



(Illustration by Sgt. 1st Class Curtis Loter, Multimedia and Visual Information Division [OCPA], U.S. Army)

Muddy Boots and Powerful Pages

Why We Write

Sgt. 1st Class Leyton Summerlin, U.S. Army

In our society, people expect instant gratification for the most menial work. This makes it easy to lose sight of the importance of writing, particularly when the author's feedback loop rarely makes it back to them. With little-to-no immediate impact or gratification, why would anyone want to write? It is challenging, intimidating, and can make us feel vulnerable. Least of all, why would a muddy-boot-wearing warfighter be inclined to tackle such a task?

Writing is a powerful self-development tool, unparalleled in its ability to clear our thoughts and hone our ideas. When we pen these insights to paper, we are forced to draw them out in their entirety, exposing weaknesses in our arguments that must be shored up and points of friction that need clarification. The more we undergo this writing and refining process, the more we develop the skill of concise communication.

More important than what writing does for the author is how writing transforms the reader. When a hard-earned lesson is shared, it makes the readers better decision-makers. When an insight is digested, it shapes our view of the world and impacts our lives in ways we could never have imagined. In 1987, Chief of Staff of the Army Gen. Carl E. Vuono said, "Sharing knowledge and experience is the greatest legacy you can leave to subordinates."¹

The following stories from Master Sgt. John Bandy and Lt. Col. Jay Ireland show us the importance of sharing our experiences and the direct link among reading, writing, and the warfighter. Others, such as my own, demonstrate the indirect and peripheral impact we can have when we share our insights, ideas, or experiences.

Words Are Lifesavers—Master Sgt. John Bandy

I met Master Sgt. Bandy while assigned to the 2nd Battalion (Airborne), 503rd Infantry Regiment of the 173rd Airborne Brigade in 2023. His liveliness, experience, and approachability stem from his genuine care for soldiers and love for the Army, which drives soldiers to flock to him for mentorship. He is more aware than most of the importance of sharing lessons.

One day in early 2004, while I was on duty, I was told to read an article about Operation Gothic Serpent, a U.S. military operation in Mogadishu, Somalia. Something from that article stood out: 95 percent of casualties fell in the streets.

Fast-forward to November 2004. I was in the middle of Operation Phantom Fury [Fallujah, Iraq], the United States' most extensive urban fighting since Vietnam. Nothing—and I mean nothing—compares to the chaos of Fallujah. Amidst that chaos, there was an ever-present chant in my head: stay out of the streets.

Around me, buildings crumbled, and we had to keep dodging into ruins to stay safe. Thanks to that article, my team avoided getting caught in the streets; one night, it saved our lives. As we were about to hunker down, I got a bad feeling about our position. I told everyone to hop into our vehicles, and just as we did, enemy mortars pummeled the spot where we were. Stay out of the streets.

I am forever thankful I read that article and have not stopped reading since. I owe a lot to the NCOs who used to mandate that we read in-house written content while on duty or when we could find white space. That one piece of advice, found in a dusty journal I was made to read, saved my team and me many times. Thank you to those who take the time to share their stories and lessons. They're not just words; they're lifesavers.

Learning Faster—Lt. Col. Jay Ireland

Another perspective comes from Lt. Col. Ireland. A passionate leader whose care for soldiers is easily seen in his work. As the commander of the 1st Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment from the 1st Cavalry Division, he is most recently known for his successful unit writing program.²

I've commanded during combat, and it shaped who I am. I'm always worried about letting my team down or making that dreaded call to someone's family. I wouldn't wish that on anyone, and to prevent that, I am now forever driven to pass on what I've learned,

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Soldiers from the 1st Cavalry Division prepare to enter and clear a building 12 November 2004 during fighting in Fallujah, Iraq. Master Sgt. John Bandy recalled reading an article about Operation Gothic Serpent in Mogadishu, Somalia, in early 2004. While in the middle of the Second Battle of Fallujah, "stay out of the streets" echoed in his head. He said, "That one piece of advice, found in a dusty journal I was made to read, saved my team and me many times. ... They're not just words; they're lifesavers." (Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Johan Charles Van Boers, U.S. Army)

whether to help save the lives of soldiers or help make somebody's job a little easier.

It started in 2009 when my troop was about to deploy to the mountains in Nuristan, Afghanistan. My boss had the officers read the redacted 15-6 investigations on the attack at Outpost Wanat. It was all marked up, but we read every word, looking for anything to help us keep our folks safe and one step ahead of the enemy. That year was intense and full of Taliban activity. Reading that report undoubtedly helped us prepare for the hell we experienced. I learned the value of reading as it pertains to warfighting and felt a sense of relief that we all took that assignment from my commander seriously.

When we redeployed, I wanted to share my experiences and help future soldiers. I wrote about defending our combat outpost, mixing tactics and personal stories. When I thought it was ready for the Armor professional journal, I solicited feedback from others, but I was told it wasn't ready

for publication. So, I stuffed it in a drawer, never to be seen again. Looking back, I know it wasn't perfect, but I wish I hadn't given up. I regret not using the feedback as motivation to transform that paper into a professional article. This way, I could have shared our hard-earned lessons and helped someone else stay one step ahead.

Let me be the first to say that it's OK if your first try isn't perfect. Writing is challenging, and now that I'm in charge of a battalion, I want to encourage all soldiers to write about and share their experiences. As an Army, we're in this together, and I'll help anyone get their work ready for others to read so we can all stay one step ahead.

Unforeseen Impact—Sgt. 1st Class Leyton Summerlin

From 2019 to 2023, I was a drill sergeant at the Maneuver Center of Excellence (MCoE). In 2020, my

wife and I found out she was pregnant with our first child, and I realized that the soldiers I was training would one day be her leaders if she were to join the service like many in our family. This persistent thought drove me to work harder than ever, and I became the MCoE Drill Sergeant of the Year two days before she was born. This position is the primary trainer for newly assigned drill sergeants at what is now Fort Moore, Georgia. If I could help drill sergeants, I figured this would have a broader and more significant impact on the Army's future leaders who might one day lead my daughter.

During this time, I developed a three-day leadership class that every incoming drill sergeant attended. I led these classes through group and interactive discussions focused on providing them with a deeply rooted sense of purpose, practical tools, and guidance from seasoned peers. The problem was that I used only a whiteboard and a marker in this class. There was no written version.

My senior leaders challenged me to put the class into writing so I could pass on three years of hard work to the instructors who would come after me. No matter how hard I thought this would be or how much I dreaded trying to pen this class to paper, I knew they were right. I locked myself in a room after work for several nights and battled with writer's block until I finally had a finished product.

Because I have learned so much from the Army's professional journals, I decided to contribute my thoughts and published "Standardizing Excellence" in the *Infantry* professional journal.³ I had no grand expectations for this piece. I simply hoped to inspire a few young soldiers over the next twenty years or so.

After three years and two changes in the position, I learned that this class is still taught, and the article I wrote is an integral part, positively influencing far more soldiers than I could ever have hoped. I'm grateful to have had Sgts. Maj. Garner, Gonzalez, and Hapney as leaders who pushed and supported me to

write and share my thoughts and experiences with others. I will forever encourage anyone whose heart is in the right place to do the same.

Empowering Voices

When is the right time for soldiers to start sharing their ideas and experiences with the Army's journals? The answer is now. Whether it's eight hundred or four thousand words, a young private first class or the old lieutenant colonel, everyone has ideas others can benefit from.

While the narratives in this article provide reasons to



This 9 July 2008 photo shows a view of the Wanat combat outpost located in the rugged, mountainous terrain of Nuristan Province, Afghanistan, looking east from a mortar position manned by soldiers from Chosen Company, 2nd Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment (Airborne), 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team toward the town bazaar and a key observation point. The Battle of Wanat between U.S. service members and approximately two hundred Afghan insurgents was fought days later on 13 July 2008. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Jesse Queck, U.S. Army)

write and call for authorship, it's always easy to find reasons not to, whether we don't have the time, find it intimidating, fear retribution, etc. For enlisted soldiers, we might lack writing skills or think no one will value our ideas. For an officer, it may be the self-induced pressure of perceived incompetence from others.

However, if you were told that what you write today might save someone's life or inspire excellence in others who then, in turn, win a future war that protects your loved ones, would you do it? As soldiers, we have no problem running into a hail of gunfire or sprinting through a potential minefield to close with and destroy the enemy or to save a friend. Whatever makes it hard to pick up the pen and share your idea or experience, overcome that obstacle. You may not realize it or ever find out, but someone is counting on you. Do not write for yourself; write for them.

Here are some closing thoughts on getting started and approaches to strengthen the profession of arms:

1. *Capstone*. Write a reflective piece at the end of your time in a particular duty position. Whether you were the Drill Sergeant Academy commandant at

the end of your tenure or a platoon leader finishing a rotation at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center, share what you learned, failed at, or wished you had done differently.

2. *Branch*. Is there a branch-specific challenge, such as integrating unmanned aircraft systems within an infantry rifle platoon? Write about how you think it can be fixed.
3. *Institutional*. Does something need to change in our primary military education courses? If so, create a dialogue between the institution and the force to solicit clear and thoughtful feedback.
4. *Organizational*. Do you think your unit could be more effective in garrison and in training? Leaders, inspire your soldiers to contribute by writing these answers in a white paper and possibly publishing them in a journal to help others outside the organization. ■

I'm grateful to have had Sgts. Maj. Garner, Gonzalez, and Hapney as leaders, and an amazing wife who pushed and supported me to write and share my thoughts and experiences with others.

Notes

1. "Year of the NCO Remarks at the Dedication of the New Academic Building United States Army Sergeants Majors Academy Fort Bliss, Texas," 12 November 1987, folder 26, box 2, Carl E. Vuono Papers, United States Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, PA, <https://emu.usahec.org/alma/multimedia/610336/20184784MNB989110502F024174I004.pdf>.

2. Jay Ireland and Ryan Van Wie, "How to Develop and Run a Unit Writing Program," *Military Review* 104, no. SE-02 (2024):

76–81. This article, included in this issue, provides a unit writing program model to promote healthy discourse and clear professional writing within our formations.

3. Leyton M. Summerlin, "Standardizing Excellence," *Infantry* (Summer 2023): 11, https://www.moore.army.mil/infantry/magazine/issues/2023/Summer/pdf/12_Summerlin_txt.pdf.

"Keep toiling at the mill. If you aspire mainly to command (and you should) remember it can only be done with work and one must practice, practice. The idea that the military looks askance at the writer is sheer bunk. Any Army functions well mainly through clear writing."

—S. L. A. Marshall, "Genesis to Revelation," *Military Review* 52, no. 2 (February 1972): 24