

# DISPATCHES

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WRITERS  
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AMERICA

Rescuing History One Story at a Time  
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SUMMER 2021



*ROBIN HUTTON*



*MIKE GUARDIA*

MIKE MULLINS  
MEMORIAL MWSA  
WRITER OF THE YEAR  
2021 FINALISTS  
Pg 11

## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

*Sandra Miller Linhart*

I HAVE A HARD TIME believing this year is already half over... or half full—whichever way you want to look at it.

Life has taken some turns, ups and downs, and tipped us sideways a bit but we keep on keeping on. Kudos to us.

I hope you spent your Covid days writing and reading and honing your craft. As life gets back to normal, now is the time to refine and submit your (1500 words or less) submissions (articles, poetry, or blog entries) to *Dispatches*. There's no time like the present. Well, actually, the present moment is all we ever really have. So, get on it!

I've been a part of this organization since 2009. The changes I've seen happening are no less than astounding. When I first met Reverend Bill McDonald, I was impressed by his foresight regarding MWSA. He never lost faith in our community. It shows in the way he always shows up. He's a mentor and a leader, and will always be there for his veteran families.

It would be a great honor to showcase some of our best memories of Bill McDonald in the upcoming Fall 2021 *Dispatches* magazine. If you have a story or anecdote about Bill you'd like to share with our readers, please do so. Submission deadline is 1 October 2021, so you have plenty of time to put your thoughts and feelings into words.

Until next time, don't forget to have fun every day. This Earth is our souls' playground.

Enjoy and In Joy.

## DISPATCHES REGULARS

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FEATURE WRITER ~ A.T. ROBERTS

FEATURE WRITER ~ JOSEPH CAMPOLI

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## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

*Bob Doerr*

IT'S GREAT TO SEE THE country opening back up again. However, in getting out and about, I hope you are bearing with this heat better than I am. Of course, living in south Texas, what should I expect?

Your MWSA board recently approved the establishment of a new scholarship program. This is something we've thought about for a while, and we hope it will turn out to be a big success. More details can be found in this issue of *Dispatches* on page 36.

The planning for the conference is moving ahead at full speed, and as most Covid restrictions have been lifted, we're expecting a good turnout in Connecticut. Please make an effort to come and take advantage of this opportunity to improve your skills as a writer, network, and help us make MWSA better. This is our annual opportunity to have an in-person membership meeting and to have an awards banquet honoring all those authors whose books have won a medal. If you are an award finalist, the conference provides an excellent opportunity to take photographs and market your books.

Ruth Crocker has volunteered to become our interim Secretary, and in doing so has made our board complete again. I thank her for her support!

Stay healthy, keep writing, and I hope to see you in September at our conference ~ Bob Doerr



# TWICE LUCKY, PT I

*Jorge Torrente*

**EXCERPT FROM THE HISTORICAL NOVEL *THE UPRIISING* BY JORGE TORRENTE.**

**BAY of Pigs,**

**APRIL 17, 1961**

**1:00 AM**

**T**HE FROGMEN IN BLACK WETSUITS silently slipped off the rubber boats and into the dark water. Blending into the night, they split into two groups and swam toward the beaches, marking with special buoys the access routes the landing crafts would soon follow. At the same time, 180 paratroopers descended over three strategic locations farther inland.

In pitch-black darkness, close to 1500 men dressed in camouflaged fatigues along with twenty-six tons of ordnance began their slow landing process. After many months of training and preparations, the 2506 Brigade was finally at the beachhead.

The brigade had been transported from their training camp in Guatemala to Nicaragua's Puerto Cabezas, and from there they sailed east on a small rickety fleet of leased merchant ships. They were escorted by U.S. Navy Task Force Alpha, consisting of the aircraft carrier USS *Essex*, four destroyers and two submarines. Twenty-five hundred US Marines were on the task force ready to hit the beach as soon as the order arrived.

The original plan was to land in and around the port of Casilda, ten kilometers south of Trinidad—a stone's throw away from the Sierra del Escambray, where for the past two years several thousand local men and women were up in arms fighting Fidel Castro's regime.

But that was the Eisenhower plan.

After winning the election, Kennedy changed it, due to his concerns with civilian casualties caused by a U.S. promoted invasion. Thus, the 2506 Brigade landed at the sparsely populated Ciénaga de Zapata, 100 miles west of its original destination, and deprived of the Escambray insurgents backup.

*La Ciénaga de Zapata*—the Zapata Swamp was the largest continuous area of marshlands on the island, consisting of six-hundred square miles of putrid waters, malodorous mud and quicksand. The area the invaders were to secure that day was one small island of dry, firm ground surrounded in the east, north and west by inhospitable, crocodile-infested marshes.

The marshes constituted a magnificent natural barrier, not only to incoming troops, but especially to heavy military equipment. In contrast, the southern side of this targeted area had two magnificent landing beaches directly accessible from the Caribbean Sea through a body of water known as the Bay of Pigs. Aerial photos taken by U.S. military spy planes provided all the necessary details about the geography of the region, the defensibility of the area to be occupied, and the feasibility of the whole operation.

"Without the Escambray insurgents' direct help, this operation will be more difficult to pull off," Admiral Arleigh "31 Knot" Burke told Kennedy days before, "But it's doable as long as our own Air Force actively participates from start to finish."

Kennedy agreed, and it was a go.

Three recently paved rural roads meandering over narrow stretches of landfill were the only routes of access from the mainland to the brigade's toehold of firm land. The brigade's paratroopers' mission was to stop at all costs and for as long as possible any enemy advance on the three roads.

As soon as the three detachments of airborne troops landed, they conducted a brief reconnaissance of the sector they were to defend and then selected the best positions to fend off the anticipated Cuban army attack. Each detachment consisted of two, thirty-man platoons, each platoon carrying a bazooka and a .30 caliber machine gun, in addition to the M-1 Garand rifle, bayonet, Colt.45 side arm, and two hand grenades each man carried. With its own modest air force backed by the promised U.S. air support, the brigade

of primarily amateur soldiers felt confident in its ability to stand its ground for the short time needed until the U.S. Marines showed up. Surely God was squarely on their side—they had, after all, come to eradicate the atheist forces from their country.

What the small troop of invaders had no way of knowing the morning they landed was their fate had already been sealed in the comfortable and distant White House. The novice president, not yet fully convinced of the threat building in his backyard, had not only moved the landing to a disadvantaged position, but at the last minute gave the order to neither deploy nor commit any regular American forces to the action that was just beginning.

"But Mr. President," a thoroughly annoyed Admiral Burke asked, "what about the air cover we promised these boys?"

"They have fifteen B-26, don't they?"

"Mr. President, those are old World War II planes flown by Cuban exiles, for God's sake. The United States Navy Air Force is what's needed to guarantee the successful outcome of the operation. It's in the original plan. You agreed."

Kennedy was a Second World War veteran and understood conflict, but he didn't see the threat his generals spoke of. What he saw in Cuba was a bearded guy talking his head off and wiggling a finger in the air. Nothing more.

"Do I need to repeat it again?" Kennedy asked.

"Then we need to abort the operation," the CIA's Richard Bissell said.

"Too late for that now," Admiral Burke retorted looking squarely at Kennedy.

*Continued on page 6*



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Soon, several skirmishes erupted along the coast between the small and isolated army outposts and the brigade's first landing wave. Before being annihilated, these outposts had time to radio out the urgent news. Barely one hour after the first message was received, thousands of soldiers from the south-central portion of the island were mobilized, although Castro and his high command were certain they were facing a much bigger challenge: the American armed forces.

Néstor Guttman's detachment parachuted on the road connecting the community of San Blas, on the mainland, to Playa Girón. , The officer in command immediately placed one platoon on each side of the road. The defensive position was six-hundred yards away from where the road turned to the left and went out of sight toward San Blas.

The paratroopers dug in, trying to make the best of the bushes around them. Each platoon had its bazooka and the .30 caliber machine gun aimed at the road ahead. Two hundred yards behind the paratroopers' position stood a small and scattered settlement of ten modest houses, where an equal number of dirt-poor families lived. They were farmers, charcoal makers, and crocodile hunters.

Right before dawn, a distant rumbling sound was heard by all—one that became clearer by the second. Néstor heard safety catches clicking off all around him. He did likewise and pushed his glasses against the bridge of his nose. His index finger lightly rubbed the trigger.

Néstor stiffened when a column of Russian-made ZIL military trucks full of soldiers emerged from the bend on the road ahead. It

came straight at them.

The swoosh of bazooka rockets momentarily deafened all other sounds. The third and fourth trucks in the convoy lifted off the ground as they exploded in a fiery red-orange flash. Bodies and limbs flew in all directions.

The two machine guns opened fire from each side of the road. Néstor and the rest followed suit. Since the two front trucks could not advance nor back out, the soldiers on them desperately jumped out like jackrabbits. Most were gunned down.



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*Thank you.*

The bazookas fired again, and the two first trucks blew up. Some of its soldiers ran, engulfed in flames. The rest of the soldiers from the convoy had already found cover, five hundred yards from the invaders' position.

An uneasy and silent impasse fell over the warring parties as both sides checked each other out, the hissing of the burning trucks the only background sound. Toward the east, the sun was rising, casting its friendly light on the corpses littering the road.

The paratroopers were in high spirits—they had stopped the enemy and had no casualties. However, they were well-aware the surprise factor had already been spent.

They dug in deeper.

Néstor looked at his watch. It was eight in the morning. Only a few hours had passed since their arrival and they were already locked in mortal combat.

*What did you expect, a grand parade? A vacation tour?*

Smiling grimly, Néstor recalled the speculation that had taken place in Miami and at the training camp about how many soldiers and civilians would join them once the brigade landed. After all, wasn't most of Cuba's population Catholic and anti-Communist? But from what Néstor could see, none of these enemy soldiers seemed willing to join them.

Time froze.

The invaders were eager to see their reinforcements show up. It was obvious the army was waiting for theirs. Several of the Brigade's B-26 planes had been seen flying in the distance, and the paratroopers imagined them bombing and striking enemy concentrations. A couple of dog fights had

taken place, resulting in two planes bursting into flames, but it was too far away to see which side had come out the winner.

Unannounced, a Sea Fury marked with the Cuban Air Force insignia, swooped down on the paratroopers. Néstor shouted out a warning. The fighter's fifty calibers opened up, spraying the invaders' position with deadly fire. The paratroopers pressed their bodies hard against the soil. As the first Sea Fury flew away, an identical second one dropped the two bombs it carried under its wings.

Thankfully they missed their mark, exploding somewhere in no man's land, but the explosions shook Néstor to the teeth. With his ears still ringing, he thought he heard another sound. It was metallic—the clanging noise of heavy steel. It came from the bend in the road. He looked at the faces around him.

*Tanks!*

One turned out of the bend and headed their way, and then a second one, and a third. *Lord! A fourth one!*

The first one hugged the right shoulder of the road as it passed the burnt trucks and kept on going. The others followed.

A handful of soldiers rode on top of each Russian T-34 tank, and behind the metal beasts marched what seemed like an endless flow of men wearing blue shirts, olive-green pants and berets. The militia had arrived.

The survivors from the truck convoy cheered at the sight of their comrades and joined them in their advance.

From his position, Néstor saw the bazooka teams getting ready for action: the helpers feeding the tubes with the deadly rockets,

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*Continued from page 7*

the operators carefully aiming the weapons at the incoming menace. Both fired on the first tank almost at the same time, stopping it in its tracks. The soldiers on top seemed to evaporate.

As the distance between the two sides grew smaller, the approaching soldiers opened fire at the entrenched paratroopers. The enemy fighter planes returned for a second pass. That time, the pilots must have spotted the bazookas' positions, which had not changed. Néstor gasped as one of the bazooka teams and the nearby paratroopers were wiped-out by a rocket.

The invaders responded with disorganized fire. The three remaining tanks fired a terrible volley, and the soil jumped under the paratroopers' bodies with the force of the explosions. As the tanks cleared the charred remains of the trucks and moved back to the center of the road, they fired again, more accurately this time.

Shrubbery flew among geysers of dirt and smoke. Paratroopers' bodies and limbs were pitched in the air. The wounded screamed. Blood splattered everywhere against a background of rifle fire.

The remaining bazooka hit the closest tank on one of its metal tracks, making it swing to one side, but no fire or explosion followed. The damaged tank swung its turret around, pointed the cannon at the bazooka's position, and fired just as the team had reloaded and primed. The tank missed, but the bazooka didn't.

Hit sideways by an armor-piercing rocket, the tank exploded like a firecracker. The other two tanks responded and blew the

bazooka away. That done, they continued their relentless advance and closed in on the invaders' positions at the same time that both enemy Sea Fury fighters swooshed in, raking the paratroopers' positions once again.

Néstor desperately fired his rifle at them, to no avail.

"Where's the American fucking air backup?!"

No one responded.

As the enemy infantry came closer, it was easy to hear them shouting encouragement to each other, cursing the invaders and calling out Communist slogans. Soon the remaining paratroopers realized their position was indefensible in the face of the approaching forces. They began an organized but hasty retreat.

Seeing their enemies retreating rapidly, the advancing soldiers increased not only their pace, but their verbal imprecations. The enemy planes flew away.

Fourteen paratroopers lay dead on the ground and many others were hurt. Limping, shell shocked and bloodied, the paratroopers retreated along the road toward the settlement, prodded by whizzing bullets from the enemy rifles and the unhurried, relentless bombardment from the two enemy tanks.

Néstor shot back at the incoming soldiers as he retreated. Then, again, he heard planes coming.

*Oh God, no,* he thought, and looked up, but to his great relief what he saw were two of their own B-26s diving in like angry birds of prey.

The retreating invaders welcomed the saviors with waving arms and shouts of joy. The planes blew the two enemy tanks off their tracks and strafed the advancing soldiers, stopping their

advance. Then, as unexpectedly as they had shown up, they flew away, disappearing from sight.

Still retreating, the paratroopers moved through the settlement, passing two modest houses that stood by the road. The dwellers probably laid low, for none could be seen.

Up ahead, a clanking sound froze the retreat. Néstor guts felt hollow.

*More tanks? Is this it?*

A loud explosion went off from the direction they were heading. Néstor said a quiet prayer. He looked up and saw a tank approaching and firing its cannon over their heads at the soldiers' positions. It was an American Sherman M-44, one of their own, with at least two platoons of his fellow invaders running behind it.

"Man, just in time!" Néstor murmured to himself.

The enemy soldiers had stopped and took positions in a new defensive line.

The paratroopers and their reinforcements wasted no time and established their own line of defense, but with only one tank and about a hundred men the invaders couldn't dream of pushing the soldiers back. They had to wait for more reinforcements.

The battle had shifted. All the homes in the settlement lay in no man's land, close to the invaders' line. In light of the number of enemy soldiers amassed, it wasn't hard to predict the outcome of the battle if the invaders didn't receive substantial back-up soon.

Courage could go only so far against overwhelming numbers.

At that point, what the brigade desperately needed was the decisive air support promised

to them by the United States—the promise upon which the whole operation had been based.

As Néstor looked at the enemy position, an ear-shattering shrieking sound froze him.

"Artillery! Get down!" someone screamed.

Néstor felt his heart beating against his chest as the ground shook. His mouth was as dry as sandpaper and he shook all over.

"Where's the goddamned air support?" Néstor heard himself shouting. "Where're the motherfucking Americans and all their promises?"

He had not finished raising his muddied face from the ground when a second artillery volley fell only a few meters away. Néstor's body was lifted from the ground he was so desperately trying to disappear into as the huge shock-wave slapped him backward.

Flat on his back and blinking in the sunlight, Néstor moved his arms and feet slightly to make sure they were still attached to his body. He wiggled his toes, but right then and there, another volley of shrieking artillery fire came down on him. He froze stiff.

"God help us!" A sudden burst of vomit stopped all his blabbering.

As if in answer to his prayer, the pounding of the artillery shifted deeper behind his position. As he recovered from shock and fear, he saw the soldiers stir and advance again. They were less than five hundred yards away.

Watching the enemy resume their assault brought a bitter taste to his mouth.

*Without the air support, we're done.*

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The last puffs of smoke from the artillery explosions blew past the two houses of the settlement closest to the road, one hundred yards from Néstor's position. It was then that he saw a tiny figure walking with uncertain steps out of the house to the right of the road.

*Oh God, no!*

A bare-chested toddler clad only in a diaper nervously stumbled away from the house toward the invaders' positions. Néstor tried to control his panic by telling himself nobody would shoot a little boy or girl, but the gunfire became more furious as the enemy troops kept coming.

*No child is going to stop this.*

“Ahh, fuck it!”

Obeying an irrational impulse, Néstor jumped to his feet and ran directly into no man's land, making a beeline for the child. His adrenaline straining his body to the max, Néstor propelled himself forward, his mind intent in making it. Enemy lead angrily buzzed past him.

As he approached the child, the infant looked at him and panicked. He turned his little ass around and ran away, screaming and crying, his diaper sliding down his buttocks.

Néstor swore. “Don't run away, damn it!” He ran harder. “Stop!”

The child tried to run faster but, lacking the coordination to do so, fell to the ground.

Switching his rifle to his left hand as he ran, Néstor scooped up the screaming toddler, clutched him to his side like a football, and went for the house. Bullets rained on him—it was only a matter of time.

A young woman stepped out the door of the

house, saw him coming, and stopped at the threshold. With terrified eyes, she stretched out her arms—bullets ricocheting all around her. Reluctantly, but without dropping her arms, the woman backed up two steps into the house.

Running, Néstor dropped his rifle, and with his two hands holding the toddler in front of him, he motioned to the woman. Almost there, a screaming artillery shell descended from the sky, and the scene went up in a flash of fire and a loud explosion.

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To be continued in MWSA's Fall *Dispatches*



## 2021 MIKE MULLINS MEMORIAL WRITER OF THE YEAR FINALISTS

*Bob Doerr*

EACH YEAR, MWSA SELECTS a member to be its writer of the year. This is a prestigious award that requires more than just a single good book.

Named after one of our charter members, receipt of this award signifies the author is a multi-award winner.

This year we are proud to select Robin Hutton and Mike Guardia as our finalists.

More information on this award and MWSA's two other special awards can be found on our website <https://mwsadispatches.com>.



*Mike Guardia*

Mike Guardia is an internationally recognized author and military historian. A veteran of the United States Army, he served six years on active duty as an Armor Officer. He is the author of the widely acclaimed, *Hal Moore: A Soldier Once...and Always*, the first-ever

biography chronicling the life of LTG Harold G. Moore, whose battlefield leadership was popularized by the film, *We Were Soldiers*, starring Mel Gibson.

He has twice been nominated for the Army Historical Foundation's Distinguished Book Award and is an active member in the Military Writers Society of America.



*Robin Hutton*

Robin Hutton's first book, *Sgt Reckless: America's War Horse*, is a biography of the famous Korean War horse, Reckless whose heroics were so incredible she is listed in Life Magazine's *Celebrate Our Heroes*, as one of our all-time great heroes. Published by Regnery History (Salem Communications), the book was a categorical New York Times Bestseller in September and October 2014. It also was the 2015 Book of the Year from American Horse Publications, and received a Gold Medal from the Military Writers Society of America in 2016.



# CUSHING 2.0, PT I

Dwight J. Zimmerman



Richmond Hobson and the Sinking of the *Merrimac*

## PART 1

IT WAS “FAKE NEWS” 118 years before the term was coined: SPANISH ATROCITIES AGAINST CUBAN REVOLUTIONARIES SEEKING INDEPENDENCE FROM THEIR COLONIAL MASTERS. The basic facts were true, which wasn’t enough for the press barons of the competing Hearst and Pulitzer newspaper syndicates. With a calculating eye on circulation numbers and a carefree disregard of the truth, actual accounts of Spanish crackdown of Cuban rebel insurrection were embellished and exaggerated, while rebel depredations were downplayed or ignored in what might be called the journalistic equivalent of taking da Vinci’s “Mona Lisa” and turning it into Marcel Duchamp’s “Nude Descending a Staircase.” All that was missing was an actual—and big—tragedy to ignite the powder keg of pro-rebel American popular opinion the yellow journalism press had primed.

The press barons got it on February 21, 1898, when the armored cruiser USS *Maine* mysteriously exploded in Havana harbor with heavy loss of life.

With front-page above the fold newspaper headlines thundering REMEMBER THE *MAINE*! leading the public opinion charge, President William McKinley (who had tried to avoid escalating hostilities with Spain) reluctantly asked Congress to declare war.

That set the stage for one of the most dramatic events in the Spanish American War—no, not Admiral Dewey’s defeat of the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay or Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders charge up Kettle Hill. The operation was far more harrowing and ultimately saw all eight of its participants receive the Medal of Honor—for a mission that failed: Lieutenant Richmond P. Hobson and the sinking of the USS *Merrimac* in Santiago harbor.

If ever there were an unlikely ship to be the central player in a heroic operation, it was the USS *Merrimac*. Unlike the Civil War warship *Merrimac* that saw historic action as the CSS *Virginia* against the USS *Monitor*, this *Merrimac* was a humble collier whose purpose was to provide coal-burning warships with fuel.

Built in New Castle, England, as the SS *Solveig* in 1894, she was documented under American registry on December 9, 1897, rebuilt in New York, sold to the Navy on April 12, 1898, less than two weeks before war’s outbreak, and re-christened the USS *Merrimac*.

Given the kind of service the collier provided during its month-and-a-half as a U.S. Navy vessel, it’s tempting to think the actual purchase date should have been April 1 and the collier’s real name should have been *Albatross*, for it seemed not a day went by

without something going wrong with her.

The *Merrimac* became the butt of jokes, one being that if she steamed trouble-free for five hours a miracle had occurred.

One oft-repeated comment was, “the full engineer force of the [armored cruiser] *Brooklyn* was sent about to get her running again.”

Yet upon war’s outbreak, the catalogue of *Merrimac*’s many breakdowns and deficiencies, instead of earmarking her for the ignoble scrap heap, presented an opportunity for the collier to literally go down in a blaze of glory and in so doing trap the Spanish fleet in Santiago de Cuba.



That was the decision North Atlantic Fleet commander Rear Admiral William T. Sampson and his top subordinates reached during a conference at the end of May on his flagship the armored cruiser *New York*, while she was being coaled at Key West prior to joining the rest of his fleet blockading Santiago harbor.

An added consideration to their decision was likely caused by Secretary of the Navy John D. Long. Unlike the Army, which was small and almost comically unprepared for war with a major power, even one in decline like Spain, the U.S. Navy was the sixth largest in the world, possessing first-class battleships and

cruisers. In a March 23 memo, Long wrote of the opportunity a war with Spain presented to the Navy. He concluded with a specific reference to junior officers, recalling the Civil War exploit of Commander William Cushing and his sinking of the ironclad *Albemarle*. He wrote junior officers should have within them “the stuff out of which to make a possible Cushing; and if the man wins the recognition given him shall be as great as that given Cushing, so far as the department can bring this about.”

Heady stuff.

And, like what Cushing experienced in his attack on the *Albemarle* traveling up the Roanoke River in Virginia during the Civil War, Admiral Sampson’s proposal to block Santiago harbor by sinking the *Merrimac* near the mouth of its channel was hazardous in the extreme.

The channel leading to Santiago’s harbor was a narrow finger almost ten miles long. At its narrowest point, only 200 yards wide. Sinking a ship there would act like a cork in a bottle, trapping the fleet. But to reach that location, an enemy vessel had to run a gauntlet of forts strategically located on both sides of the channel, as well as gunboats hidden in the channel’s many inlets—all the while navigating in unfamiliar waters at night.

On the morning of May 29, as coaling of the *New York* was being completed, Admiral Sampson called Assistant Naval Contractor Lieutenant Richmond P. Hobson into his quarters. The admiral outlined his idea for the *Merrimac* and requested Hobson determine how best to accomplish the mission.

*Continued on page 14*

*Continued from page 13*



Richmond Pearson Hobson was born on August 17, 1870, on the family plantation Magnolia Grove in Greensboro, Alabama. Richmond was one of seven children born to probate judge James Hobson and Sarah Pearson Hobson.

An intellectual prodigy, Richmond was tutored at home until age twelve, when he enrolled in Greensboro's Southern University (now Birmingham-Southern College).

Upon graduation, he was accepted at age fifteen to the U.S. Naval Academy, the youngest midshipman in his class, and the youngest midshipman in Naval Academy history. [Baron Samuel has the distinction of being the youngest midshipman in the U.S. Navy—a distinction he achieved at the age of two in 1811, thirty-four years before the Naval Academy was founded. Another very young

Naval Academy midshipman was Admiral Je-ruld Wright who was sixteen years old when he received his appointment in 1914.]

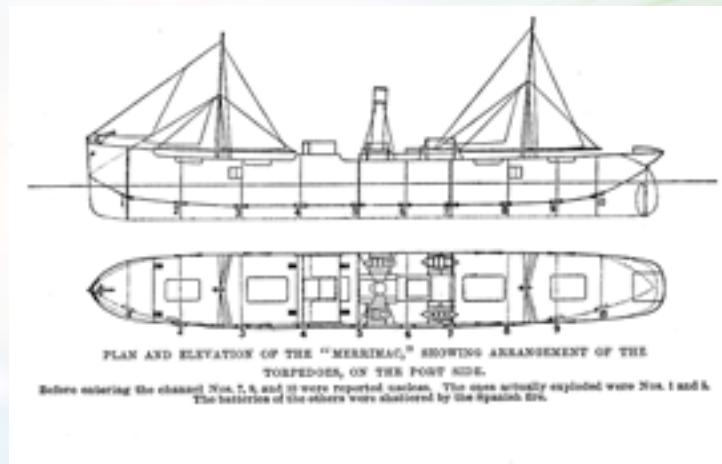
Hobson graduated first in his class in 1889. He served two years as a navigator on the cruiser USS *Chicago*. His next posting was a furthering of his education at the French school of naval design in Paris, France. He was then appointed Assistant Naval Constructor at the U.S. Navy Bureau of Construction and Repair in Washington, D.C. This made him supervisor of the construction of all naval vessels.

Passionate about promoting education in the military, he was instrumental in establishing a three-year post-graduate course in the Construction Corps at the Naval Academy.

On May 30, 1898, as the *New York* took up position with the rest of the fleet off the mouth of the channel and beyond the range of the Spanish forts' cannon, Hobson met the admiral and presented him with two plans. One called for lining the port side of the *Merrimac*'s hull below the water line with ten electronically triggered torpedoes—cannisters filled with explosives that would blow holes in the side of the ship. [A backup explosive package involving two hundred pounds of guncotton strategically positioned below decks was rejected by Admiral Sampson who said that two hundred pounds of guncotton on the inside would "blow everything to the devil" and kill the crew.]

The other plan involved blowing a hole in the collier's bottom by cutting the rivet heads on six bottom plates and then blasting them loose by firing a cannon aimed at them. In both cases, it would happen after the *Merrimac* was anchored in position, and sink in less than two minutes.

With the night of Thursday, June 2, set as the target date for the operation, it was determined the rivet-heads could not be cut in time. Thus preparations commenced in fitting the *Merrimac* with an explosive truss.



As that was being done, Admiral Sampson issued a signal from the *New York* requesting volunteers for a “hazardous mission.”

In his account of the operation, *The Sinking of the Merrimac*, Hobson wrote that in response, “names were pouring in by the hundred. It may be said broadly that the bulk of the fleet was anxious to go.”

For the skeleton crew, Hobson chose Machinist First Class George Phillips, Water Tender Francis Kelly, and Coxswain Osborn Dignan (from the *Merrimac* because of their familiarity with the ship’s engines and helm), Coxswain J. E. Murphy (from the pre-dreadnaught battleship USS *Iowa*), and Gunners Mate First Class George Charette and Coxswain Randolph Clausen (from the *New York*). The crew was picked and ready. The ship and its weaponry on the other hand...

It was too much to expect everything would be smooth sailing with the *Merrimac* and, sure enough, a last-minute glitch almost

threatened to scuttle the operation itself. After the torpedoes had been put in place and wired, it was discovered there were only enough batteries to trigger six of the ten torpedoes. A canvassing of the ships in the fleet revealed there were none to be had.

Hobson was forced to postpone the mission one day to give sailors time to jury-rig detonators for the rest of the torpedoes.

Hobson put the delay to use by reviewing his plan. He came to the conclusion the sequence of events leading up to the detonation of the torpedoes and, while in all likelihood under enemy fire, was so time-sensitive and demanding as to be beyond the command capacity of just himself. He needed an executive officer tasked with the all-important responsibility of accurately dropping the stern anchor—the action that would initiate the sequence—and take over command should something happen to him.

*New York*’s Master-At-Arms Daniel Montague was approached because of his combined experience in the Royal Navy and U.S. Navy. He promptly volunteered.

Just after sunset on the night of June 3, 1898, Hobson and his crew, together with a pilot and assistant engineer from the *Merrimac*, who would help on the first leg of the voyage, embarked on their mission.

As the ship approached the mouth of the channel, Hobson conducted a test of the firing mechanisms. To his frustration, he discovered three of the ten triggers failed. Despite that, Hobson decided to continue.

Just before they reached the mouth of the channel, the two extra sailors from the

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*Merrimac* transferred to an escorting steam launch that would remain in station near the mouth of the channel to pick up survivors who escaped from the sinking *Merrimac* on a catamaran—put on the collier for that purpose.

The *Merrimac* entered the channel.

Hobson wrote, “When we arrived within about two thousand yards [of their objective at Morro Point] there could be no question of surprise. In the bright moonlight we were in clear view, and our movements must long since have caused suspicion.”

Yet, for several nerve-wracking minutes the *Merrimac* continued unchallenged. Then about five hundred yards from Morro Point, a gunboat emerged and fired point-blank at the *Merrimac*.

Cursing the fact that the collier had no cannon, Hobson ordered the ship to continue at her top speed of nine knots and “pay no attention” to the cannon fire from the forts above that had joined in.

Hobson estimated they were about three ship-lengths away from Morro Point when shells hit the *Merrimac*, wrecking her rudder and steering gear. Despite loss of navigation, the ship’s momentum continued to carry the collier closer to its scuttling point.

Hobson ordered the stern anchor dropped, only to discover it had been shot away. The bow anchor was ordered dropped in the hope it would suffice.

Shouting over the din of enemy barrage, Hobson then ordered the torpedoes detonated. But shellfire had damaged most of the remaining working triggers and only two successfully exploded.

The crew threw open the seacock, but the inrush of water from them and the ruptured hull was too slow. With the channel’s strong current dragging the one anchor, the *Merrimac* drifted out of position.

\*\*\*

To be continued in MWSA’s Fall *Dispatches*

## CAPTIONS

Image 1:

The USS *Merrimac* under fire from Spanish forts and ships at the mouth of Santiago de Cuba harbor. Illustration from *The Sinking of the Merrimac*, Richmond Hobson’s account of the mission, published in 1899. *Author’s collection*

Image 2:

The collier USS *Merrimac*, one of the most unlikely vessels ever to serve as a warship in the US Navy. *Naval History and Heritage Command*

Image 3:

Lt. Richmond P. Hobson, USN. After his service in the Navy, Hobson would serve as a Congressman from Alabama where he was instrumental in passing legislation creating the position of Chief of Naval Operations. *Naval History and Heritage Command*

Image 4:

Diagram showing the placement of the torpedoes on the *Merrimac*’s hull, with the caption indicating which torpedoes actually detonated. *Author’s collection*



## MWSA Dispatches Seeks Member Submissions.

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## DEADLINES FOR SUBMISSIONS

- ✓ MWSA 2021 Fall *Dispatches* magazine releases on 15 October 2021. The deadline for submission is 1 October 2021.
- ✓ MWSA 2022 Winter *Dispatches* magazine releases on 15 January 2022. The deadline for submission is 1 January 2022.
- ✓ MWSA 2022 Spring *Dispatches* magazine releases on 15 April 2022. The deadline for submission is 1 April 2022.

Submit poetry, short stories, fiction, non-fiction—you name it! Although we do our best to accommodate you, please keep submissions around 1500 words.

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# TOMORROW'S FLIGHT, PT I

*A.T. Roberts*

IN the not-too-distant future...

**C**OMMANDER EDWARD ESCOBAR-ZACARIAS HEARD HIS alarm ding and rolled out of bed. Grabbing his iPhone 41 to cancel the head-rattling noise, he noticed a text from his XO.

SIR, HAVE YOU CHECKED MESSAGE TRAFFIC YET?!

After ending the annoying sound, he opened the Worldbook app—a company that, years earlier, had received a DoD contract to handle all military communications—and scrolled through the DoN's message traffic wall.

Adhering to the second of the Navy's latest core values of inclusion, transparency, and tolerance, Worldbook made all message traffic open source, and even provided sailors the ability to comment on posted messages.

*What exactly am I looking for?* wondered Edward.

The DoN's Worldbook page was inundated with ads from defense contractors like Boeing-Rockwell-Collins and BAE-L3-Raytheon, so it was hard to find something specific.

Then he saw it, posted by none other than the CNO himself, CHINA DECLARES WAR ON U.S.

*No way,* he thought.

Worldbook was frequently hacked by anyone ranging from kids in basements with too much time on their hands to foreign intelligence services. The breaches became so common it was increasingly difficult to determine what was real and what was fake.

He scrolled the message's comments for verification.

SCREW THAT, posted one Sailor.

THAT'S IT, IMMA GO AWOL, said another.

'MURICA, commented a third.

WE'RE STANDING BY TO PROVIDE DISCOUNTED MUNITIONS, added Northrup-Grumman-Lockheed-Martin.

Finally, he found real confirmation. A comment by the top man in his chain of command, COMNAVSURFPAC.

THIS IS NO JOKE; I WANT ALL MY SHIPS TO SEA IMMEDIATELY! ORDERS TO FOLLOW.

Edward personally knew the man, and trusted the authenticity of the news.

*What a bizarre way to find out about a war,* he thought.

Donning his hot-pink digital camouflage—for breast cancer awareness month—Edward descended the stairs of his bedroom community apartment in Poway and began his hour-long commute to his ship moored at Naval Base San Diego, or simply “32nd Street” to Sailors and locals alike.

Commander Edward Escobar-Zacarias was the CO of the USS *Steven Spielberg*—named for the famous director’s positive portrayals of the U.S. military on the silver screen. It used to be named the USS *Jack Wilson*—a WWII marine medal of honor recipient—but after it was discovered that Wilson used derogatory terminology in reference to his opponents during the war, the name had to be scrapped.

Edward didn't care, he was just happy to have his own ship; and of all ships, it was one of the last of a mighty breed, the *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyer. All subsequent vessels built for the surface fleet were either littoral warfare ships or neo-frigates, both built for their cost-effectiveness. Unfortunately, these newer, state-of-the-art ships had a common nickname throughout the Navy—missile sponges.

As Edward barreled down I-15 he turned on his radio, hoping to hear some more news about the war.

“This is JAM’N 95.7 coming to you with allllll the greatest hits; but before we do, a quick news update. wAr WiTh ChInA? wHo KnEw!”

Edward rolled his eyes. He hated the overdone voice inflection of radio personalities.

“Before we get into that, this just in. Oh my God, no. Folks, I don’t know what to say. I’m sorry to be the one to break this devastating news to you, but... international hip-hop icon Juice-Cash was found dead last night in the VIP room of a nightclub in Antwerp. The untimely death of this magical artist is being reported as an apparent overdose of huffing vaporized fentanyl... I don’t know what else to...”

“What in the world,” said Edward as he changed to an AM news station.

“This is News radio 600 KOGO, San Diego’s news and information station. Several elected officials are declaring the U.S. government’s retaliatory response to China’s war declaration a blatant act of racism. One of the most boisterous opponents of the decision is San Francisco Mayor Olivia Jenkins, who recently proclaimed Frisco an open city, and

welcomed a Chinese military invasion of California’s most progressive metropolis.”

Edward turned the radio off and decided to call his XO who had spent the night aboard the ship. Surely he would have more updated information.

The phone rang only once before going to voicemail.

*Shoot, he thought, no service, he must be in the skin of the ship.*

Edward was embarrassed he didn’t know the phone number of his own ship’s quarterdeck. He’d been the CO for only a few weeks and hadn’t remembered to save the number in his cell phone.

He was the USS *Steven Spielberg*’s 7th CO in the past year. Each previous Skipper had been removed from command for various equal opportunity complaints. The reasons were never made public, but people talk, and Edward had heard one of them was fired for driving too nice of a car—which, according to the Bureau of Equal Opportunity, “presented an overbearing and unnecessary attitude of privilege in the face of those less advantaged.”

The most recent CO was fired for hanging a sign in his office that his children gave him as a birthday present which read: RED SOX FANS ONLY. The “only” part of the sign chafed with the Navy’s core value of inclusion. To the crew of the *Spielberg*, the constant command changes translated to a rudderless leadership, which many of them loved, since it was easier to fly under the proverbial radar that way.

As Edward began to sweat at the thought of getting his ship to sea in a timely matter, to

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fight a potentially massive conventional war no less, he looked down at his phone to dial his XO one more time.

“Jesus!” he screamed as he looked up at a wall of stopped cars.

Slamming on the breaks, he screeched to a stop just inches from the rear bumper of the car in front of him.

*Traffic? Already?* Then he noticed banners being toted about thirty yards in front of the stopped cars.

Apparently, another protest group had decided to block the highway. He assumed they were protesting the war—the war he still knew nothing about—until he focused on the banner closest to him which read: DOGS ARE PEOPLE, TOO!

Days earlier, a San Diego woman was asked to leave a movie theater after her service dog, Shiloh, would not stop barking at the screen. Movie-goers complained, and the incident sparked an outrage throughout San Diego’s dog-loving community, and now they were blocking highways in an effort to get the issue of dog’s rights into the public’s eyes.

“No, not now,” trembled Edward to no one.

The mob of mostly middle-aged women neared Edward’s car. He lowered his window to plead with the nearest protester.

“Ma’am, I need to get through. A war’s just started and I *need* to get through!”

Ignoring Edward’s pleading, and with a crazed expression on her face, the woman screamed, “Dog’s rights!”

“Ma’am, we’re at war with *China*!”

“And we’re at war with *you*!”

*What? But I love dogs.*

Edward noticed some San Diego police officers standing idly by—also wearing hot-pink uniforms for breast cancer awareness month—but knew they’d be little-to-no help. He opened his door, almost striking the woman with it.

“Heeey!” she yelled.

Continuing to scan the area, he saw a child trailing the protesters on a bicycle. Edward left his car sitting in the dead-stop traffic jam.

“Hey, kid! I need that bike!”

“Like hell you do,” responded the child.

“Kid, there’s a war on... I’ll pay you for it.”

“One-thousand ameros.”

“One-thousand? Whatever, let’s go.”

Edward and the boy touched their phones together and transferred one-thousand ameros. Edward couldn’t help but notice the boy had an iPhone 42.

Next thing he knew, Edward was peddling down an empty I-15 in his hot-pink digital camouflage on a bicycle sized for a twelve-year-old. *Only four miles left to base.*

In his leg pocket, his phone rang. He answered it as he continued peddling like a mad-man.

“Hello?”

“Sir, it’s XO. Where are you?”

“I’m on my way, I’ll be there in twenty minutes. Get the ship ready to pull out, now!”

“On it, sir.”

*Thank God for the XO*—who managed to avoid the Bureau of Equal Opportunity purges, thus accruing some actual time and

experience aboard the *Spielberg*.

The 32nd Street main gate was jammed even worse than the dog's rights highway blockade. Unbeknownst to Edward, there had been reported but unverified acts of sabotage by Chinese nationals living in the San Diego area, and as a result base security was currently on overdrive.

The bicycle proved to be a blessing in disguise. Edward was able to coast between cars to the front of the line. Slowing down as he approached the guard house, he stuck his hand into his leg pocket to fish for his ID.

*WHAM!* He was suddenly tackled off the bicycle and onto the pavement so hard he thought his right shoulder may have just broken.

"What are you doing?" groaned Edward.

"Hands where I can see them, now!" demanded a Master-of-arms with his sidearm drawn. "What are you reaching for? And where'd the bike come from?"

"I was going for my ID! And I had to buy the bike from some damn kid, the freeway is blocked again! I'm the CO of the *Spielberg*, dammit!"

"Let's see some ID."

"Here," Edward handed his military ID, "See?"

"Okay, sir. Sorry about that. Before we let you on, we're making everyone sign one of these." The MA handed Edward a sheet of paper and pen.

Edward read the top of the page, "Obedience Oath?"

"Yes, sir. New policy because of the war. We need signed statements making sure everyone

is inclusive, transparent, and tolerant."

Edward couldn't find the words to express his confusion.

"But, I'm the... a... a ship's CO. What does obedience have to do... What's the point of this? Doesn't the very nature of my *job* and congressional commission *prove* my loyalty, uh, I meant o...obedience?

The MA again raised his sidearm, "Sign it, sir. Or else you can't get on base."

Edward quickly signed the document and hopped back on the bicycle.

The *Spielberg* shared a pier with three other surface combat ships. The scene in front of Edward as he peddled along the seawall was pure mayhem.

Normally an off-limits procedure, heavy ordnance was being loaded onto ships directly from the pier, lines were being cut rather than untied, and random supplies ranging from food to printer paper were being carried aboard in the most haphazard manner. Edward even saw a young Sailor hurriedly running to his ship with an XBOX 1080 and at least a dozen games in hand.

The *Spielberg*'s XO waited for Edward at the base of the brow. Edward jumped off the bicycle as it ghosted forward and off the side of the pier.

"Sir, thank God you're here!"

"Give me a statrep, now!" The CO and XO conversed as they made their way aboard.

"Supplies are good. Ordnance is good. The only problem is crew."

"What about it?"

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“Duty section is all here, but the rest of the crew is trickling in one, two, half-a-dozen at a time.”

“Goddamn traffic,” muttered Edward. “We’ll hold out as long as we can. Have there been any orders updates?”

“Yes, sir. They just posted to Worldbook. We’re to get underway no later than 1200, escort the carriers as far as Hawaii, then rendezvous with the rest of PACFLT and push west. Apparently, it’s pretty bad.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“Our bases on Guam and Japan have been hit hard with long range missiles, Taiwan’s been engulfed, and the PLA just landed on the P.I. Apparently Manila has already fallen. Oh, and a Sino-North Korean force is currently making its way down the peninsula.”

“My God.” Edward briefly pondered how the re-ignition of the Korean War seemed like an afterthought to everything else that was transpiring.

“What’s the international response?”

“All I’ve read is that India has militarized its border. That’s all I know.”

“Copy all. Do we have the updated code book?”

“Yes, sir. It’s in your stateroom.”

“Copy, let me go get it.”

Several years earlier, Raytheon was awarded a contract to install retina scanners aboard all naval vessels. The purpose of which was to control access to anything from weapons system interfaces to secured spaces—one was the CO’s stateroom.

Their microchips were designed to fry after a certain amount of uses so the contractor could secure years of spare parts purchases. However, someone designed the flawed chips too flawed, and they occasionally broke after just one or two scans. They broke so much that every retina scanner had a bag of extra microchips duct-taped to it so vital systems and spaces could still be accessed.

BAE-L3 subsequently merged with Raytheon and deemed the retina scanner program cost-ineffective but never bothered to uninstall them from naval vessels. Nor did they keep enough microchips in supply to avoid dumping money into a no-longer-funded program.

As Edward plugged his last microchip into his stateroom’s retina scanner to retrieve the code book, an error message appeared on the scanner’s screen.

“What the hell? I just put in a new chip!” Edward made his way to the bridge to find help. “XO, do we have any more retina scanner microchips?”

“No, sir. Just whatever is left in the bags.”

“I just used my last one, and it didn’t even work!”

“Um, let me go look down in CIC, I think they have some extras.”

“Screw it, send a hull tech up to my stateroom. Have him blowtorch the door open. I can’t be dealing with this when we’re fighting a damn war.”

“Will do, sir. And, uh, there’s one last thing, sir.”

“What is it?”

“We haven’t had our Monday Morning Meeting yet.”

"I don't think there's time for that right now, XO."

"But if we don't properly log our Monday Morning Meeting minutes on NavyNet, the Bureau of Meetings might launch a formal investigation. The last CO got fired for that."

"I thought he was the Red Sox sign guy?"

"No, that was the one before him."

"Fine, assemble the department heads and..." a loud thud interrupted the CO. "What was that?"

"Look!" someone yelled from the bow, pointing across the pier.

The neo-frigate moored opposite from the *Spielberg*—the USS *Beyoncé*—billowed smoke. There was no way to tell if it was an attack or accident, but there was no time to figure that out.

"We're downwind of that fire. We can't wait here any longer. XO. We're casting off."

"But what about the rest of the crew?"

"There's no time, Let's go."

"But..."

"What is it, XO?"

"But, but what about the Monday Morning Meeting, sir?"

"Screw it!" Edward screamed so loud he actually felt light-headed, stumbled backward, and caught himself on his bridge chair.

Pulling out of San Diego Bay was chaos. The *Beyoncé* still burned, and Edward witnessed two other ships—the USS *Spider-Man* and the USS *Tim McGraw*—back into each other like two old ladies driving Lincolns in a grocery store parking lot. He saw the USS *Gerald R. Ford*, the first of its class and as old

as the *Spielberg*, pulling out of NAS North Island while helicopters still leapfrogged on and off its flight deck—presumably bringing last minute personnel and supplies. The *Ford* was the first carrier to launch aircraft with the Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System (EMALS), which never worked as advertised. All *Ford*-class carriers needed a team of one-hundred specially trained civilian contractors to operate EMALS—all of whom received a flat per diem rate of 600,000 ameros for deploying on the carrier, in addition to their normal salaries.

While briefly pondering why the *Ford* never had its name changed, the strange sight of a littoral warfare ship actually towing a neo-frigate to war passed Edward's view. Even more bizarre was the sheer amount of pleasure craft in the bay.

San Diego was always a city that seemed to care about nothing, but Edward was still taken aback by the fact so many people didn't seem to care a war was on.

As the *Spielberg* rounded the bluffs of the Point Loma peninsula, Edward noticed a group of people at the tip of Cabrillo Point holding a huge homemade banner. Grabbing his binoculars, he read the sign: BM3 WILLIS, HAVE FUN AND WE'LL MISS YOU!

*OPSEC be damned*, thought Edward. *Fun?*

Odds were where they were headed would not be fun.

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To be continued in MWSA's Fall *Dispatches*



# A THING CALLED COURAGE

*Vic Socotra*

6 JUNE 2021

**W**E ALL GET CAUGHT UP in the excitement and activity of the coming summer—city or country folk included. Seasonal work in progress at the farm includes replacing rotted boards on the deck and slashing back aggressive entwining green growth of land that wants itself back.

Eugene and his family are doing the former and Big Mike is going to hack at the latter. I am happy to know and trust them.

There are memories of other summers, of course, and that always takes me back.

For reasons best known to others, a horrendous bad memory cloaked the Memorial Day topic of sacrifice. For those who were lucky to know him, our memories were drawn to the great sea battle near Midway that our pal Admiral Mac Showers remembers. The pictures from his last visit to Hawaii to commemorate the 70th anniversary circulated among those who were there for that physical contact with living memory.

There is competition in memory space, of course. We were all Pacific sailors of one kind or another, and the memories of what Mac's generation did in the blue vastness evokes a powerful response.

The national memory is normally about the amphibious landings on this day in 1944.

Young men were flung across the English Channel to land on the beaches of France. Their sacrifice was made at the cost of ten thousand casualties—half of them killed.

Their foes in deep concrete bunkers paid, as dearly.

The magnitude of the operation was staggering, intricately planned and with multiple diversions scheduled. Communications were intercepted and twisted into offensive use by the Allied command.

The idea of being nineteen years of age, hoisting a rucksack, and running from a landing craft toward a sandy hill bristling with angry guns was something to contemplate this morning.

There were heroes that day.

In our family, Uncle Dick represented us there. He married our Aunt Barbara and brought his own magic with him. Like many, he knew trouble was coming for us all when the world went to war. He learned to fly airplanes, and joined the Army to be taught to fly the way the Air Corps wanted. He was ready, and he was good enough to be one of the first crews to fly to England—literally via South America and then east and north to avoid the Germans. He was a lead pilot, deemed suitable to lead a flight of a thousand roaring bombers to strike Hitler's heartland.

On this day, this morning, seventy-seven years ago, Captain Richard 'Dick' Gile walked the pre-flight circuit of the B-24 Liberator bomber. He was tasked to fly across the channel and strike German targets behind the beach-line, interdict reinforcements of tanks, and protect kids who waded out of the surf and into the chaos of the guns.

The pre-flight routine was acceptable, and

with the dozens of other aircraft rumbled in line to launch point on the main runway—delivering safety and salvation to some and death to others.

Systems set to go, Dick pushed the throttles for the four engines and released the brakes on the shuddering powerhouse his crew called “Buzzin’ Betsy.”

The take-off roll was good. Loaded with ordnance, the great machine gained speed, got successfully to rotation, and lifted off over the rolling green fields of East Anglia.

After angling off departure for formation integration, there was trouble. One of the four Pratt & Whitney air-cooled engines slung beneath the high wings failed. With muttered cursing in the cockpit, his co-pilot and engineer struggling to save it. The rest of the boys in back intuited something was wrong.

Normal flight procedures would have been to

declare “emergency,” proceed east over water, safely dump the load of bombs, orbit until fuel levels lowered to safe-landing weight and recover—saving the precious aircraft for re-use against the enemy.

Below Betsy, the waters of the Channel teamed with tens of thousands of others headed to action.

Dick considered the recommended options. The failed engine was shut down and its props feathered, and he decided to proceed to target, anyway. Men needed his crew to perform for a higher purpose. Dick chose them before himself and his crew.

The command analyzed his decision later and could have cited him for unsafe flight procedures. Instead, they awarded him a Distinguished Flying Cross.

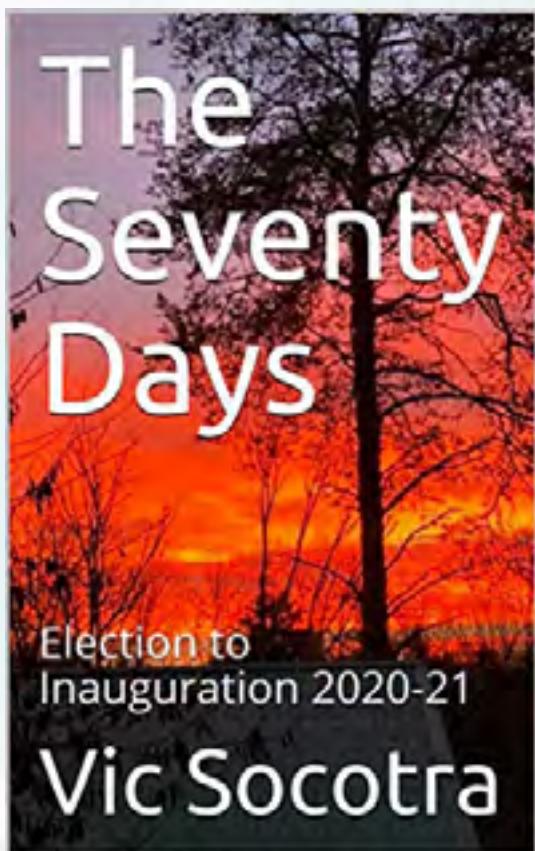
But that wasn’t the point.

Seventy-seven years ago, this bright morning, Dick was needed. He considered the mission essential and worth his own life if that was the cost. He and his crew went east.

Bless his memory, and those of Buzzin’ Betsy’s crew. And bless his gift of courage to help bolster the courage of those who struggled below.

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## EYES ON AMERICA

*Michael Lund*

A FEW YEARS AGO I dropped my wife off at a medical clinic in Lynchburg, Virginia. She was going for routine tests (which would show her in good health, I'm happy to say).

While she waited for her procedures, I drove out (at her insistence) to find sandwiches for our lunch. I didn't know the town well, as we lived in a village an hour east. But it was Veterans' Day, and I hoped I might stumble upon a lunch special.

I had another project I feared I would not complete in the available time—to get my most recent pair of glasses adjusted so they wouldn't slide down my nose, causing me to lose focus. I had, however, no idea where an optical shop would be in the city and had to depend on luck—or something more—to accomplish that mission.

Concentrating on spotting a good place to get sandwiches as I drove away from the clinic, I almost missed a small billboard on the other side of the road. Below the drawing of a pair of old-fashioned spectacles were the words COOPER AND ELDER OPTICAL. Surprised but pleased, I crossed over and parked on the left side of the building.



In front of me on the window was an American flag.

There's a particular reason the sign seized my attention, which I'll come to in a minute. It has to do with that American flag. First, here's what happened when I went inside.

"What can we do for you?" a pleasant woman asked, as she advanced from a desk in the back of the shop.

"I need to have these glasses adjusted," I explained.

She hesitated and then asked, "Where did you get them?"

I later realized she must have suspected I'd bought them from another optician or off a drug store rack—competitors for her business. She was, as the sign out front said, a LICENSED OPTICIAN.

"I get them from the Veteran's Administration, but they come in the mail with the frames shaped by the manufacturer for, I guess, an average head." I didn't want to go so far as suggest I didn't think I had an average head.

When she heard me mention the VA, her face brightened, and she smiled.

"Come right over here. Yes, they do mail them if you're not close to a veterans' medical facility."

She gestured for me to sit on the other side of a narrow counter. Stepping around it to face me, she carefully removed my glasses. As she inspected them, taking them off and putting them back on my face a few times, she asked if I knew about a big upcoming event sponsored by the local American Legion.

"No, but I live an hour away." A member of

the Veterans of Foreign Wars, I knew these interest fairs to be good events.

"You ought to come over, the 28th. We've got great music, veteran bands, lots of free information. You'll have a good time."

I promised to think about it.

After a few more bends of the frames with little pliers, a bit of tweaking on the nose pads, and some light tugs from the front when they were on my face, she pronounced me ready to go.

I rose and scanned the store and the street outside—all in perfect focus. I reached for my wallet.

"Oh, no, Honey. You don't owe me anything. But y'all come out on the 28th, hear?"

My cell phone beeped. I held it up and smiled—at the phone and at the optician.

My wife said she was ready to go, much earlier than anticipated. And she was fine. And now my glasses, at no cost, were fine as well.

I thanked my new friend, promised once more to look at my schedule, and went out to the parking lot.

I again looked at the picture of the wire-framed glasses that had guided me to the accomplishment of the day's second mission.

I recalled an incident from one of the most famous American novels, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, in which the narrator sees along the side of a road a billboard featuring large, blue eyes peering through yellow glasses. There is no nose holding them up and no face around them—just weak eyes and aging glasses.

Fitzgerald's novel took us through a wasted

landscape, the heritage of American growth abandoning one site and moving to prosperity elsewhere. The painted eyes, which had faded under years of sun and rain, were an advertisement for an optician no longer in business. It's as if they were as empty as the scene in front of them.

This was Fitzgerald's lament about America in the 1920s: the prosperous professionals, who should have used their abilities and power to guide others, instead retreated with their wealth and had forgotten or ignored the burial grounds of a society's excess.

You may decide if such an image reflects America today. A number of veterans I know do, in fact, suffer from neglect by those they pledged to serve. And you may decide if it was simply luck—or something more—that led me to that shop that day.

Cooper and Elder (and other businesses, to be sure), rather than overlooking veterans like me, are, in fact, watching over that small portion of the nation's population.

And I say to you, readers, "Don't count on luck. Use a sharpened vision to locate such shops and then take them your business. They are serving us, hear?"



*A Conversation with MWSA Member & Author***RONA SIMMONS**

INTERVIEW Date: 28 April 2021

**R**ONA SIMMONS IS AN ATLANTA-AREA author of historical fiction and nonfiction. After co-authoring *Images from World War II* in 2016 celebrating the art of WWII veteran and artist Jack Smith, Simmons again turned to the Second World War for *The Other Veterans of World War II: Stories from Behind the Front Lines* released by Kent State University Press in 2020. Her next book, a work in progress, combines her passion for history and research to tell another story with a unique perspective on the war.

Simmons has written for literary journals, magazines, and newspapers and is active in her local writing community and veterans organizations (as a member of the Atlanta World War II Roundtable, the North Georgia Veterans Group, and Stories Behind the Stars, a group that is documenting the stories of all 400,000 fallen of WWII). She is also a contributing author and book reviewer for DODReads.org, an organization dedicated to reading and lifelong learning.

Simmons graduated from Tulane University and received her post-graduate degree from Georgia State University. Prior to launching her writing career, she spent thirty years in business, ending with a period with IBM as a business consultant.

**MWSA:** How long have you been associated with MWSA?

**RONA SIMMONS:** Having embarked on my third book on WWII and contemplating a fourth, I decided it was time to make the commitment



to the discipline of writing on military matters and engaging with a community of like-minded writers for mutual benefit.

**MWSA:** Can you share a bit about why you chose to write about history, the military, and WWII in particular?

**SIMMONS:** I come by an interest in the military “honestly,” as they say. My father served in World War II as P-38 fighter pilot, flying bomber escort for B-17s into southern Europe. He remained in the military after the war, so I grew up in a military family, in and out of foreign countries and in dozens of homes and air stations across the country.

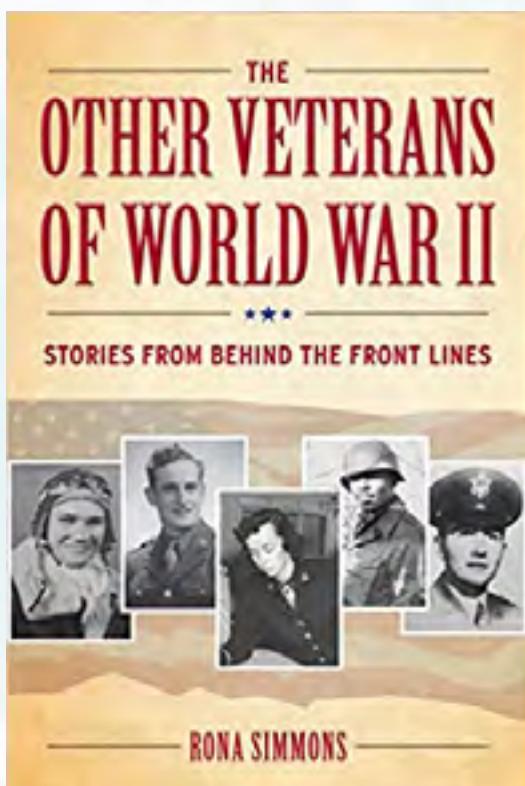
My parents were avid readers and believers in education. We had a wall of books in our home. I chose *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* from those shelves—no Harry Potter or *Chronicles of Narnia* (well, I’ll admit, maybe there was a Nancy Drew or Agatha Christie tome as well). Regardless, that book stayed

with me and spawned a love for seminal events in our history.

Years—make that decades—after the war, I finally encouraged my father to talk about his service during the war. It was not that he did not want to speak about his experiences. It was no one had bothered to ask. What I thought would be a two or three hour conversation turned into weeks of delving into his now faded records and talking and taping. At the end, I produced a mini memoir for the family. I was hooked.

**MWSA:** Now, please, tell us a bit about your recent book, *The Other Veterans of World War II*.

**SIMMONS:** In 2016, I met, quite by chance, WWII veteran Jack Smith. We immediately hit it off and soon were collaborating to bring his incredibly detailed paintings of iconic scenes of WWII into a book to preserve the story of his and his brother's service and to help educate readers about the war.



In the attending research, I learned the story of another WWII veteran—this time not someone on the deck of a ship under attack by Japanese dive bombers, nor someone slogging through the jungles in the Pacific, but a humble and determined army sergeant who served behind the lines.

He was a member of the Quartermaster Corps' graves registration unit—a unit and a job I had never known of, nor could I imagine the horrific responsibility he shouldered. The encounter made me realize that although the dramatic stories of WWII soldiers have been the stuff of memoirs, novels, documentaries, and feature films, the men and women who served in less visible roles, never engaging in physical combat, had received scant attention.

Convinced their frequent depiction as pencil pushers, grease monkeys, or cowards was far from the truth, I set out to discover their story. I talked to veterans, read their letters, perused their photos and journals, and touched their mementos. With their stories in hand, I decided to compile them not just into a collection of tales, but into a telling of the history of the war through their eyes.

The book follows the men and women as they report for service, complete their training, and ship out to stations far from home. I tell of their dreams to see combat and their disappointment.

Ultimately, however, I found the non-combat veterans had far more in common with front line soldiers than differences. And, I believe the book provides a more complete picture of the war, bringing long-overdue appreciation for the men and women whose everyday tasks, unexpected acts of sacrifice, and faith and

*Continued on page 30*

*Continued from page 29*

humor contributed mightily to the outcome of the war.

**MWSA:** Can you share what you are working on now?

**SIMMONS:** 2020, being the seventy-fifth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, was a fortuitous time for the release of my most recent book, *The Other Veterans of World War II: Stories from Behind the Lines*. Stories of the war rose to the top of our consciousness. My book offered a unique perspective on the war—the untold stories of men and women who worked far from the spotlight yet served their country honorably and with courage.

*A Gathering of Men*, the working title of my new book, takes that same premise. That is, of telling an untold story—this time of soldiers in the air and on the ground during the allied bombing campaign in Europe. It's fiction, but, like my earlier work, the protagonist is not the hero portrayed in numerous books in the genre. It again takes a different perspective on the war. And more than a work of historical fiction, the book interweaves exhaustively researched, little known details of the war into the story. So much so, I prefer to think of the book as a “nonfiction novel.” I look forward to being able to share more soon.

**MWSA:** Having written both fiction and nonfiction, how would compare the two and which do you prefer?

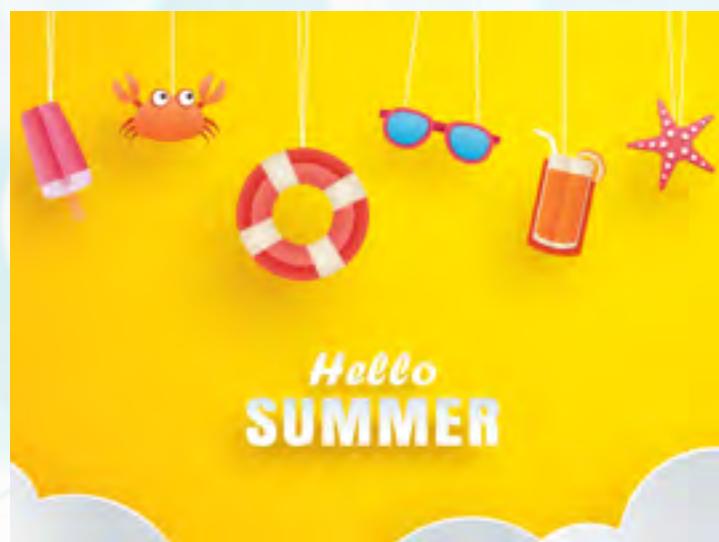
**SIMMONS:** That's a hard question to answer. Both offer so much—not just to the reader but to the writer. To me as long as a book is based on a true story or an actual event or perhaps a turning point in a person's life, it offers a

chance for the reader to learn something.

I am a big proponent of lifelong learning and devour books with these elements. As a writer, I also believe both forms can challenge me—they require me to dig deep into history, artifacts, and stories behind the stories to find the nuggets that make a compelling new read.

**MWSA:** Finally, what advice can you offer to those starting out on their writing career particularly in military writing?

**SIMMONS:** I suppose the age-old piece of advice is to read and read widely in your chosen field. To be successful, I believe you have to bring something new to the table and the only way to do that is to know what has already been said about your topic. Then, of course, you have to do the research to bring up the little details that make the story come alive. And maybe, too, it is necessary to know when to stop researching, when to stop writing, and when to stop editing and share your work.

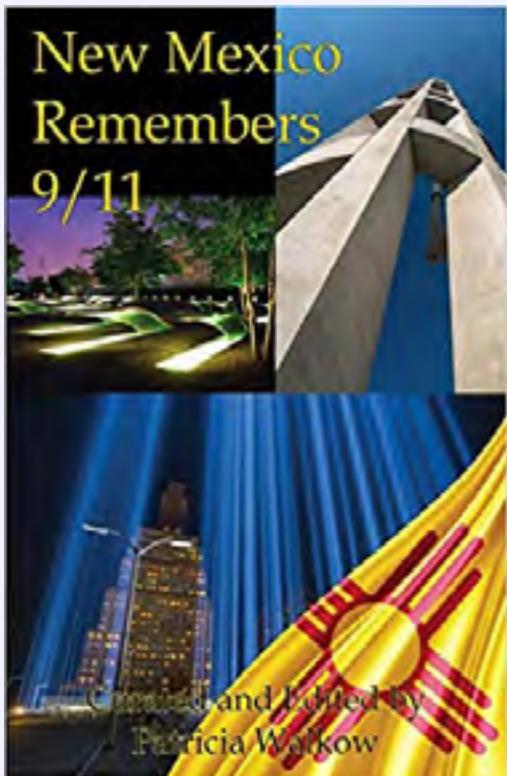


## MWSA DISPATCHES IS LOOKING FOR MEMBER SUBMISSIONS.

**W**E HAVE OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE FOR you as a member in good standing, from *Author Interviews* to Poetry submissions, to Book Profiles (three books, first come-first served, will be showcased in the *Dispatches* every quarter). We offer this opportunity to be published in a national magazine exclusively to our membership.

If you'd like to write a feature article (1500 words or less, please) or have further questions, please email:

*dispatches@mwsa.co*



*NEW MEXICO REMEMBERS 9/11*

**Edited by Patricia Walkow**

Genre(s): Historical Essay

Format(s): Kindle, Paperback

ISBN-13 : 978-1951122102

*This anthology captures the 9/11/2001 experiences of New Mexican writers. Some witnessed the event first-hand. Some were still in school, or out of the country. But all of them now live in The Land of Enchantment, the state snuggled between Texas and Arizona. The talented contributors to **New Mexico Remembers 9/11** offer enlightening, sometimes heart-wrenching prose, thoughtful analysis, and evocative poetry.*

# ON SPEAKING WITH VETERANS & YOUNGSTERS

*Joe Campolo Jr*

[HTTPS://NAMWARSTORY.COM/2021/05/ON-SPEAKING-WITH-VETERANS-AND-YOUNGSTERS/](https://namwarstory.com/2021/05/on-speaking-with-veterans-and-youngsters/)

HAVING RETIRED FROM THE WORKFORCE some years ago, I've been able to take up my hobby of writing full time. I've written three published books of historical fiction, relating to my experiences serving in Vietnam with the U.S. Air Force. I also write for the Military Writer's Society of America, (MWSA), and various newspaper and magazine publications. I have a very active blog on my website, which brings in about forty thousand hits a month. In another month or two, my latest book, *On War, Fishing and Philosophy* will be released.



OUR VETERANS

This past week my wife, Ann and I attended the Wounded Warriors of Wisconsin Northwoods Venture in Northern Wisconsin. I was honored to be the emcee at the event banquet. There was a fantastic group of veterans in attendance along with their families and guests. There were also many others in attendance, including event sponsors, donors, fishing guides who donated their services to the group, and our wonderful hosts, the Hess family from The

Woodlands Resort in Plum Lake Wisconsin.

I did my best to keep it interesting for all the wounded warriors and guests, and they responded kindly to my presentation. I donated over forty copies of my three books from *The Kansas NCO* trilogy, during the course of our stay.

Speaking with my fellow veterans has been the highlight of my book events and speaking engagements. Veterans, with their own experiences, understand the many facets of military activity. They also share many of their experiences during these events, which I am honored to hear.

I am especially humbled around our wounded warriors. They are not bitter. They raise families and hold them dearly. And they push themselves through their trials to become the members of our society we all hope to be. Simply put, they are the best of the best.



THE YOUNGSTERS

I have also had the pleasure of speaking with our young people on many occasions. They are always a joy to be with, curious, attentive and courteous.

The schools and various children's organizations where I have spoken have always made me feel welcome.

Some time ago I spoke at the Boys and Girls Club in Kenosha, Wisconsin—a fine organization, run and supported by many dedicated people. There, I had another very enjoyable day, chatting with youngsters who were present. I spoke to them about my time in Vietnam and the youth I encountered while there. My audience was interested in the young people of Vietnam. I also spoke about the wide variety of wildlife we encountered in that wild, tropical country.

The story of our hooch dog, Noah particularly grabbed the attention of the kids. They were fascinated by the part where Noah killed a large cobra snake that had entered our barracks, thus becoming a hero.

I told the youngsters about an encounter four of us had with a tiger, right on the Phu Cat Airbase one evening around dusk. The tiger was laying in wait as we walked along a dirt

road. A passing jeep saw the animal and came back to warn us. [Approximately twelve American servicemen were killed by tigers during the Vietnam War.]

I told the kids how the tiger had crouched in the tall grass and snarled at us when we approached. I described the beauty of the large cat and how I still get the shivers when I remember it's snarl.

One of the youngsters, I believe his name was Javon, was particularly enthralled with the story.

He raised his hand and said, in all sincerity, “Mr. Campolo, Noah would have saved you from that tiger!”

Love my fellow veterans, and love those kids.



## THINGS YOU NEVER KNEW YOU NEVER KNEW

*...about the MWSA Website.*

- ★ *We list the types of correspondence members can anticipate receiving from MWSA here:*

<http://www.mwsadispatches.com/membership>  
(3rd bullet under “New Members” section)

- ★ *Archived, electronic copy of past email blasts (back to Nov 2017) can be found on our website here:*

<http://www.mwsadispatches.com/mwsa-news>

- ★ *MWSA Blasts can be found here:*

<http://www.mwsadispatches.com/mwsa-news?tag=Blast>

*If you have any questions about navigating the MWSA website, please reach out to MWSA and we'll answer as best we can. Thank you.*

# 2021 SUMMER RECOMMENDED READING LIST

*Bob Doerr*

THE MILITARY WRITERS SOCIETY OF America (MWSA) is an organization of hundreds of writers, poets, and artists drawn together by a common bond of military service. One purpose of our society is to review the written works of our members. In reviewing these books, we like selecting some of the better ones to recommend. This list has been taken from the books submitted for review by our members since January. Only those books that pass a thorough scrutiny make it to this list.

- ★ *The Cotillion Brigade* ~ by Glen Craney
- ★ *Not for God and Country* ~ by William Murphy
- ★ *Two Million Steps* ~ by Tommy Anderson
- ★ *On 21st Century Nuclear Deterrence* ~ by Joe Buff
- ★ *Sheltered: When a Boy Becomes a Legend* ~ by Jacob Paul Patchen
- ★ *B.R.A.N.D. Before Your Resumé* ~ by Graciela Tiscareño-Sato
  - ★ *A Sailor's Journey* ~ by Raymond Perrotti
- ★ *Volunteer: A Vietnam War Odyssey* ~ by Bob Stockton
  - ★ *They Were Soldiers* ~ by Marvin Wolf
  - ★ *The Silver Waterfall* ~ by Kevin Miller
- ★ *A Scribe Dies in Brooklyn* ~ by Marvin Wolf
- ★ *Young Hickory* ~ by Steven Underwood
- ★ *A Final Valiant Act* ~ by John Lang
- ★ *Devil's Den* ~ by LTC David Brown (Ret)
- ★ *Fragments: Long Coming Home from Vietnam* ~ by Bruce Berger
  - ★ *Heaven* ~ by Frank Taylor
  - ★ *Impaired* ~ by Michael Lepore
- ★ *Up Here: A 10th Mountain Soldier's Letters Home 1943-1945* ~ by David T. Hoople
- ★ *Dreams of Winter: A Forgotten Gods Tale #1* ~ by Christian Warren Freed
- ★ *20 Year Letter: An Afghanistan Chronicle* ~ by Benjamin R. Warner
  - ★ *The First Recruit* ~ by Alton Ioerger
- ★ *Tactical Influence: How I Counteracted an Insurgency with Words* ~ by Mitchell Hockenbury
  - ★ *Heirloom (A Kate Tyler Novel)* ~ by Nancy Wakeley
- ★ *Tomcat Fury: A Combat History of the F-14* ~ by Mike Guardia
  - ★ *The Zombie Deception* ~ by Marvin Wolf
  - ★ *M-9* ~ by Marvin Wolf

- ★ *Clouds of War: Past, Present and on the Horizon* ~ by Jerry Burton
- ★ *Moments around the Campfire with a Vietnam Vet* ~ by Thom Brucie
  - ★ *Liberian Gold* ~ by Patrick Sydor
  - ★ *The Wolves of Helmand* ~ by Frank Biggio
  - ★ *The Midshipmen's Story* ~ by Thomas McCaffery
  - ★ *Get a Grip on the Bible* ~ by Jerry Burton
- ★ *My Pilot: A Story of War, Love and ALS* ~ by Sarajane Giere
  - ★ *Where the High Winds Sing* ~ by Donald Purdy
  - ★ *The Flying Cutterbucks* ~ by Kathleen Rodgers
- ★ *DeGroote: The Incredible Life of a Downed US Airman* ~ by Conrad Kersch
  - ★ *The Meat and Potatoes of Life* ~ by Lisa Smith Molinari

Summer has arrived with all its heat and at least for some of us, its humidity. Some of you “yard people” enjoy mowing the grass in the heat or otherwise making yourself miserable in pursuit of some seemingly worthwhile outdoor chore. For those of us a little more rational, there’s no better time to read a good book. Besides, there’s always tomorrow to get to those (or any other) chores. *So where can I find a good book to read?*, you might ask. How about starting with the list above. More info on these books and the authors can be found on our website: [www.MWSADispatches.com](http://www.MWSADispatches.com).



## YOUR MWSA MEMBERSHIP TEAM

WHERE TO TO FOR INFORMATION. WHO TO CONTACT WITH QUESTIONS .

**MEMBERSHIP | [MEMBERSHIP@MWSA.CO](mailto:MEMBERSHIP@MWSA.CO)**

**REVIEW & AWARDS | [MWSAAWARDSDIRECTORS@GMAIL.COM](mailto:MWSAAWARDSDIRECTORS@GMAIL.COM)**

**EVENTS & CONFERENCES | [EVENTS@MWSA.CO](mailto:EVENTS@MWSA.CO)**

**DISPATCHES MAGAZINE | [DISPATCHES@MWSA.CO](mailto:DISPATCHES@MWSA.CO)**

**OUTREACH & EDUCATION | [OUTREACH@MWSA.CO](mailto:OUTREACH@MWSA.CO)**

**VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES | [VOLUNTEER@MWSA.CO](mailto:VOLUNTEER@MWSA.CO)**

**WEBSITE & CONTACT | [INFO@MWSA.CO](mailto:INFO@MWSA.CO)**

## MWSA SCHOLARSHIP

*Bob Doerr*

THE MWSA BOARD HAS APPROVED a new scholarship program and wishes to acknowledge through this scholarship the tremendous effort and giving nature of our founder William ‘Rev. Bill’ McDonald.

The scholarship will be named “The William ‘Rev. Bill’ McDonald Student Scholarship,” to be awarded yearly to the winner of the MWSA member sponsored high school student in the 11th or 12th grade who wins the annual scholarship essay contest.

To begin with, the scholarship will be awarded to one student in the amount of \$1,000.00 along with a one-year membership in MWSA. As time progresses adding more awards, extending it to college students, adding veteran writing students, and obtaining corporate sponsorship are avenues we may pursue.

**Timeline:** The scholarship process will begin each year in October with entries being accepted from November 1st until January 31st, in order to run the contest and announce a winner on April 1st. The winner will be invited to attend an award presentation but this should not be a requirement, as the winner could come from any part of USA.

A check will be written out to the winner and be presented to the student by his/her sponsor. The sponsor should attempt to garner a “local news” piece in the hometown paper which could be placed on *Facebook* and our website as well as in *Dispatches*.

We will be adding a Scholarship Award page to our website outlining requirements. The

annual announcement of the scholarship contest will be made on that page.

Students in their 11th or 12th grade year of high school, sponsored by an active MWSA member in good standing are eligible to apply. Scholarship criteria are established, and sponsors will provide that information to eligible students, it can also be reviewed on the MWSA website.

Three MWSA members will serve as judges to evaluate the essays submitted for the contest.

The winner of the scholarship must win the writing contest and be a high school 11th or 12th grader sponsored by an MWSA active member.



## MWSA MEMBER BENEFIT: BETA READER FORUM

*John Cathcart*

AS A NEWER SERVICE TO our members, MWSA reminds you of our Beta Reader Forum. The idea is to easily expand our authors' pool of potential beta readers—an important part of our creative process for books nearing completion.

As with our review swap program, MWSA is only providing a venue to get authors and beta readers together. Once there, you might also agree to swap reviews once the book is published. The page is available to members only (username and password required).

Here are the details (which are also posted at the top of the forum page):

### PURPOSE

- ★ Use this forum to line up beta readers for your book.
- ★ This is a member-to-member program, MWSA will not monitor any individual agreements made via this system.

### SUGGESTIONS

- ★ Provide a short paragraph describing your book.

★ Include title, author, genre, expected publication date.

★ Keep your initial posting short—you can always share more details once another MWSA member responds to your request.

★ What format(s) you'll provide your beta readers.

\* Paper copy: manuscript, proof, etc.

\* Digital format: Word document, PDF, eBook format (.mobi, .epub).

★ How you'll collect feedback—i.e. via paper questionnaire, online form, email responses.

★ When you'll collect feedback—i.e. your expectation on how long beta readers have to read and provide feedback.

★ Whether or not you'll be posting beta reader names into your book's acknowledgment section.

MWSA recommends authors acknowledge beta readers... and that authors allow the readers to opt in or out!





## **WELCOME TO THE MWSA ~ WHO WE ARE**

*John Cathcart*

**W**E ARE A NATIONWIDE ASSOCIATION of authors, poets, and artists, drawn together by the common bond of military service. Most of our members are active duty military, retirees, or military veterans. A few are lifelong civilians who have chosen to honor our military through their writings or their art. Others have only a tangential relationship to the military. Our only core principle is a love of the men and women who defend this nation, and a deeply personal understanding of their sacrifice and dedication.

Our skills are varied. Some of us are world class writers, with many successful books. Others write only for the eyes of their friends and families. But each of us has a tale to tell. Each of us is a part of the fabric of Freedom. These are our stories...

For more details, [\*\*\*click here\*\*\*](#) to read more about us on our website. Feel free to browse our site and get to know our organization, our members and their works.

**THANKS VERY MUCH FOR BEING A PART OF YOUR MWSA ORGANIZATION.**

**SAVING HISTORY ONE STORY AT A TIME**



