National Endowment for the Arts

A GUIDE FOR WRITERS

OPERATION HOMECOMING

Writing the wartime experience

The first thing I had thought was I had just been hit in the back by and IED. It wasn't like I felt as if I was going to die, more like "man that really hurt."…

There was a Major who was our field surgeon waiting for me in the front of the gate to check me out. This guy didn't reassure me either. When I told him that I was okay he looked at me and said, "look son, you may have internal bleeding." Now I was scared….

They did an x-ray of my back and found that I had two pieces of shrapnel in my back, I asked the doctor if I could keep the shrapnel and he said "yea sure, forever." They weren't going to be taking the shrapnel out. So yeah now your son is going to have two pieces of metal in his back for the rest of his life…. A purple heart recipient.

…. im not leaving Iraq and I dint want you to worry. I know your going too anyway but the reason I shared this story here was so you know what it's like to be here and that the people that im with all look after one another.... I don't want mom to worry so don't read the detailed parts of this letter. I LOVE YALL and ill be home soon enough. Let everyone know what's going on over here, let them here it from a soldier….

— Sergeant Timothy Gaestel, writing quickly to his father via e-mail (the typographical errors are in the original) about being wounded in Iraq in September 2003

National Endowment for the Arts

OPERATION HOMECOMING

Writing the wartime experience

A Guide for Writers

Written and edited by
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The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) is a public agency dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts, both new and established; bringing the arts to all Americans; and providing leadership in arts education. Established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government, the Arts Endowment is the largest annual national funder of the arts, bringing great art to all 50 states, including rural areas, inner cities, and military bases.

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Contents

Foreword by Dana Gioia 4
Introduction by Andrew Carroll 6

UNLOCKING THE STORY: Subjects & Themes to Inspire Ideas

I. PEOPLE
"A Quick Look at Who Is Fighting This War" (*letter*) by Ryan Kelly ..10
"Star-Fix" (*poem*) by Marilyn Nelson 11

II. EVENTS
"Vulnerable" (*personal narrative*) by Susan Henson 12
"December 7, 1941" (*letter*) by William Czako 13

III. OBJECTS
"A Journey Taken with My Son" (*e-mail*) by Myrna Bein 14
In Pharaoh's Army (*memoir*) by Tobias Wolff 15

IV. PLACES
"Ferris Wheel" (*poem*) by Brian Turner 16
"Facing It" (*poem*) by Yusef Komunyakaa 17

V. HUMOR
"Combat Musician" & "Lost in Translation" (*personal narratives*) by Sharon D. Allen 18
Catch-22 (*novel*) by Joseph Heller 19

VI. COMING HOME
"The Hardest Letter to Write" (*e-mail*) by Parker Gyokeres 20
Fatal Light (*novel*) by Richard Currey 21

CRAFTING THE STORY: Essential Elements of Good Literature

VII. PERSPECTIVE
"Aftermath" (*short fiction*) by Sangjoon Han 24
The Things They Carried (*novel*) by Tim O'Brien 25

VIII. NARRATIVE
"Road Work" (*personal narrative*) by Jack Lewis 26
Beyond Glory (*nonfiction*) by Larry Smith (oral history of Thomas Hudner Jr.) 28

IX. CHARACTERS
"Safekeeping" (*short fiction*) by Kathleen Toomey Jabs 30
Slaughterhouse-Five (*novel*) by Kurt Vonnegut 31

X. DIALOGUE
"Khost-Gardez" (*short fiction*) by Ross Cohen 32
The Red Badge of Courage (novel) by Stephen Crane 33

XI. TONE
"Sea Voyage" (*e-mail*) by Guy W. Ravey 34
"I Have a Rendezvous with Death" (*poem*) by Alan Seeger 35

XII. DETAILS
"Here Among These Ruins" (*e-mail*) by Helen Gerhardt 36
"First Snow in Alsace" (*poem*) by Richard Wilbur 37

KEYS TO WRITING WELL 38

A CLOSE READ
Shiloh: A Novel by Shelby Foote 40

Credits and Permissions 42
Submission Guidelines 43

Foreword

By Dana Gioia
Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts

Photo by Vance Jacobs

In 2004, the National Endowment for the Arts created *Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience*, a program for U.S. military personnel and their families. Over the next four years this unique literary program sought out and preserved the stories and reflections of American troops who have served our nation on the frontlines—as in Afghanistan and Iraq—and stateside defending the homeland. In partnership with the Southern Arts Federation, the NEA has now expanded the *Operation Homecoming* program to offer extended writing workshops to active-duty troops and veterans at Department of Veterans Affairs medical centers, military hospitals, and affiliated centers around the country.

In coordination with all four branches of the Armed Forces and the Department of Defense, the Arts Endowment sponsored writing workshops for returning troops and their families at military installations from Alaska to Florida, New York to California, from 2004 to 2007. The workshops also were held at overseas installations from the USS *Carl Vinson* in the Persian Gulf to Bagram Air Field in Afghanistan. Taught by some of America's most distinguished novelists, poets, historians, and journalists, these workshops provided servicemen and women with the opportunity to write about their wartime experiences in a variety of forms — from fiction, verse, and letters to essay, memoir, and personal journal. The visiting writers, many of whom are war veterans themselves, helped the troops share their stories with current and future generations. The original faculty has been expanded to include new authors who themselves served in the U.S. Armed Forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

To give our troops a sense of their own capabilities, the Arts Endowment also produced an accompanying audio CD for this program. Moving from a heart-rending letter from the Civil War to poems and memoirs about World War II to Vietnam War fiction, the CD explores a variety of literary responses by those who have come through similar experiences. In addition, the Arts Endowment will provide the workshop participants with this Guide for Writers as well as the acclaimed documentary *Muse of Fire* about the *Operation Homecoming* program and creative writing process.

In tandem with the original workshops, the Arts Endowment offered an open call for writing submissions to active-duty military personnel and their families. This ongoing appeal has resulted in more than 1,200 submissions and 12,000 pages of writings. Operation Homecoming submissions collected in Phase I (April 2004 to April 2008) will be preserved in both the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration and the Library of Congress's Veterans History Project. Almost one hundred of the submissions are featured in the acclaimed anthology *Operation Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families*, edited by military historian Andrew Carroll. The University of Chicago Press released an expanded paperback of the original Random House edition on Memorial Day 2008. Future submissions to this historic NEA program also will be preserved.

It is impossible to predict what stories will be submitted to the program in the future. Based on the thousands of pages we have received to date, much of it may be personal in importance—a soldier's or spouse's attempt to capture and clarify a singularly challenging moment in life. Some of it may rise to literature—vivid accounts of experience that arrest the reader's attention and linger in the memory. All of it will have historical value as the testimony of men and women who saw the events directly. *Operation Homecoming* will capture these

individual accounts and preserve them for the public record. American letters will be richer for their addition.

War and military service have been major literary subjects as long as there has been literature. The earliest masterpiece of the Western tradition, Homer's *Iliad*, portrays the heroism and human cost of the Trojan War, while its companion poem, *The Odyssey*, recounts one veteran's long and difficult homecoming. The great national epics of imperial Rome (*The Aeneid*), France (*The Song of Roland*), Spain (*El Cid*), and Persia (*The Shahnama*) all commemorate the decisive military encounters that shaped each culture's history.

Many great authors have been soldiers. The Greek playwright Sophocles, creator of *Oedipus Rex*, served as an Athenian general in the Peloponnesian War. The Roman poet Horace fought at the Battle of Philippi. Shakespeare's friend and fellow playwright Ben Jonson served in the infantry in the Flemish Wars. The two Renaissance poets who first brought the sonnet to English — Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey — both were soldiers. Other great writers have continued this tradition from Spain's Miguel de Cervantes, author of *Don Quixote*, to Russia's Leo Tolstoy, author of *War and Peace*.

War also has inspired its civilian witnesses to great literature. Tending to wounded soldiers in the makeshift hospitals of Washington, D.C., the poet Walt Whitman wrote about the devastation of the American Civil War with heartfelt understanding. During World War I, Ernest Hemingway served as a volunteer ambulance driver for the American Red Cross on the Austro-Italian front and was hospitalized with shrapnel injuries. He fictionalized his war experiences in his novel *A Farewell to Arms*. While many American writers served in World War I, few participated in sustained combat, and their writing reflects this absence. For most of them, the war was a great storm in the distance that rolled past without ever touching down.

But World War II was different. For millions of Americans, the war was long, bloody, and personal. Many of our greatest contemporary poets saw brutal combat and later wrote movingly about their wartime experience, including Pulitzer Prize winners Anthony Hecht, Howard Nemerov, Louis Simpson, and Richard Wilbur. Other American writers served their nation on the dangerous wartime seas, either in the U.S. Navy, like poet William Jay Smith, or in the U.S. Merchant Marine, like novelist Ralph Ellison. Our novelists in uniform also addressed war in their best works, especially James Dickey, Shelby Foote, Joseph Heller, James Jones, John Oliver Killens, Norman Mailer, James Salter, and Kurt Vonnegut. The pattern repeated with the Vietnam War, producing such singular literary talents as Philip Caputo, Joe Haldeman, Yusef Komunyakaa, Tim O'Brien, Robert Stone, and Tobias Wolff.

One cannot tell the story of our nation without also telling the story of our wars. And these often harrowing tales are best told by the men and women who lived them. Today's American military is the best trained and best educated in our nation's history. These men and women offer unique and important voices that enlarge our understanding of the American experience. Looking at the great literary legacy of soldier writers from antiquity to the present, I cannot help but expect that important new writers will emerge from the ranks of our latest veterans. ~

Introduction

By Andrew Carroll

Photo by Chris Carroll

Marines, soldiers, sailors, and airmen do not often think of themselves as authors. Tens of millions of Americans have served in the armed forces since the War of Independence, but only a small fraction of them have gone on to write about their experiences.

This is perhaps not entirely unexpected; military training and traditions have fostered a culture and community that, for understandable reasons, promote collective stoicism over individual self-expression. But it nevertheless represents an enormous loss of potentially stellar fiction and nonfiction works by individuals who have been at the epicenter of world events and seen firsthand the extremes of human nature.

In April 2004, the NEA launched *Operation Homecoming*, an unprecedented initiative that brought prominent authors to U.S. military bases worldwide to lead writing workshops and encourage troops to share their short stories, poems, memoirs, and other writings. The response was overwhelming; the NEA received 12,000 pages of material in the first two years alone, and submissions are still coming in.

What was most impressive about the initial response was not its volume but its quality. Regardless of rank, specialty, education, or socioeconomic background, veterans and active-duty troops represent a previously untapped community of writers with tremendous range and ability. In September 2006, Random House published approximately one hundred of the submissions in an anthology titled *Operation Homecoming*. The book was immediately praised in newspapers across the country for its candor, authenticity, and literary excellence. The *Washington Post* hailed it as one of the best nonfiction books of the year. The *Chicago Tribune* wrote: "The wildly diverse pieces, thematically arranged, convey an urgency and immediacy that bring to mind great authors of the wartime experience: Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, Tim O'Brien." NPR and ABC News broadcast readings from the book. *Operation Homecoming* was also the inspiration for an Oscar-nominated documentary that played in theaters nationwide and aired on PBS. In a glowing review, *The New York Times* remarked: "The best pieces [from the film] suggest that war can turn ordinary men who wouldn't think of keeping diaries into latter-day Hemingways."

The caliber of the material should not have come as a surprise. Good writing takes stamina and determination, and few individuals are more disciplined than military personnel. Good writing requires sharp attention to detail, and troops are drilled constantly on the importance of "situational awareness," of carefully observing one's surroundings and mentally noting: What's different, unique, out of place? Good writing also depends on originality and ingenuity, and service members are trained to improvise and think creatively to solve seemingly insurmountable problems. And troops certainly aren't lacking in material needed to fire up the imagination; many have accumulated a lifetime of riveting stories from a single deployment. Above all, first-rate writers believe emphatically that language matters, that words are almost sacred. For members of the armed forces, words are more than marks on a page or spoken utterances. They are one's honor. They are orders and missions. They are life and death.

Along with inviting troops to participate, the NEA solicited material from the men and women who guard the loneliest post in any conflict and are often overlooked in wartime—the family members on the home front. They

too serve, waiting anxiously day after day for their loved ones to return alive and well. Every time they hear the phone ring or see an unfamiliar car approach their driveway, they wonder if they're about to be told that their spouse, child, or parent is gone forever.

When asked why they decided to participate in the writing workshops and submit material to the NEA, the troops and their family members consistently gave the same answers. First, they found the writing process itself cathartic. It enabled them to gain a measure of control over their feelings and unravel tangled knots of emotions. Second, they shared their private journals, e-mails, and letters—many of which reveal very raw and honest accounts of drinking binges, depression, and nightmares—to let other veterans suffering from similar problems know that they aren't alone.

Finally, many participants lamented how little civilians seemed to know about the armed forces, and they wanted their writings to foster a greater understanding of the military. "Until I married my husband," the wife of one National Guardsman said, "I had no idea how demanding the life of a soldier is. He almost never talks about it, but it's harder than anyone can imagine." None of the troops sought attention for themselves, but they all wanted their brothers and sisters in arms—especially those who did not come home alive—remembered, and the writings they submitted are impassioned records of this sacrifice.

In addition to revealing the heroic actions of U.S. service members, the submissions illuminate how thoughtful and intelligent these troups are. The literary works they have crafted are valuable not only for their lessons about history and combat, but for their insights into human nature itself. Their writings transcend the subject of war and teach us about grief, hope, violence, compassion, empathy, resilience, and the precariousness of life. Without question there is intrigue, humor, suspense, and drama in these stories of men and women who have endured the crucible of battle. But as with all great literature, there is also hard-earned wisdom about the human condition from which all of us can learn.

Throughout this writer's guide are selections from *Operation Homecoming* paired thematically with poems and excerpts from novels, memoirs, and nonfiction works by veterans of past conflicts. The first half of the booklet focuses on specific subjects—people, events, objects, etc.—that ideally will prompt readers to write stories on similar topics. The second half concentrates on stylistic matters —narrative structure, tone, dialogue, point of view, etc.—to help polish those stories.

The purpose of featuring these excerpts and writing exercises is not to generate homework lessons or tests on the material. Rather, it is to show troops and veterans today what their fellow service members have published, recently and in years gone by, so that they will be inspired to put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) and begin writing about what they have seen and felt and experienced.

Hopefully they will come to realize both the personal and historical importance of telling their stories—and that no one can do so better than they can. And above all, they will recognize that these stories are ones that every American needs to hear. ~

My nerves were completely shot and I was emotionally drained and I noticed that my hands were still kinda shaking. The stars were now out over Mosul, and I decided to go sit by myself up against the tires on the side of the vehicle and stare at them for a while. I was thinking how I was lucky to be alive. I've never experienced anything like the fear I felt today. A couple times today I thought about that guy who jumped out from the corner of that building with that angry look on his face when he pointed the AK at my head and pulled the trigger….

Sgt. Vance saw me sitting by myself, and he came over and sat next to me. He asked if I was OK. I thought about that one for a second and I told him, "I don't know."….

Vance started telling me a little bit about his father, who had been in Vietnam, and who had given him sound advice about situations like this, "Put all the things that bother you, and keep you awake at night, and clog your head up, put all those things in a shoebox, put the lid on it, and deal with it later."….

Shortly after that they told us to go back to our rooms. I walked back to my room, thanked God, and passed out on my bed….

I've put the events of that day in a shoebox, put the lid on it, and haven't opened it since.

— U.S. Army Specialist Colby Buzzell, who served in Iraq from 2003 through 2004, writing about a firefight he barely survived

Unlocking the Story

Subjects & Themes to Inspire Ideas

"When a man does not write his poetry, it escapes by other vents through him."

— RALPH WALDO EMERSON

I. PEOPLE

Stories, for the most part, are about people—how they behave, struggle, fail, succeed, and interact with others. Great writers bring these individuals to life on the page by what they reveal about each person's thoughts, motivations, behavior, physical qualities, and actions. Ryan Kelly has created distinct snapshots of his fellow troops using only a few short sentences and brief but vivid details. Marilyn Nelson's "Star-Fix" emphasizes the selflessness of her protagonist when she writes that he goes hungry during missions so he can bring extra food back to his daughters. It is a small but telling detail that accentuates the kind of individual he is.

"A Quick Look at Who Is Fighting This War"

By Ryan Kelly

In December 2004, 35-year-old UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter pilot Captain Ryan Kelly was stationed at Camp Buehring in Udairi, Kuwait, preparing himself and his company to head into Iraq. As a ferocious sandstorm whipped through the staging base, Kelly typed out the following letter to his mother about the men and women who would be going with him into battle.

■

A quick look around my tent will show you who is fighting this war. There's Ed, a 58-year-old grandfather from Delaware. He never complains about his age, but his body does, in aches and creaks and in the slowness of his movements on late nights and cold mornings....

There's Melissa and Mike, two sergeants who got married inside the Ft. Dix chapel a month before we deployed—so in love, yet forbidden, because of fraternization policies, even to hold hands in front of other soldiers. But if you watch them closely, you can catch them stealing secret glances at each other. Sometimes I'll see them sitting together on a box of bottled water tenderly sharing a lunch. They are so focused on each other, that the world seems to dissolve around them…. War's a hell of a way to spend your honeymoon….

There's Noah, a 23-year-old motor cross stuntman, who wears his hair on the ragged edge of army regulations. He's been asking me for months to let him ship his motorcycle to the desert. I keep telling him no….

There's Martina, 22, a jet-black-haired girl, who fled Macedonia with her family to escape the genocide of the Bosnia-Croatian civil war. Her family ran away to prevent the draft from snatching up her older brother…. A few years later, the family, with no place else to run, watched helplessly as the US flew their daughter into Iraq. She's not even a US citizen, just a foreigner fighting for a foreign country on foreign soil for a foreign cause. She has become one of my best soldiers….

There's my 1SG, my no-nonsense right-hand man. He's my counsel, my confidant, my friend. He's the top enlisted man in the company with 28 years in the army…. Last year, his pit bull attacked his wife's smaller dog—a terrier of some sort, I think. As she tried to pry them apart, the pit bit off the tip of her ring finger. Top punched the pit bull in the skull and eventually separated the two. A hospital visit and a half a pack of cigarettes later, he learned the blow broke his hand. He bought her a new wedding ring in Kuwait.

And on, and on and on.... I hope you are doing well, mom. I'm doing my best. For them. For me. For you. I hope it's good enough….~

WRITING IDEAS: *Think of someone from your own life and describe him or her in a paragraph or two. Or write a poem or short story that demonstrates why he or she is unique. It could be a person you barely know but who did something strange or fascinating, a native from a country where you were deployed, a close friend, someone you found unbearable, or a loved one. (If no one comes to mind, write about yourself.) Whomever you choose, be as specific as possible in relating why this individual is so memorable.*

"Star-Fix"

By Marilyn Nelson

Marilyn Nelson taught at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, and she served as the Poet Laureate of Connecticut (2001–2006). Her father was Captain Melvin M. Nelson, one of the famed Tuskegee Airmen in World War II, and she wrote the following poem for—and about—him.

■

At his cramped desk
under the astrodome,
the navigator looks
thousands of light-years
everywhere but down.
He gets a celestial fix,
measuring head-winds;
checking the log;
plotting wind-speed,
altitude, drift
in a circle of protractors,
slide-rules, and pencils.

He charts in his Howgozit
the points of no alternate
and of no return.
He keeps his eyes on the compass,
the two altimeters, the map.
He thinks, *Do we have enough fuel?*
What if my radio fails?

He's the only Negro in the crew.
The only black flier on the whole base,
for that matter. Not that it does:
this crew is a team.
Bob and Al, Les, Smitty, Nelson.

Smitty, who said once
after a poker game,
I love you, Nelson.
I never thought I could love
a colored man.
When we get out of this man's Air Force,
if you ever come down to Tuscaloosa,
look me up and come to dinner.
You can come in the front door, too;
hell, you can stay overnight!
Of course, as soon as you leave,
I'll have to burn down my house.
Because if I don't
my neighbors will.

The navigator knows where he is
because he knows where he's been
and where he's going.
At night, since he can't fly
by dead-reckoning,
he calculates his position
by shooting a star.

The octant tells him
the angle of a fixed star
over the artificial horizon.
His position in that angle
is absolute and true:
Where the hell are we, Nelson?
Alioth, in the Big Dipper.
Regulus. Antares, in Scorpio.

He plots their lines
of position on the chart,
gets his radio bearing,
corrects for lost time.

Bob, Al, Les, and Smitty
are counting on their navigator.
If he sleeps,
they all sleep.
If he fails,
they fall.

The navigator keeps watch
over the night and the instruments,
going hungry for five or six hours
to give his flight-lunch
to his two little girls. ~

To hear Marilyn Nelson read "Star-Fix," please visit *www.OperationHomecoming.gov.*

From the clashes at Bunker Hill and Gettysburg to the battles for Kandahar and Fallujah, American troops have participated in and witnessed some of the most pivotal moments in history. Susan Henson and William Czako offer riveting, personal accounts of the attacks on the Pentagon and Pearl Harbor, respectively. Both writers immediately place the reader in the eye of the storm, and they include just enough details to describe the terror of the situation without overwhelming the reader with information and slowing down the story's momentum.

"Vulnerable"

By Susan Henson

Susan Henson is the daughter of a Korean War veteran, and, partly inspired by her father's service, she enlisted in the Navy at the age of 19. On September 11, 2001, Lieutenant Junior Grade Henson was working at the Pentagon when American Airlines flight 77 slammed into the building at more than five hundred miles an hour. Henson escaped physically unscathed, but the images she witnessed stayed with her long after the attack. Henson started to write the following personal narrative in October 2001. It begins at the moment of impact.

■

"What the hell was that?!?" someone yelled as people looked around startled. I immediately turned around from my desk to look out the window behind me. The normal view of the "C" ring was completely obliterated now by flying concrete and billowing, gray clouds of dust and smoke. "There is an emergency in the building. Please evacuate the building," the new warning system mechanically instructed us, as a high-pitched, whooping alarm shrieked throughout the hallways.

I saw a coworker on the stairs as we left our offices. A normally upbeat woman with a bubbly personality, she was now ashen gray. I asked if she was OK. She was shaking as she tried her best to tell me that while speaking on the phone with her husband, she'd seen the plane coming straight at us. I tried to calm her down as we got outside to the courtyard, not even stopping to consider we'd just walked away from a terrorist attack. I still had no idea how close we were.

We wandered around the inner courtyard of the Pentagon looking for coworkers so we could account for everyone as the black mass of smoke expanded up and out of the building. Many people were hacking and coughing. They came like stragglers, wandering aimlessly one-by-one out of the wreckage. One gentleman in his early-to-mid 50s wandered out of the rubble. He was wearing what was once a very nice, dark two-piece business suit. It was so covered in dust and debris that I couldn't tell what color it was. But I could tell something was terribly wrong. His pants and shirt sleeves looked like he'd thrown his suit into a shredder before putting it on. But what was more strange was the way he was holding up his hands like doctors who've just scrubbed for surgery. There was something dangling like streamers from them. I stood there for a couple of seconds before I realized that those streamers were what was left of his skin. The medical team rushed over to him, but he wasn't crying or really even talking much. He was in a state of shock and didn't even register the pain.

Ten days after the blast I was allowed to go back into my office in the Pentagon to gather my belongings. The plane had crashed just twenty feet from where I worked. By this time I had seen photographs of the building from above, and it looked like a burning ax had cracked it open and was left there to remind us of how vulnerable we really were. It was then I knew how close I and my colleagues had been to getting killed.

The more than 4,000 displaced Pentagon office personnel found ourselves working wherever we could find a place. My office squeezed fifteen people into an office in the Navy Annex usually full with just four. There was a staggering amount of work to be done, and we all moved with a sense of urgency and purpose. We all recognized, as of course did everyone in the country, the enormous significance of what had just happened—and what was about to. For the first time in almost sixty years, the United States of America had been attacked on its own soil.

And now, we were going to war. ~

"December 7, 1941"

By William Czako

Trapped in the forward engine room of the USS *New Orleans*, a sailor named William Czako handwrote the following letter to his sister, Helen, as Japanese Zeroes targeted American warships, including his own, at Pearl Harbor.

December 7, 1941

Dear Sis:

It is now 9:05 Sunday morning and we've been bombed now for over an hour.... Our anti aircraft guns are yammering and every so often a bomb strikes so close as to rock this ship. Again a bomb. We're helpless down here in the Forward Engine Room because our main engines are all tore down. We're trying to get underway if possible. We were just struck by a bomb near the bow. We're fighting back as much as possible because we have no power to load our guns, no power circuits to fire them. It is all being done by hand....

We've lit off all the boilers that are not out of commission and are trying to get underway so that we will not be altogether helpless by laying alongside the dock and be a stationary target. Those bombs are getting closer — God grant that they do not hit that loaded oil tanker that is lying right across from us. Ten million gallons of fuel oil would bathe this ship in an inferno of fire.... I am on the interior communications telephone and I can hear the various stations screaming orders at one another. A man just brought us our gas masks.... We've been struck several times now but fortunately there are no casualties as yet....

There has been a lull for a few minutes but there they go again. Strangely Sis, I'm not excited but my heart is beating a little faster from all that firing. I know that this is not a drill because the concussion of exploding bombs is jarring the whole ship.

I don't know why I am writing this because if we are hit with a bomb here — they won't find enough of me and the rest — let alone this letter. I imagine it is to show myself that I can be calm under fire. A few of the boys here are white faced and their voices hushed and choked. They too know that this is no joke or mock battle — but the real stuff.... Ah — there was one explosion — perilously close — Yes — we were hit but not badly. The bomb struck between the bow and the stern of another ship tied up just ahead of us. Comes the report over my phones that there are no casualties but that there is a 40 ft hole in our bow and numerous small ones from flying shrapnel....

There is another lull and only sporadic bursts from our pom-poms. Preparations to get underway are still continuing. It seems impossible with all that machinery tore up but still we'll do what we can.— The order has come now to secure from general quarters. We were under fire for nearly two hours and I'm going to sneak up to topside to see what happened —. ~

Czako survived the attack, went on to fight in the Pacific campaign against the Japanese, and then returned home in 1946.

WRITING IDEAS: *Think of an unforgettable event in your own life and write about it in detail. It doesn't have to be as dramatic or significant as 9/11 or Pearl Harbor; it could relate to boot camp or basic training, your first mission, the day you were wounded (or had a close call or watched someone else get injured), or an incident with a positive outcome. If you have an event in mind but don't know how to begin, just write "On [date] here's what happened...," or, start it as if you were writing a letter to a close friend or family member and go from there.*

III. OBJECTS

Not all military-related literature revolves around major battles, harrowing firefights, or massive invasions. Some of the most powerful wartime stories ever written focus on seemingly mundane, everyday objects. Myrna Bein uses a single sock to reflect on a mother's effort to cope with her son's injury. In the excerpt from *In Pharaoh's Army*, the men's suits that Tobias Wolff writes about come to symbolize more than just old clothing, but grief, the long-term emotional repercussions of war, and a young life cut short.

"A Journey Taken with My Son"

By Myrna Bein

On the morning of May 2, 2004, Myrna Bein learned that her 26-year-old son, Charles, had been wounded in Kirkuk, Iraq, when his convoy was ambushed by insurgents. Charles, a U.S. Army infantryman, lost part of his leg in the attack, and he was flown to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center for surgery and rehabilitation. Bein frequently visited Charles at the hospital and then e-mailed friends and family with updates on his progress. The following was written on June 10.

■

A sock did me in a few nights ago, a plain white sock. I'm doing so much better with the grief, but sometimes I just get blindsided again in a totally unexpected way. Some memory or sharp realization will prick at the places healing in my heart, and I feel the grief wash over me in a massive wave. Sometimes I almost feel I could double over with the pain of it. That's what happened with the sock.

I had brought Charles' soiled clothes home from Walter Reed to wash. Everything had gone through the wash and dry cycles and I had dumped the freshly laundered clothes onto the bed to fold them. It was late and I was quite weary, so I wanted to finish and get to bed to try for a better night's sleep than I've been having lately. I found one sock...just one. I folded all the rest of the clothes and still, just one sock. Without even thinking, I walked back to the laundry room and searched the dryer for the mate. Nothing was there. I looked between the washer and dryer and all around the floor, in case I'd dropped the other sock somewhere during the loading and unloading processes. Still, my tired and pre-occupied brain didn't get it. As I walked back to the bedroom with the one sock in hand, it hit me like a punch to the gut. There was no other sock. There was also no other foot, or lower leg, or knee. I stood there in my bedroom and clutched that one clean sock to my breast and an involuntary moan came from my throat; but it originated in my heart. ~

Charles decided to stay in the military, and, knowing he couldn't serve as an infantryman, he changed his specialty to military intelligence and began studying as an Arabic translator.

WRITING IDEAS: *Write about an object that is significant to you or someone you know. It doesn't have to relate to death, as certain objects can conjure up humorous or positive memories, too. Possible items to write about include: a photograph, handwritten letter, journal, combat boots, medal, tattoo, birthmark, ring, coin, or piece of shrapnel. It could also be something you lost, or a good luck charm, religious pendant, or a talisman you carry with you. Along with describing the item, try to make it central to a larger story.*

In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War

By Tobias Wolff

Tobias Wolff served in the military from 1964 to 1968, which included a tour in Vietnam as an officer in the Special Forces training South Vietnamese Army troops. After the war Wolff became a prolific writer, earning the prestigious PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, as well as several O. Henry Awards for his short stories. His first memoir, *This Boy's Life*, was made into a feature film starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert DeNiro. His critically acclaimed *In Pharaoh's Army*—from which the following passage is excerpted—was based on his time in Vietnam.

I didn't really know Keith Young. We saw each other in My Tho now and then, exchanged a few friendly words, but we didn't take it any farther than that. He was too quiet for me, too careful. He struck me, I have to admit, as a company man, and it was pretty clear that I'd made no better impression on him. We'd never spent any time together until by chance we ran into each other while boarding the Kowloon ferry in Hong Kong. I'd been on R and R for four or five days already and Keith had just arrived. He was on his way to a tailor he'd heard about, and invited me to join him. This tailor was incredible, he said. For thirty dollars he could copy any suit; all you had to do was show him a picture of it. Keith had several pictures, advertisements he'd cut out of *Esquire*. You could pick up the suits in twenty-four hours.

I didn't have anything better to do so I went along with Keith and watched him being fitted for his wardrobe. At first I found the whole thing comical, especially a sign in the window of the shop: "Guaranteed by the Royal Navy." I liked the idea of the Royal Navy taking an interest in my duds. And then I began to think it wasn't that bad a deal, thirty bucks, and that it wouldn't hurt to have a few good suits and the odd sport coat hanging around. Before leaving the shop that day I placed some orders of my own, for clothes that did not in fact resemble the ones in *Esquire*—"You look like a Chinaman," a friend told me when I got home—and which quickly began to fall apart because of inferior thread. One of my suit sleeves actually came off inside my overcoat as I was arriving at a house for a dinner party some years later. I considered sending a letter of complaint to the First Lord of the Admiralty, but never did.

My haul was modest compared to Keith's. He ordered six or seven suits, tweed jackets, camel and blue blazers, slacks, button-down shirts of every acceptable color, formal wear, and two overcoats—also in camel and blue. He seemed bent on getting the whole clothes problem out of the way forever, right then and there. We hit a few clubs that night and he couldn't stop talking about what a great deal he'd gotten. And that was the first thought I had when I heard he'd been killed: What about all those clothes? It was a gasp of a thought, completely instinctual, without malice or irony. All those clothes waiting for him—they seemed somehow an irrefutable argument for his survival. Maybe they'd seemed that way to him too, a kind of guarantee, like the wives and fiancées some of us accumulated just before leaving home. They gave us a picture of ourselves in time to come, a promise of future existence to use as a safe-conduct pass through the present.

I sometimes tried to imagine other men wearing Keith's suits, but I couldn't bring the images to life. What I see instead is a dark closet with all his clothes hanging in a row. Someone opens the closet door, looks at them for a time, and closes the door again. ~

To hear Tobias Wolff read from *In Pharaoh's Army*, please visit *www.OperationHomecoming.gov.*

IV. PLACES

The setting of a literary work not only serves as the physical stage on which the characters perform, it can establish mood and help drive the plot. The poems here by Brian Turner and Yusef Komunyakaa also demonstrate how a place—a river in Iraq and a veterans memorial in Washington, D.C., respectively—can play a role in a story as central as any human character.

"Ferris Wheel"

By Brian Turner

Brian Turner joined the military in 1998 and became a sergeant in the U.S. Army with the 3rd Stryker Brigade, ultimately serving for 11 months in Baghdad and Mosul. Turner earned a master's degree in poetry prior to his deployment in Iraq and composed numerous works during his tour of duty. He kept the poems to himself, however, as he didn't want his men to think he was writing about "flowers and stuff." In fact, Turner's poems offer a haunting and often surreal outlook on life in a war zone.

■

A helicopter went down in the river
last night, hitting a power line slung
a few feet off the water. They were searching
for survivors and bodies from a boat
capsized earlier, Americans and Iraqis both.

It's dawn now, and the sky
drifts low and flat and cold
the way search-boats on the Tigris
drift further and further downriver.
When Navy divers bring up the body
of an Iraqi policeman, it will be a man
we aren't searching for, and still another
later in the day—a college student from Kirkuk.

It will be a long week of searching
like this, every morning near the shoreline
restaurant, where open fires are fed
kindling and tinder, a cook's hands
lifting the silver bodies of fish,
weighing them on scales.

The history books will get it wrong.
There will be nothing written
about the island ferris wheel
frozen by rust like a broken clock, or
about the pilot floating unconscious downriver, sparks
fading above as his friend swam toward him
instead of the shore, how both would drown
in this cold unstoppable river. ~

"Facing It"

By Yusef Komunyakaa

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial was created as a tribute both to those who died and those who came home alive. Each year hundreds of thousands of Vietnam veterans visit the memorial to remember their comrades and reflect on their own experiences. Yusef Komunyakaa—a Vietnam War veteran and the recipient of the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry—wrote the following poem about the monument that is now known simply as The Wall.

■

My black face fades,
hiding inside the black granite.
I said I wouldn't,
dammit: No tears.
I'm stone. I'm flesh.
My clouded reflection eyes me
like a bird of prey, the profile of night
slanted against morning. I turn
this way—the stone lets me go.
I turn that way—I'm inside
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial
again, depending on the light
to make a difference.
I go down the 58,022 names,
half-expecting to find
my own in letters like smoke.
I touch the name Andrew Johnson;
I see the booby trap's white flash.
Names shimmer on a woman's blouse
but when she walks away
the names stay on the wall.
Brushstrokes flash, a red bird's
wings cutting across my stare.
The sky. A plane in the sky.
A white vet's image floats
closer to me, then his pale eyes
look through mine. I'm a window.
He's lost his right arm
inside the stone. In the black mirror
a woman's trying to erase names:
No, she's brushing a boy's hair. ~

WRITING IDEAS: *Think of a specific location and describe what it looks like. If possible, build a larger story around it. The place could be as massive as a city or as small as a tent. It could be indoors or out, and it certainly doesn't have to relate to death. It could be a particular table in a chow hall where people gather to eat and talk, the cockpit of a plane, a port-o-john filled with graffiti, or a makeshift soccer field—any place that evokes strong memories and emotions.*

"Combat Musician" & "Lost in Translation"

By Sharon D. Allen

Humor isn't immediately associated with a subject as serious as warfare, but, as shown in Sharon Allen's pieces, levity enables service members to cope with the tension and monotony of deployments. It can also, as Joseph Heller demonstrates, illuminate the absurdities of certain rules and regulations.

Sergeant Sharon D. Allen deployed to Iraq in March 2004 to operate bulldozers, loaders, dump trucks, and other heavy equipment. While overseas, she wrote dozens of short, nonfiction accounts about her experiences. In the first story below, Allen profiles a soldier who was teaching himself a new musical instrument. The instrument of choice was just not one that she had expected.

■

Most of my platoon is comprised of guys who work as prison guards in the civilian world. One of my best friends out here is Shannon Bear, a 240-pound, six-foot three-inch prison guard. When he got back from leave, he brought with him a new toy.

A fiddle.

In the middle of Iraq, Bear's learning how to play the fiddle. He's really, really happy because he's almost got two songs down. "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." You have to picture this grown man all excited because, as he said, he's "almost ready to turn the page!"

To "Little Brown Jug."

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em, so now I'm trying to pick it up. Got "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" and a start at "Camptown Races." I am notorious for my lack of patience, however, so I convinced Bear to jump ahead to "Amazing Grace," which was in chapter twenty-six. Keep in mind, we were on chapter four.

He got the first two notes right off the bat, and we were really impressed with ourselves until we realized that we could not read sheet music.

"What's that little slashy-thingy?" I asked. "If we could figure out what that is, I can get it." Oh, yes, with the fiddle, as with most things, a little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing.

Later we found a book with "Amazing Grace" without the little slashy-thingies. We are now unstoppable. ~

Music was more than just a diversion for Allen and her fellow soldiers, however. At times it was also a cultural icebreaker. Allen titled the following story "Lost in Translation."

We work with a lot of Turks and Iraqis, especially Kurds. I wish that every deployed soldier had a chance to meet them because they are very different from the Arabs in the south. The Kurds love us.

I started to learn Kurdish to keep score in volleyball. Eventually I learned about two hundred words and phrases, but it wasn't so easy because they have sounds Americans can't pronounce. They can't say "left" or "six," for some reason, so I guess we're even.

One of our guys brought his guitar around to the guard shacks and played some American music for them. Note to Enrique Iglesias: Iraqis know you. For what it's worth, you rank right up there with Michael Jackson, Madonna, and Shakira.

Sometimes they'd try to join in. You haven't lived until you've seen a bunch of Iraqi soldiers, complete with AK-47s, sitting around and singing with gusto as they mangle the Beatles' "Let It Be."

"In times of trouble, mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom... Little Pea."

They really got into it.

"Little Pea, Little PEA! Little Pea, yeah, Little Pea...Whisper words of wisdom, Little Pea."

That was a good day. ~

Catch-22

By Joseph Heller

Few characters in wartime literature work harder to stay out of harm's way than Captain John Yossarian, the protagonist of Joseph Heller's 1961 classic *Catch-22*. Heller, a veteran of World War II, infused his novel with satirical humor, and the following excerpt explains the phrase that—after the book's publication—would become synonymous with almost any example of bureaucratic lunacy.

Yossarian came to [Doc Daneeka] one mission later and pleaded again, without any real expectation of success, to be grounded….

"You're wasting your time," Doc Daneeka was forced to tell him.

"Can't you ground someone who's crazy?"

"Oh, sure, I have to. There's a rule saying I have to ground anyone who's crazy."

"Then why don't you ground me? I'm crazy. Ask….any of the others. They'll tell you how crazy I am."

"They're crazy."

"Then why don't you ground them?"

"Why don't they ask me to ground them?"

"Because they're crazy, that's why."

"Of course they're crazy," Doc Daneeka replied. "I just told you they're crazy, didn't I? And you can't let crazy people decide whether you're crazy or not, can you?"

Yossarian looked at him soberly and tried another approach. "Is Orr crazy?"

"He sure is," Doc Daneeka said.

"Can you ground him?"

"I sure can. But first he has to ask me to. That's part of the rule."

"Then why doesn't he ask you to?"

"Because he's crazy," Doc Daneeka said. "He has to be crazy to keep flying combat missions after all the close calls he's had. Sure, I can ground Orr. But first he has to ask me to."

"That's all he has to do to be grounded?"

"That's all. Let him ask me."

"And then you can ground him?" Yossarian asked.

"No. Then I can't ground him."

"You mean there's a catch?"

"Sure there's a catch," Doc Daneeka replied. "Catch-22. Anyone who wants to get out of combat duty isn't really crazy."

There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and would have to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to. Yossarian was moved very deeply by the absolute simplicity of this clause of Catch-22 and let out a respectful whistle.

"That's some catch, that Catch-22," he observed.

"It's the best there is," Doc Daneeka agreed. ~

WRITING IDEAS: *Write about a humorous experience you observed or initiated yourself. It could be a comment, prank, or incident, or something that led to a funny nickname or call sign. The story doesn't have to be hysterical; it can simply be a lighter moment you recall fondly.*

VI. COMING HOME

Returning home can be a culture shock to troops regardless of whether or not their deployment was to a combat zone. Many troops are especially surprised to discover how difficult it is even for their loved ones to fully comprehend what they've gone through while overseas. Parker Gyokeres and Richard Currey endured similar experiences and emotions, but they chose to express themselves differently—Gyokeres through the intimacy of personal correspondence and Currey through fiction, which can give a writer greater freedom in exploring a variety of themes.

"The Hardest Letter to Write"

By Parker Gyokeres

Although trained as an aircraft armament systems technician, Staff Sergeant Parker Gyokeres provided force protection for the air base in Tallil, Iraq, for five months. Gyokeres kept a journal which, for the most part, detailed his daily efforts to overcome the boredom of life on an air base in the middle of a desert. The most serious of his entries is the final one, which, even after he e-mailed to friends and family members months after he was back in the States, he continued to edit. Gyokeres was no longer writing for them. He was writing for himself.

■

This has been, by far, the hardest letter to write. I returned home to the dichotomy of being universally welcomed with open, respectful, grateful arms—by a country that is increasingly against why I was ever in Iraq. I performed my mission well and have great pride in my actions, and those of my peers, but I can also understand why people are questioning if there is any long-term hope for Iraq and its people. . . .

The main issue for me has been adjusting to a life without the dear friends I served with and whom I grew to love—and, without whom, I felt lost, alone, and unable to relate to others. I am told this is normal. That did not, however, make it easier. And I know I'm doing better than many for whom I care deeply. They hide it well, but they are struggling. . . .

My writing gave me an outlet while I was over there, and it continues to help me now.

I was fortunate not only because I had it easy compared to so many other troops, but because my wife supported me during my angry, confused, and sleepless times. I cannot thank her enough for this, and she has always been there for me and never stopped loving me. This is all that matters, and I do not want to leave her again or make her go through all the anxieties and worries that she silently endured as well. My wife could not understand how I could become so close to people I had served with for such a relatively short period, and she was upset about my apparent inability to leave it all behind. But it was for my own well-being that she was concerned, and not out of jealousy. Most importantly, she knew when to listen and when to let me work through my emotions.

This is perhaps the most important thing any loved one or friend can do. Those of us coming back from Iraq or Afghanistan are not looking for sympathy. We might be reluctant at first to talk about what we've been through, good or bad, and some troops might never be able to open up, which is certainly their right. There are also things about war that people will never comprehend unless they have experienced them firsthand. But I hope that those who need to will reach out, and it's helpful knowing that there are people who care about us and are at least making an effort to understand.

Your support has made this journey an incredible one for me, and I couldn't have gone through it alone. Thanks for joining me—and thanks, above all, for listening. ~

Fatal Light

By Richard Currey

Richard Currey enlisted in the Navy in 1968 and, after being trained in jungle warfare and special operations, served in Vietnam as a medical corpsman attached to the Marine Corps's Fleet Marine Force. Twenty years after being honorably discharged from the military, Currey wrote a novel based on his wartime experiences titled *Fatal Light*. The following excerpt from the book describes a visit the protagonist makes to see his grandfather, Earl, after returning stateside.

In the morning I came into the living room in a pair of jeans and unlaced basketball shoes. No shirt, no socks....

Earl had left scrambled eggs and bacon and an English muffin face-down in a skillet.

"Put a little fire under that if you want," he said, following me into the kitchen.

"It's OK. I'll just heat the coffee." ....

My grandfather studied me. "You don't put on clothes when you come to the table anymore?" He blinked at me.

I had a forkful of eggs in my mouth; I stopped chewing.

"Eats cold food and comes to the breakfast table naked. This what war does for a man?"

I swallowed the eggs. "I'll be right back," I said.

Earl shrugged, lifted his eyebrows. "Common decency." He sipped coffee.

I took the stairs at an easy run, the dark hall to my bedroom, and put on a fatigue jacket. The manila envelope of pictures was on the bed. I hesitated, picked up the envelope. *Is it hard coming back?*

In the kitchen I put the envelope on the table.

My grandfather looked at the wrinkled fatigue jacket. "Not a hell of a great improvement. But better." He gestured with his chin at the envelope. "What's that?"

"Pictures."

"Vietnam? You took them?"

I nodded. "Vietnam."

He slipped the stack of photos out of the envelope and looked at the first one. After a moment he said, "Christ, are these bodies?.... What the hell's going on over there?"

I shrugged. "It's a war."....

"Listen," my grandfather said. "Tell me something: you plan to show these pictures… to anyone else?"

I blinked. "Haven't really thought about it."

"Well. Don't do it. Put these in a shoebox somewhere."

I stacked the pictures, returning them to their envelope, and he kept his eyes on his coffee cup, pushing his spoon back and forth on the saucer. The spoon made a small empty sound against the high ceiling.

"They're too damned hard," he said. "Too…I don't know. Too true." He looked up at me. "I'm glad I saw them. But I don't know that anybody else would be." Shifting his gaze to the window he said, "Nobody's ready. You know what I'm saying?"

I watched his face a moment. "I know," I said. ~

WRITING IDEAS: *Write about your own homecoming, and if you've had several, focus on the most memorable—or compare how they were different and why. Start at the very moment your boots touched U.S. soil. What were your first impressions? What (or who) seemed different? What was the happiest moment? What was the toughest? Like Gyokeres and Currey, concentrate on specific examples.*

I flew a mission yesterday. A squad of Marines was in the mountains way up above 10,000 feet, and they were attacked by some bad guys. These bad guys fired six big rockets at the Marines' position. I saw the explosions.... Some of those Marines are only seven years older than you are, Cavan. All I could think about was you two hunkering down in the mountains with rockets landing all around. I have no fear for my own safety, but I'd be petrified if you were in my shoes—or worse yet, theirs.

Thinking about that stuff wasn't helping me or the Marines, so I had to box up that feeling and store it away for another time. Hope you guys learn how to do that because it can get you through the rough spots with a clear head. Trick is that you have to remember to find the box again later. Keep them stuffed away, and eventually you'll run out of storage space when you need it....

Tell Mom I love her. Tell Mom you love her too.

Love you both, Dad

— U.S. Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Chris Cohoes, writing via e-mail from the Middle East on August 13, 2004, to his two young sons back home in Nebraska

Crafting the Story

Essential Elements of Good Literature

"Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass."

— ANTON CHEKHOV

VII. PERSPECTIVE

Along with selecting a topic and genre, a writer has to decide on the perspective or "point of view" of his or her literary work. Essentially, who is telling the story? Is it you acting, speaking, and observing in the first-person? Is it an omniscient third-person narrator? The former can be more personal, while the latter might allow a writer to delve into the motivations and private thoughts of multiple characters. In a first-person work of fiction, such as *The Things They Carried*, an author can do both.

"Aftermath"

By Sangjoon Han

U.S. Army First Lieutenant Sangjoon Han, a 24-year-old Korean-born soldier who served in Iraq from September 2003 through April 2004, wrote the story "Aftermath" following a real IED attack on U.S. troops. Han tried to portray the incident from many different angles, including from the perspective of an Iraqi (Qasim) who was literally caught in the crossfire. The following passage represents the story's final paragraphs, when Qasim and a wounded soldier are being airlifted by helicopter to receive medical aid.

■

Qasim could feel the American helicopter taking off. The physical pain had eased a bit, and overwhelmingly what he felt was anger and despair. *How will my wife and sons ever be able to bury me now?* he thought. He didn't even know where they were carrying him.

He was growing furious at himself as well. If he hadn't stood around to watch the convoy passing, he would still be out in his fields making preparations for the spring planting. He silently cursed his own stupidity. He also cursed the Americans for their guns and the young men who attacked them with their bombs. He almost cursed God, but just barely caught himself. He was going to die, and there was nothing he could do about it.

A sad sense of defeat came over him as his vision grew even blurrier. Anger gave way to another feeling. He wanted to hold on to life just a few moments longer.

He looked around the helicopter once more, trying to catch a few last glimpses of his surroundings. The inside was mostly black and burnished steel, covered with the same light dust that coated everything else. On the far wall was a window, the blue Iraqi sky beyond. He would have liked to have looked outside at the receding ground, but he knew he would never get that chance.

Across from him there was an American soldier clenching his eyes shut and shaking slightly. Qasim could see that for all the fabulous technology that his country had sent with him, the soldier was still filled with terror. *He is only a boy*, Qasim said to himself. *A scared young boy who looks like he just wants to go home.*

It will be over soon, Qasim thought as each breath grew more labored than the last. He took one final look at the soldier and closed his eyes. ~

The Things They Carried

By Tim O'Brien

Drafted in 1968 at the age of 21, Tim O'Brien was opposed to the war in Vietnam and considered leaving the U.S. for Canada. But he reported for service and was shipped to Southeast Asia as an infantry soldier in 1969. After his one-year tour he came back to the States and eventually started writing about Vietnam. *The Things They Carried*, published in 1990, is considered one of the greatest war books ever written—about Vietnam or any other conflict. The excerpt below is from the chapter titled "The Man I Killed."

The young man's fingernails were clean. There was a slight tear at the lobe of one ear, a sprinkling of blood on the forearm. He wore a gold ring on the third finger of his right hand. His chest was sunken and poorly muscled—a scholar, maybe. His life was now a constellation of possibilities. So, yes, maybe a scholar. And for years, despite his family's poverty, the man I killed would have been determined to continue his education in mathematics. The means for this were arranged, perhaps, through the village liberation cadres, and in 1964 the young man began attending classes at the university in Saigon, where he avoided politics and paid attention to the problems of calculus. He devoted himself to his studies. He spent his nights alone, wrote romantic poems in his journal, took pleasure in the grace and beauty of differential equations. The war, he knew, would finally take him, but for the time being he would not let himself think about it. He had stopped praying; instead, now, he waited. And as he waited, in his final year at the university, he fell in love with a classmate, a girl of seventeen, who one day told him that his wrists were like the wrists of a child, so small and delicate, and who admired his narrow waist and the cowlick that rose up like a bird's tail at the back of his head. She liked his quiet manner; she laughed at his freckles and bony legs. One evening, perhaps, they exchanged gold rings.

Now one eye was a star. ~

WRITING IDEAS: *Write about someone or some thing entirely unfamiliar to you. This will force you to approach your subject matter from a new persepective. Or, think of an encounter involving at least two people and write about it from each person's viewpoint. If you base the story on a quarrel or confrontation, write it so that both positions are equally convincing.*

VIII. NARRATIVE

When constructing a narrative, writers strive to draw readers into the story and maintain their interest throughout. But there are no set rules on what the ideal structure or length of a piece should be. Thomas Hudner Jr.'s oral history (pages 28–29) demonstrates how even a simple, chronological telling of an incident can be very effective. Jack Lewis's "Road Work" is slightly more intricate, beginning with a first line that essentially places Lewis in the present. Lewis then recalls the accident as if it were a flashback, which suggests that he is still haunted by the tragedy.

"Road Work"

By Jack Lewis

In February 2005, 41-year-old U.S. Army Reserve Staff Sergeant Jack Lewis was part of a convoy involved in a late-night collision between a Stryker armored vehicle (call sign "Rattlesnake Six-Seven") and a small car. While Lewis had seen shocking acts of violence and bloodshed during his ten-month deployment in Iraq, nothing had struck him as hard emotionally as this accident.

■

I never heard the boom-CRUNCH, only imagined it later. There was strong braking, followed by a great deal of shouting. Our Stryker moaned through its monstrous air brakes and then bumped, heaved, and finally ground itself to a halt.

"Six-Seven's in the ditch!"

"Did they roll it?"

"No, they're up. I think they're disabled."

"Where's the colonel? Is the colonel's vehicle okay?"

The colonel's vehicle was okay.

The major said that we would need a combat lifesaver. It wasn't combat. There were no lives left to save. But I dug out the CLS bag, because you never know, do you? And walked across a pitch dark highway.

Somebody was wailing in Arabic, hypnotically, repetitiously.

A single car headlight was burning, a single shaft of light beaming across the road like an accusing finger. When tactical spotlights suddenly illuminated the little car, we found the source of the wailing.

He was an older man with a silver beard, a monumental, red-veined nose, and a big, thick wool overcoat. He was hopping like a dervish, bowing rapidly from the waist and throwing his arms to the sky, then to his knees, over and over again in a kind of elaborate dance of grief.

Down the road a hundred meters or so, Six-Seven's vehicle commander and air guards had dismounted and were standing around in the ditch. Nobody had started smoking yet.

I walked to the car with an Air Force sergeant and moved the older man aside as gently as possible. He was built like a blacksmith, powerful through the neck and shoulders.

It's hard to describe what we found in the car. It had been a young man, only moments earlier that night. A cop or a fireman or a soldier would have simply said, "It's a mess in there." I used to be a fireman. I'm a soldier now. It was as bad a mess as I've seen.

I'm not a medic. We didn't have one with us. It's still my responsibility to preserve life. So I squeezed into the crumpled passenger area, sat on the shattered glass, and tried to take the pulse from his passenger-side arm (nothing) and his neck (nothing). I thought about CPR, but only for a moment. His left arm was mostly torn off, and the left side of his head was flattened.

Up on the highway, GIs walked around, gave and took orders. By the car, the victim's father still capered madly, throwing his arms around, crying out to God or anyone. I asked him, in my own language, to come with me, to calm down, to let me help him. I put my arm around him and guided the old Arab to the road. I sat him on the cold ramp of our Stryker and tried to assess his injuries. It seemed impossible that he could be only as superficially scratched up as he appeared. His hand was injured, bruised or possibly broken, and he had a cut on his left ear. I wrapped a head bandage onto him and tied it gently in back. It looked like a traditional headdress with a missing top. Every few seconds he would get animated, and I would put my hand firmly on his shoulder. He would not hold still long enough for me to splint his arm.

"Why can't he shut up?"

"You ever lose a kid?" This is a pointless question to ask a soldier who's practically a kid himself.

We moved him into the Stryker, assuring

him that no, we weren't arresting him. But he didn't care. Whenever he started to calm down, he would look toward the car and break into wails. I sat next to him, put my arm around his shoulder, tried to keep him from jumping around enough to hurt himself or a soldier. I held him tightly with my right arm. By the next morning, my shoulder would be on fire.

Forty minutes later a medic arrived.

"What's his status, sergeant?"

"He has a cut on his left earlobe. I think his hand is broken." (I think his heart is broken.)

"Roger. Okay, I got this."

"Thanks." (Bless you for what you do every day, doc.)

I got out of the way, letting the old guy go for the first time in almost an hour. He started wailing again almost immediately. While the medic worked on him, the colonel's interpreter came over and fired a few questions at the man. It sounded like an interrogation.

They had been on their way back to Sinjar, just a few miles away. The younger man had been taking his father back from shopping. They were minutes from home.

We didn't find any weapons in the car—either piece of it. There was no propaganda, nor were there false IDs. If we had stopped these people at a checkpoint, we would have thanked them and let them go on.

The young man had been a student. Engineering. With honors. Pride of the family. What we like to think of as Iraq's future.

Finally, I had to ask, "What does he keep saying?"

The terp looked at me, disgusted, resigned, or maybe just plain tired. "He says to kill him now."

The colonel came over and asked the medic if he could sedate the man with morphine.

"No, sir. Morphine won't help."

"Well, can't you give him something to calm him down? I mean, this is unacceptable."

I walked away and lit a Gauloise. A sergeant came up next to me, smoking. I didn't say anything. After a few moments in the black quiet, I overheard him say, "It wasn't anyone's fault. It was just an accident."

"I know." Inhale. Cherry glow. Long exhale. "Why we gotta drive in blackout—here—I don't get."

"If Six-Seven had turned their lights on a couple of seconds earlier..."

"Yeah. I know." And he went to help carry the young man's remains into the sudden light show of ambulances and police jeeps, surrounded by young Arabic men with steely eyes.

The supersized staff sergeant who mans the .50 cal on our truck walked down the road to kick a little ass and get Six-Seven's recovery progress back on track. Within a few minutes, they had it hooked up. It would be two weeks before that Stryker would roll outside the wire again, this in an environment where trucks totaled by IEDs are welded back together and sent again into harm's way in mere hours.

I went and sat on the back gate of the Stryker. I felt the cold creep into me. The old man sat next to me, perhaps too tired to continue his tirade against cruel Fate, careless Americans, war and its accidents.

I haven't lost a full-grown son, just a little daughter. A baby. And she wasn't torn from me in a terror of rending steel, stamped out by a sudden monster roaring out of the night. She went so quietly that her passing never woke her mother. I like to think she kissed her on the way out, on her way home.

But still, sitting on the steel tail of the monster that killed his son, I think I knew exactly how one Iraqi man felt.

"Just kill me now."

We sat and looked straight into the lights. ~

Beyond Glory: Medal of Honor Heroes in Their Own Words

By Larry Smith

A distinguished newspaper and magazine editor, Larry Smith interviewed 24 Medal of Honor recipients from World War II, Korea, and Vietnam for his bestselling book *Beyond Glory.* One of Smith's stories focuses on Navy pilot Thomas Hudner Jr., who received the Medal of Honor in April 1951 for his efforts, four months earlier, to save the life of Jesse Leroy Brown, the Navy's first African-American aviator. All of the quoted material below comes directly from Hudner's oral recollections (recorded by Smith in December 2001) concerning what happened on December 4, 1950, in the frigid mountains of Korea.

"We were about forty-five minutes into an armed reconnaissance mission, looking for targets of opportunity, when Jesse was hit. At that time the Marines and the Army were in a desperate withdrawal from the Chosin Reservoir….

"We assume Jesse was hit by some ground fire. The first we knew was he called out and said, 'I think I've been hit, I'm losing power, and I'm going to have to land.' We were up in the mountains at that time and almost the whole area was covered by scrub pine, and yet one of the other pilots saw a clear area and directed him toward that. He barely made it because he was almost on top of the mountains.

"There was not enough room to bail out, and if you did you'd get killed down in those trees. It was better to ride the plane down. We were circling as he went down. I was calling to him on the radio with a checkout list: Make sure your shoulder harness is locked, lock your canopy open, be careful of your airspeed so you don't stall. But he hit the ground with such force that when he came to a stop his aircraft was actually bent at the cockpit twenty or thirty degrees and his canopy had slammed shut because the lock didn't withstand the force of the crash."

Because of the condition of the aircraft, Hudner said, "We were convinced he had perished in the crash. We were flying overhead talking among ourselves, saying, 'Jesus, Jesse's dead,' and our flight leader left us to climb to a high altitude so he could get better radio reception to ask for a helicopter, and while he was up there, we saw that Jesse had opened his canopy and was waving to let us know he was alive….

"So I took a lot of things into consideration and made the decision to land as close to him as I could and pull him out of his cockpit and wait till the helicopter could come." ….

[Hudner] miscalculated the rate at which the plane was dropping "so, when I hit the ground, God, it was hard. I thought, God, what the hell am I doing here? But Jesse was alive and it looked as if he needed nothing except a good tug to get him out of the airplane. I wouldn't even have considered it if I didn't know the helicopter was coming. Because I don't think anybody could have survived that night. It was fifteen degrees above zero. My thought was, if I go in I might save his life. I just didn't think very much about hurting myself. I just felt that, for what it was, it was worth taking a chance."

Hudner had an extremely difficult time simply climbing up onto the slanting, slippery wing and was forced to hold on to the edge of the plane merely to look down at Brown. "When I got to him he was conscious. He saw me coming up to his airplane, and his first remark was something to the effect, 'Tom, we got to figure a way to get out of here.' Those were not his exact words, but he was very calm. I couldn't believe he was so calm. There was about a foot and a half snow on the ground, and it was fifteen degrees. He had pulled his helmet off so he was bareheaded and he had dropped his

gloves and his fingers were literally frozen solid in that short a time. The reason he had taken gloves off was he tried to unbuckle the chute and had dropped his gloves beyond his reach. He was sitting there doing almost nothing. As the aircraft bent at the cockpit, it pinned his leg in so his knee was caught between the edge of the cockpit and the hydraulic control panel. . . .

"I was able to pull myself up to look into the cockpit but I had to hold on with one hand all the time. Even with the one hand it was difficult to reach in. I had no leverage, no hold, no way to provide him any help at all. I didn't call for an axe until I'd gotten up to look into the cockpit. I was thinking I could pull him out, but I couldn't. So I ran back to the airplane and turned on my radio and asked for a fire extinguisher and an axe and then I went back to the airplane.

"Pretty soon I scooped up some snow and threw it into the cowling, but it didn't do any good at all. Jesse talked without any strain, but then he would stop talking. It wasn't really a situation where you could carry on a good conversation, so it was difficult for me to know whether he was semiconscious or too tired to talk or just cold. He didn't mention anything about being cold.

"It was forty minutes before the copter came. This was probably about three P.M., and the copter pilot and I didn't work very long after that." The fire extinguisher lasted about three squirts and the axe bounced harmlessly off the metal of the fuselage. The helicopter pilot, Lieutenant Charles Ward, climbed up on the fuselage to get a look at the pilot so he could pretty well see what the situation was. "Then he told me away from earshot of Jesse, he said, 'I don't know about you, but I have got to get out of here because it's getting to be dusk and this helicopter doesn't have any ability to fly in these mountains after dark. It's your choice if you want to stay, okay, but I've got to go.' Of course, that would have been suicide for me to stay, so I went back to Jesse and told him we were hoping to get some more equipment and we just couldn't move him without it. And sometime during this time he said if anything happened to him to tell his wife, Daisy, how much he loved her. He really, he really did love her. I just have no idea what was going through his mind.

"All I can say is he was unbelievably calm. He gave me support instead of panicking. Had the situation been reversed, I'd have been saying, 'Get me out of here!' He was, just matter-of-fact, saying, 'We got to figure out some way to get out of here.' And he wasn't begging or anything. There was nothing like, 'God, don't leave me.' He was a very religious person. So I said, hang on, we'll be back in a little bit, we'll get some tools to get you out. I don't know if he heard me. It was a miracle that he had survived, that he had lasted as long as he did." . . . .

Back aboard [ship], Hudner was called up to see the captain on the bridge. "He said, 'What I'm planning to do is send a helicopter to the crash site with a flight surgeon to get Jesse's body out of the airplane and bring him back to the ship.' But I told him in those conditions and the distance over hostile territory and the fact that the helicopter would be overloaded with three people would be very very dangerous, as nice a gesture as it was.

"So the backup plan was to send a flight of Corsairs and some Skyraiders to the crash site and drop napalm on it. So they did. And so it was a Valkyrean funeral for Jesse. The pilots who dropped the napalm said his body had been stripped of all its clothing. I think, if they could have, they would have pulled his body out without the distraction of having somebody constantly shooting at them. So our two airplanes and Jesse's remains are still up there someplace." ~

WRITING IDEAS: *Regardless of whether you're working on a short story or long memoir (or anything in between), ask yourself how the plot will be best served by the organization of the narrative. Think carefully about the journey you want to take your readers on—where it begins, where it ends—and the revelations that will keep them engrossed along the way.*

IX. CHARACTERS

Unlike the excerpts in the section titled "PEOPLE" on pages 10 and 11 of this booklet, the writings here by Jabs and Vonnegut focus on *fictional* characters. Jabs's and Vonnegut's excerpts might seem vastly dissimilar, but they both present characters coping with the stresses and strains of military service. For Brenda Croce and her young son, these pressures are evident before her deployment, while for Billy Pilgrim, they are manifested after it. And what both authors do so effectively is reveal their characters through their actions, thoughts, and how they perceive the world.

"Safekeeping"

By Kathleen Toomey Jabs

While rushing through an airport in the spring of 2003 on her way to report for reserve duty, U.S. Navy Commander Kathleen Toomey Jabs observed an incident that inspired her to write a story about a female sailor heading off to the Middle East. The following excerpt begins near the end of the fictional piece when the protagonist, Brenda Croce, and her four-year-old son have been held up at airport security. The guards have just confiscated her son's favorite toy, a hobby horse named "Blackie."

■

She squatted down so she could look Tommy in the eye and spoke in a voice of forced calmness. "Tommy, can you be brave? We can't take Blackie. I'll ask Nana and Grampa to get you a new horse. A better one. Okay?"

"I want Blackie," Tommy said. His eyes widened and she saw that he was going to cry. Not here. Not now, she thought. . . .

She took a deep breath. "They'll feed Blackie here," she said. "I think it would be too hot for him in Atlanta. You know how humid it gets in the summer. Blackie's not used to that."

"Really?" Tommy asked.

"Blackie is a special horse," she said quickly. "He has secret special powers. Like the way he talks to you and the way he listens. If he stays here, they'll put him in a paddock with all the other confiscated toys and keep him safe." . . . .

Tommy glanced at the horse and then back at her. His voice shook a little. "When can we get him?"

"When we come back."

"When?"

"It won't be too long. Just long enough for Blackie to have a good adventure. And for you, too. A little time apart..." She stopped abruptly. She bit her lip and pressed her eyes shut; she felt dizzy and a little woozy. Her whole insides seemed to be churning. When she opened her eyes, Tommy was staring at her.

"What's wrong, Mommy?"

She gripped the orders and stood and shook out her legs. She had no idea how long she would be gone or if she would be back at all. "I'm okay, bud. I can't bend like I used to." She felt her heart quiver and tighten. The din around her was almost overwhelming: suitcases slapping the belt, guards calling for IDs, radios buzzing, and overhead the announcements kept coming. In the midst of all the noise, she heard a slight rustle and saw Tommy move towards Blackie. He patted the horse on the neck and pressed its ear and the scratchy familiar music floated out. He whispered something in the horse's ear and then he turned away and walked towards her without looking back at the horse.

"What'd you tell him?" she asked.

"Goodbye," he said.

"That's it?"

"I said he has to be brave."

Her eyes started to burn. Everything was loud and bright. Tommy slipped his hand into hers, and she clasped the small fingers and squeezed them hard. Her heart, she thought, had seized; she couldn't think up any lie to numb the pain. She stood immobile until Tommy tugged on her arm. "Okay, Mommy, time to go," he said. He pulled her forward and led her into the crowd heading for the gate. ~

Slaughterhouse-Five

By Kurt Vonnegut

On February 13, 1945, Allied warplanes carpeted Dresden with thousands of tons of high-explosives and incendiary bombs. Ironically, a group of U.S. prisoners of war detained in the German city lived through the firestorm virtually unscathed. One of these POWs, a 22-year-old private first class from Indiana named Kurt Vonnegut, would later write a book titled *Slaughterhouse-Five* about the firebombing. The protagonist of the novel, Billy Pilgrim, is not based on Vonnegut but another soldier who also survived Dresden, and much of the story describes Pilgrim's mental condition after the war. The following scene takes place soon after his daughter's wedding reception and right before Pilgrim believes he is going to meet space aliens.

■

Billy Pilgrim padded downstairs on his blue and ivory feet. He went into the kitchen, where the moonlight called his attention to a half bottle of champagne on the kitchen table, all that was left from the reception in the tent. Somebody had stoppered it again. "Drink me," it seemed to say.

So Billy uncorked it with his thumbs. It didn't make a pop. The champagne was dead. So it goes.

Billy looked at the clock on the gas stove. He had an hour to kill before the saucer came. He went into the living room, swinging the bottle like a dinner bell, turned on the television. He came slightly unstuck in time, saw the late movie backwards, then forwards again. It was a movie about American bombers in the Second World War and the gallant men who flew them. Seen backwards by Billy, the story went like this:

American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses took off backwards from an airfield in England. Over France, a few German fighter planes flew at them backwards, sucked bullets and shell fragments from some of the planes and crewmen. They did the same for wrecked American bombers on the ground, and those planes flew up backwards to join the formation.

The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical steel containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes. The containers were stored neatly in racks. The Germans below had miraculous devices of their own, which were long steel tubes. They used them to suck more fragments from the crewmen and planes. But there were still a few wounded Americans, though, and some of the bombers were in bad repair. Over France, though, German fighters came up again, made everything and everybody as good as new….

Billy saw the war movies backwards then forwards—and then it was time to go out into his backyard to meet the flying saucer. Out he went, his blue and ivory feet crushing the wet salad of the lawn. He stopped, took a swig of the dead champagne. It was like 7-Up. He would not raise his eyes to the sky, though he knew there was a flying saucer from Tralfamadore up there. He would see it soon enough, inside and out, and he would see, too, where it came from soon enough—soon enough. ~

WRITING IDEAS: *If you are working on a fictional story, imagine what your characters look and act like, as well as how they relate to others. Give them a specific backstory. Where were they born? How were they raised? What motivates them? What are they afraid of? What sustains them? What secrets do they harbor? Even if you don't ultimately use the answers to these questions, they will help you get a better idea of who, exactly, your characters are.*

X. DIALOGUE

Dialogue serves many purposes in a work of literature. It introduces characters and emphasizes their individuality, accelerates the pace of a story, and exhibits an author's own distinct style. In Ross Cohen's "Khost-Gardez," Specialist Ginsburg's good-natured personality and sense of humor are established through his conversation with the Afghan driver. In *The Red Badge of Courage*, the reader gains insight into both Henry and his mother through his announcement that he's enlisting and her response. While her dialect suggests she might not be well educated, her plainspoken words convey integrity and wisdom.

"Khost-Gardez"

By Ross Cohen

Just out of college, 22-year-old Ross Cohen learned of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks while backpacking through Asia. Cohen returned to the United States and enlisted in the Army, eventually becoming an airborne infantryman and shipping off as a paratrooper to eastern Afghanistan. Cohen wrote several short works of fiction based on his experiences in-country, and in the following story he describes a brief but memorable encounter between U.S. soldiers and an Afghan driver during a routine security check.

"What's up, Sarnt?" I took a drink from my CamelBak, the water-filled bladder that I carried on my back. (Five pounds full.)

In his good-natured Californian redneck drawl [Sergeant Feiner] said, "I need your Pashtu ex-per-tees, Ginsburg. Find out where these gentlemen are heading to, please.... Ask him if he's seen anything suspicious." This was always a fun game. I enjoyed learning Pashtu. It gave me something to do, and it made me feel special. I had a unique talent for a paratrooper with no rank. And it helped with building a rapport and communicating our intentions to the locals. But not once in seven months had I discovered any intel.

"Have you seen anything strange? Any explosives, bullets, weapons, Taliban, Al Qaeda ..." I droned on in a playful monotone.

He smiled, getting the joke, and vigorously assured myself and Sergeant Feiner, whom he seemed to sense was the boss, that he had seen nothing whatsoever. Ever.

In the meantime, the AMF guys had searched him, his car, and his fellow passengers, who were all watching the exchange intently. In a land without television, Americans were high entertainment.

"*Sa'eeshwa. Ta tlaay shay. Dera manana staala komak tsecha.*" Okay. You can go. Thank you very much for your help....

Our Afghan friend stared at me, taking in my dark features and olive complexion. "*Ta Afghani ye*?"

"*Nah. Ze Amrikayan yam*," I teased him, pointing to the flag on my right shoulder. I'm not Afghan. I'm American.

"*Ta Musulman ye*?"

"*Nah. Ze Yehud yam.*" I'm not Muslim. I'm Jewish.

Silence....

Finally, from the driver. "*Sha Musulman!*" Be Muslim! Yes, of course. I smiled my most friendly of American smiles, the can-do smile that has been transforming the world for generations, and explained that I liked being Jewish. My dad was Jewish, my mom was Jewish, my sister was Jewish, my brother was Jewish.

He cut me off and told me that yes yes he understood.

"We are like cousins, then. We are all children of Ibrahim."

We shared a moment....

"Yes. We are cousins."

"Cousins."

"Cousins."

He reached out to shake my hand, and did the same with Sergeant Feiner. Thank-yous were exchanged between the driver, Feiner, and myself. Ahmad and Zalmay stayed quiet. He got back into his car and drove off. ~

The Red Badge of Courage

By Stephen Crane

Born six years after the conflict was over, Stephen Crane published—at the age of 23—what is arguably the best 19th-century novel about the Civil War: *The Red Badge of Courage.* (Although he never joined the military, Crane covered the Spanish-American War as a journalist and witnessed the fighting at San Juan Hill in July 1898.) In the following excerpt from *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane describes the moment his young protagonist, Henry Fleming, tells his mother he wants to join the Union Army.

■

"Ma, I'm going to enlist."

"Henry, don't you be a fool," his mother had replied. She had then covered her face with the quilt. There was an end to the matter for that night.

Nevertheless, the next morning he had gone to a town that was near his mother's farm and had enlisted in a company that was forming there. When he had returned home his mother was milking the brindle cow. Four others stood waiting. "Ma, I've enlisted," he had said to her diffidently. There was a short silence. "The Lord's will be done, Henry," she had finally replied, and had then continued to milk the brindle cow.

When he had stood in the doorway with his soldier's clothes on his back, and with the light of excitement and expectancy in his eyes almost defeating the glow of regret for the home bonds, he had seen two tears leaving their trails on his mother's scarred cheeks.

Still, she had disappointed him by saying nothing whatever about returning with his shield or on it. He had privately primed himself for a beautiful scene. He had prepared certain sentences which he thought could be used with touching effect. But her words destroyed his plans. She had doggedly peeled potatoes and addressed him as follows: "You watch out, Henry, an' take good care of yerself in this here fighting business – you watch out, an' take good care of yerself. Don't go a-thinkin' you can lick the hull rebel army at the start, because yeh can't. Yer jest one little feller amongst a hull lot of others, and yeh've got to keep quiet an' do what they tell yeh. I know how you are, Henry….

"An' allus be careful an' choose yer comp'ny. There's lots of bad men in the army, Henry. The army makes 'em wild, and they like nothing better than the job of leading off a young feller like you, as ain't never been away from home much and has allus had a mother, an' a-learning 'em to drink and swear. Keep clear of them folks, Henry. I don't want yeh to ever do anything, Henry, that yeh would be 'shamed to let me know about. Jest think as if I was a-watchin' yeh. If yeh keep that in yer mind allus, I guess yeh'll come out about right." ~

WRITING IDEAS: *Write about an intense conversation you've had or, if nothing comes to mind, create a situation involving at least two people and tell their story primarily through dialogue. Listen to conversations around you in real life for inspiration; even a few overheard words can spark an idea. Read the dialogue you write out loud. Does it sound realistic? Do the characters have their own vocabulary, tone, slang/dialect, etc.—or are their voices all the same?*

XI. TONE

Tone is as important to writing as it is to speaking. How a narrative voice "sounds"—whether it's sincere, whimsical, sarcastic, resigned, cheerful, or bitter—can affect how readers interpret an author's intent, for better or for worse. An exclamatory tone, for example, might alienate readers, while a more understated tone can draw them in. Both Ravey's e-mail and Seeger's poem are about death, but they seem to convey a deep sense of pride in serving one's nation. Some readers of Seeger's poem contend his tone is actually ironic, and that the message of the poem is the opposite of what it seems. Every interpretation, of course, is subjective.

"Sea Voyage"

By Guy W. Ravey

During the seven-week voyage back to Hawaii from the Persian Gulf on the USS *Constellation*, 30-year-old U.S. Marine Corps Captain Guy W. Ravey reflected on his wartime experiences flying combat missions in the Middle East. On May 10, 2003, while sailing past the jungle islands of Indonesia, Ravey saw something off in the distance relating to a great uncle who fought in World War II that caused a strong emotional reaction. Ravey e-mailed the following to loved ones later that evening.

■

Tonight was special. Tonight we passed by the island of Halmahera. It is a seemingly insignificant blob of tropical land sitting right on the equator near New Guinea and the Philippines, but it holds a great deal of significance to the Ravey family. This is the island where First Lieutenant Will Ravey, US Army Air Corps, was shot down in August of 1944.

Grandpa Ken Ravey had mentioned the island to me a few times as I was growing up. He rarely, if ever, brought the subject of his brother up. Even as a child I could sense how raw and painful the memories of his loss still were to him. However, he would proudly and reverently tell me the stories of his big brother, and once or twice he mentioned how his brother had died in combat over an island I had difficulty finding in any atlas because it was so small.

I have hacked away at the subject of Great Uncle Will from time to time. I eventually did find Halmahera on an atlas and quickly determined there was probably very little chance I or anyone else I knew would ever go there. . . .

I went up on the signals bridge tonight and looked out at the dark silhouette of Halmahera on the horizon. I tried to imagine what it was like to be in this area fifty-nine years ago. The pilot in me wondered what the P-38 was like to fly, and how exciting it must have been to be where Will was and to do what he was doing. The combat I experienced was very different from his. He most likely endured malaria, unsanitary conditions, oppressive heat and humidity, and a determined, well-equipped enemy. Not to mention there was a war that endured four long years, not three short weeks. I felt a kinship, though, and not just because Will is my flesh and blood. Will was a fighter pilot, and he died doing what he loved. . . .

The weather at this latitude is hot and sticky, even at midnight, so I only stayed outside for a little while. I said a silent prayer for Will and for Dan, and then I went below. I felt strange. I'll tell you all this now and hope you understand: I felt happy. Being near Halmahera is the closest I've been to family in seven months. It felt warm and soothing. There are many more emotions I felt, and maybe someday I'll be able to express them better. Tonight, though, I am proud to have closed the loop within our family. I called Grandpa Ravey on the sailor phone aboard ship and spoke to him for four minutes: long enough to hear the lump in his throat when I told him where I was. I am proud to have been able to set eyes upon this place. In a way, I feel as though I'm bringing a part of Will's spirit home with me. ~

"I Have a Rendezvous with Death"

By Alan Seeger

After war exploded throughout Europe in August 1914, a 26-year-old American poet named Alan Seeger enthusiastically enlisted in the French Foreign Legion. Seeger continued to write poetry during the war, and although he did not achieve the critical acclaim of his British counterparts like Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, and Isaac Rosenberg, his "I Have a Rendezvous with Death" was the most popular World War I poem by an American. It became all the more poignant in light of the fact that Seeger was killed in action on July 4, 1916.

■

I have a rendezvous with Death
At some disputed barricade,
When Spring comes back with rustling shade
And apple-blossoms fill the air—
I have a rendezvous with Death
When Spring brings back blue days and fair.

It may be he shall take my hand
And lead me into his dark land
And close my eyes and quench my breath—
It may be I shall pass him still.
I have a rendezvous with Death
On some scarred slope of battered hill,
When Spring comes round again this year
And the first meadow-flowers appear.

God knows 'twere better to be deep
Pillowed in silk and scented down,
Where Love throbs out in blissful sleep,
Pulse nigh to pulse, and breath to breath,
Where hushed awakenings are dear...
But I've a rendezvous with Death
At midnight in some flaming town,
When Spring trips north again this year,
And I to my pledged word am true,
I shall not fail that rendezvous. ~

WRITING IDEAS: *Take something you've already written—a letter, journal entry, poem, story, etc.,—and consider its tone. Does it add to or detract from the piece? Change the tone to see how it might sound in a different voice.*

Well-chosen adjectives and adverbs can bring a thing or person vividly to life in a story while also strengthening the larger narrative. Helen Gerhardt's description of the "carefully stripped car frames" hint at Iraq's poverty, but the demeanor of the girl in her boldly waving "cinnamon and curry-colored gown" suggests the pride of the people themselves. In "First Snow in Alsace," Richard Wilbur paints an idyllic picture of a winter snowfall. But beneath the "simple cloths" and "milky domes" of the pure white snow is still a war-scarred town, leading the reader to wonder if the return to innocence suggested in the poem is real or illusory.

"Here Among These Ruins"

By Helen Gerhardt

Helen Gerhardt enlisted in the U.S. Army in May 2000 and was deployed to the Middle East in 2003. Gerhardt drove 915 A1s (18-wheeler tractor-trailers) throughout Iraq to move everything from large cases of food and water to charred Humvees incapacitated by roadside bombs. In the following e-mail to loved ones, Gerhardt offers her first impressions of the country, which she found to be a curious mix of the ancient and the high-tech.

Rusted, carefully stripped car frames rested on both shoulders of the road, uncomfortably reminding me of the props at our live-fire training range. Small windowless houses shed grey bricks like worn-out lizard scales on patches of thick, fine dust and rocky sand....

The first face I saw closely was a girl maybe ten-years-old, thin, but beating time on a half-full water bottle as she danced up and down on the shoulder of the road with confident grace. She looked straight into my eyes with no trace of humility, her brilliant smile seemed to command acknowledgement of a beauty impossible to deny anything to, her cinnamon and curry-colored gown waved like a flag of bold pleasure in her past triumphs....

Everywhere as we progressed north, the middle ages met the modern; a satellite dish protruded from a mud hut, a donkey hauled a cart with two women sharing a cell phone back and forth, a large black and white cow tried to keep its feet in the bed of a small Toyota pick up truck. Roadside stands sold Snapple and long blocks of ice. Men dressed in shiny green U.S. football jerseys waved to us with one hand as they scooped salt from cracked-ivory flats into glinting white pyramids. Lines of camels were urged onward by little boys with big sticks and bigger walkmans….

The next day all went smoothly and we pulled into our destination camp in Mosul, a former Iraqi Army base. Wandering through the littered compound next to the buildings we had occupied we found abandoned helmets, spent shells, and Arabic training manuals for gas mask use. In one room I found twisted hooks hanging from the ceiling next to an electronic control board and I shuddered at what my inner Hollywood pieced out of the scene.

But in the regular soldier's barracks I found a detail that irrationally moved me more. A black-bottomed coffee pot sat in the sill of a window, its spout pointing out the heavy bars on the windows toward the foothills in the distance. Here the poorly fed draftees of years past may have shared coffee and cigarettes, read letters from home, told each other the news of the families we knew they had not volunteered to leave. I sat there a long time, the door open behind me, finally moved to take myself back to the Army barracks I had freely chosen. Just outside the door I found a boy waiting for me. "Thank you" he said, his light brown eyes looking straight into mine, and then he smiled with what seemed years-worth of relief. Despite all my reservations about this war, I could not help but wonder if he was thanking me for freeing father, uncle, or brother from some cell like that I'd walked so easily out of….

I sit writing here among these ruins, looking out the unbarred window, thinking of you, missing you always. ~

"First Snow in Alsace"

By Richard Wilbur

Richard Wilbur was trained as a U.S. Army cryptographer in World War II and served as a frontline infantryman in Europe. After the war he established himself as one of the nation's foremost poets, earning two Pulitzer Prizes and numerous other literary awards. The following is from his first book, *The Beautiful Changes and Other Poems* (1947).

The snow came down last night like moths
Burned on the moon; it fell till dawn,
Covered the town with simple cloths.

Absolute snow lies rumpled on
What shellbursts scattered and deranged,
Entangled railings, crevassed lawn.

As if it did not know they'd changed,
Snow smoothly clasps the roofs of homes
Fear-gutted, trustless and estranged.

The ration stacks are milky domes;
Across the ammunition pile
The snow has climbed in sparkling combs.

You think: beyond the town a mile
Or two, this snowfall fills the eyes
Of soldiers dead a little while.

Persons and persons in disguise,
Walking the new air white and fine,
Trade glances quick with shared surprise.

At children's windows, heaped, benign,
As always, winter shines the most,
And frost makes marvelous designs.

The night-guard coming from his post,
Ten first-snows back in thought, walks slow
And warms him with a boyish boast:

He was the first to see the snow. ~

WRITING IDEAS: *Review material you've already written and look critically at the details you've included. Do they seem ostentatious or artificial, or do they truly enhance the reader's perception of the subject? If you do not have previous work to critique, think of an object (see pages 14 and 15 for ideas) and use all five senses—taste, touch, smell, sound, and sight—to describe it thoroughly and, if possible, build a story around it. In whatever you write, avoid clichés (e.g., "it was so quiet you could hear a pin drop"). Great writing takes what is familiar and presents it from a different angle to make it fresh and new.*

To hear Richard Wilbur read "First Snow in Alsace," please visit *www.OperationHomecoming.gov.*

KEYS TO WRITING WELL

Writing is an art, not a science. There are no immutable laws or objective formulas that will guarantee predictable outcomes. For every creative writing "rule," including the recommendations in this booklet, there are exceptions. Instead of being discouraged by this ambiguity, find freedom in it—and, most important, your own voice. Although few guidelines should be considered absolute, there are some general tips that will help you find that voice regardless of what you wish to write.

1. Keep it simple.

The problem for many new writers—especially military personnel who have traveled the world and acquired a wealth of stories—is not that they have too few ideas, but too many. They're overwhelmed and don't know how to organize their thoughts. First, "think small." You don't have to produce *The Iliad* right away. Take a single incident, object, person, etc. and use this as your foundation. Build on it with other experiences and characters. Over time you might decide to focus on something different, but start getting words down on paper. And follow the advice of the master, William Shakespeare, who wrote in *Richard III*: "An honest tale speeds best, being plainly told."

2. Talk it out.

If you have a clear story in mind but you're finding it impossible to start or structure the narrative on the page, pretend you're telling the story to a friend and record it. Thomas Hudner Jr.'s account (page 28) detailing his efforts to help a downed pilot is a straightforward oral history of the attempted rescue, and it is an extremely compelling recollection. Once you've written something, you might also find it worthwhile to read it aloud. What "sounds" natural in print might reveal itself to be contrived when spoken.

3. Draft a letter.

Another way of overcoming writer's block is to compose a letter or e-mail to a loved one, even if you have no intention of sending it, that describes your theme or story. The process itself can concentrate the mind. In 1963, Tom Wolfe (who has since written numerous bestselling books, including *The Right Stuff*) was struggling to write an article for *Esquire* magazine. Exasperated and unable to continue, Wolfe typed all of his notes into a long memo so that *Esquire* could take his research material and give it to another writer. The editors were so impressed with the stream-of-consciousness letter that they removed the salutation and ran it in the magazine almost verbatim.

4. Look and listen.

We are all, at the very least, passively aware of our surroundings. Great authors are *active* observers. They are constantly searching for material, whether it's a fragment of an overheard conversation, a funny personality quirk they notice in an acquaintance, or a brief story tucked away in the corner of the morning newspaper. Carry a notebook with you wherever you go and jot down these observations along with any other ideas, favorite words, colorful expressions, and dreams or memories you suddenly recall that could ignite a larger story or improve an existing one. Inspiration can strike at any time.

5. Don't censor yourself.

At least not at first. If the creative juices start pumping, let them flow irrespective of how graphic, personal, intense, or risqué the material might be. Don't worry about grammar, spelling, or syntax. Obviously these are important, but they all can be fixed later. Finally, don't let the aforementioned concerns or any others keep you from writing in the first place. If you're afraid of what others might think, you're under no obligation to share the results with anyone. Write for yourself.

6. Be patient.

This goes for the short term and the long haul. Even the most gifted and accomplished writers get stuck on an opening sentence, plot twist, line of dialogue, or some other crucial element. And if you try and publish your material, don't be discouraged by rejection. Learn from whatever criticism you receive, but don't let it stop you completely. Every great writer has been rejected or reviewed harshly at some point.

7. Edit, edit, edit.

Arguably the most exhausting (and rewarding) aspect of writing is not the creating part, but the editing. Read whatever you've written as objectively as possible—ideally, after having set it aside for a bit—and be especially attentive to any bad habits or personal tics. Do you frequently begin sentences using "And" or "But"? Does your dialogue have too many adverbs? (For example, "I love you," she said lovingly.) Do you repeat certain words instead of varying your vocabulary? Do you ask too many rhetorical questions? Cutting material can be especially difficult if you've fallen in love with a character, scene, or description, but if it interferes with the overall momentum of the story, you have to be merciless. One of the most famous pieces of literary advice, variously ascribed to different authors, is "Murder your darlings."

8. Trust the reader.

Constantly using exclamation points, repeating a particular idea over and over, explaining what's about to happen before it occurs, and similar examples of overkill are more likely to irritate than enlighten readers. Let them figure out things on their own. Similarly, have your characters speak the way they would in real life. If they would normally use technical jargon, abbreviations, or slang, write it. Put a glossary in the back if you're concerned that readers will truly be confused by the terminology. But in most cases they'll get the gist of it and the dialogue will sound more authentic.

9. Read.

Read because first-rate literature illuminates, incites, comforts, educates, and inspires. Read, particularly if you wish to be a writer, because the more you do it the better you'll appreciate the countless ways in which words, carefully selected and organized, can make you believe that everything on the page is real, is happening, and has consequences. And read for the simple pleasure of immersing yourself in a great story previously untold.

10. Write.

It is the most obvious—and overlooked—advice, but you simply cannot be a writer unless you are writing. All the time. Yes there might be moments you'll want to pull your hair out in frustration or will unexpectedly unleash a torrent of emotions, some of them painful. But more likely you will discover the sheer joy of creating something new and unique, and it is a feeling that can infuse one's entire life with a sense of passion and wonder. So start writing, and keep at it. That's the most important secret of all.

The commentary throughout this booklet will help you not only become a better writer, but a more discerning reader. The prose excerpt on the next page by Shelby Foote and the accompanying text on page 41 further demonstrate how to better appreciate the subtle choices an author makes when crafting a story. ~

Shiloh: A Novel

By Shelby Foote

The line was crooked as a ram's horn. Some men were pushing out front and others were beginning to breathe hard and lag behind. My heart was hammering at my throat—it seemed like every breath would bust my lungs. I passed a fat fellow holding his side and groaning. At first I thought he was shot, but then I realized he just had a stitch. It was Burt Tapley, the one everybody jibed about how much he ate; he was a great one for the sutlers. Now all that fine food, canned peaches and suchlike, was staring him in the face.

When we were halfway up the rise I begun to see black shapes against the rim where it sloped off sharp. At first I thought they were scarecrows—they looked like scarecrows. That didnt make sense, except they looked so black and stick-like. Then I saw they were moving, wiggling, and the rim broke out with smoke, some of it going straight up and some jetting toward our line, rolling and jumping with spits of fire mixed in and a humming like wasps past my ears. I thought: *Lord to God, theyre shooting; theyre shooting at me!* And it surprised me so, I stopped to look. The smoke kept rolling up and out, rolling and rolling, still with the stabs of fire mixed in, and some of the men passed me, bent forward like they were running into a high wind, rifles held crossways so that the bayonets glinted and snapped in the sunlight, and their faces were all out of shape from the yelling.

When I stopped I begun to hear all sorts of things I hadnt heard while I was running. It was like being born again, coming into a new world. There was a great crash and clatter of firing, and over all this I could hear them all around me, screaming and yelping like on a foxhunt except there was something crazy mixed up in it too, like horses trapped in a burning barn. I thought theyd all gone crazy—they looked it, for a fact. Their faces were split wide open with screaming, mouths twisted every which way, and this wild lunatic yelping coming out. It wasnt like they were yelling with their mouths: it was more like the yelling was something pent up inside them and they were opening their mouths to let it out. That was the first time I really knew how scared I was.

If I'd stood there another minute, hearing all this, I would have gone back. I thought: Luther, you got no business mixed up in all this ruckus. This is all crazy, I thought. But a big fellow I never saw before ran into me full tilt, knocking me forward so hard I nearly went sprawling. He looked at me sort of desperate, like I was a post or something that got in the way, and went by, yelling. By the time I got my balance I was stumbling forward, so I just kept going.... ~

To hear Shelby Foote read from *Shiloh: A Novel*, please visit *www.OperationHomecoming.gov*.

GENRE: How writers express themselves—i.e., the literary form they use (poetry, fiction, personal narrative, etc.)—can be as essential to their work as what they wish to say. The excerpt selected here is from *Shiloh: A Novel* by Shelby Foote, who has chosen historical fiction as his genre. (Foote served in both the U.S. Army and Marine Corps during World War II, but he never saw combat.) Some writers prefer the freedom of fiction, which allows them to set events in motion and have the characters do or say whatever best serves the overall story. Others prefer the authenticity of nonfiction and adhere only to what is known to be true. Neither approach is better or worse than the other; like photography and painting, each art form tells a particular "truth," but in two distinct ways. And some authors, including Foote, write both fiction and nonfiction.

EVENT & PERSPECTIVE: Foote has chosen a real battle from the Civil War as his focus, but he tells it from the standpoint of individual soldiers. Foote is not interested in a "bird's eye" view of the conflict, but what it's like for the troops on the ground, right there in the line of fire. The excerpt here is seen through the eyes of a Mississippi private named Luther Dade, the protagonist, who is not an omniscient narrator but knows only what is happening around him.

CHARACTERS: Along with the protagonist, there are several peripheral characters: Burt Tapley and a "big fellow" Luther Dade doesn't know who crashes into him as he's charging toward the front. There are also the Union and Confederate soldiers on all sides of Dade hollering and screaming, but they are not described in detail. By including both the mob of troops and Tapley and the big fellow, Foote balances the abstract chaos of combat with the individual experience of it all.

HUMOR: An old storyteller's trick is to have a character say or do something humorous immediately preceding a shocking or dramatic moment. This relaxes the reader (or audience) and makes the impact of the surprise all the more powerful. Right before the shooting begins, Foote introduces the reader to the obese, almost clownish Burt Tapley, who apparently never met a can of peaches he didn't like.

DIALOGUE & TONE: The entire text is told in what is called "internal monologue," meaning that the reader hears the character's thoughts and words in the first-person. And in the case of Luther Dade, the tone of this monologue is one of incredulity, which is certainly an understandable reaction to being shot at and thrust into the maelstrom of war.

DETAILS: Mark Twain once remarked in a letter to a budding young writer, "When you catch an adjective, kill it. No, I don't mean utterly, but kill most of them—then the rest will be valuable." Foote uses very few adjectives and adverbs in this excerpt, and the details and images he does employ are consistent with who the protagonist is; Luther Dade alludes to a ram's horn, wasps, trapped horses, and men who "looked like scarecrows," all things with which a man from a farm or rural area would be familiar.

NARRATIVE: Foote builds the momentum of the story so that it becomes increasingly intense with every sentence. He keeps the pacing brisk and gives his readers just enough information to follow what's going on without bogging them down with unnecessary details, all of which draws readers deeper into the battle—and into the story itself. This is ultimately much harder to do than it might appear, and Foote accomplishes it with great skill.

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Submissions should be no longer than 50 typescript, double-spaced, numbered pages neatly printed and clearly reproduced on standard 8 1/2 x 11 paper in font sizes no smaller than 11 and no larger than 14 points. Copies of submissions cannot be returned. Please include a cover sheet that includes the following information:

- YOUR FULL NAME
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- BACK-UP CONTACT (please give the name, address, phone number, and e-mail of a parent, grown child, sibling, or someone else we can contact if you have moved by the time we try to contact you)

SUBMISSION ADDRESS

Submissions can be emailed to: **submissions@OperationHomecoming.gov**

Or mailed to: **National Endowment for the Arts**
"Operation Homecoming"
Suite 723
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As I now gaze out across the sea, the horizon has become thin strands from sea to sky of dark haze, a shy red, a yellow gold and finally a light blue. I look behind my shoulder and the coast of Iraq is still dark. I turn forward as the haze succumbs to a soft orange rising Sun. Behind me, as minutes grow; the Iraqi coast turns a quiet blue with the increasing light. And once again, slowly, another cloudless day awakens. I have watched dawn not break, but blossom. . . .

I can't resist telling you a dream I had some nights ago. I am walking alone on a beach and I feel as if I am searching my heart for something to give you. I sense the distance and am angry at the expansive Oceans and Continents that separate us. In the dream I remember cursing in two languages on why I could not lift and carry myself to you, to offer you something that would make all things right and happy. Later that day as I remembered the dream, I promised myself that given the opportunity I intend for you and me to accumulate many pleasant memories that in retelling, will keep us warm in our old age.

My love, I wish I could offer you more.

— Petty Officer Second Class Edwin Garcia-Lopez, writing to his wife Debra from the Middle East via e-mail on September 12, 2004

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