and in the book to try to understand what she meant. The editor Brumgardt infers that she means the whole human race. I hope all of those meanings can be true simultaneously.

It's My Country Too brought me to broader vantage ground and helped me face my aunt's question: Who the hell is "we"?