

Writing in the Professional Military: I tried it and was not attacked by sea monsters



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The maps of cartographers early in the Age of Exploration included an interesting element that affected early explorers. When drawing areas of uncharted waters, they purposefully placed large and menacing sea monsters to warn sailors of danger and potential of death. While several of these mythical beasts were only manifestations of the anxiety of the unknown, the fear they produced kept many young men from taking to the seas to explore the world around them. Even as European explorers set out to discover new lands, crews still worried about the sea monsters that supposedly lurked just below the surface of the ocean. As exploration increased and knowledge of the world spread, the idea of sea monsters diminished. We know today that some of those areas of the map that were once represented by those menacing beasts became the New World, and along with it, new opportunities.

Today, sitting comfortably in North America, we can look back and laugh at the irrational fears of these early cartographers and sailors. Just imagine not attempting to explore or grow due to a perception that turned out to be false! While it would be nice to believe that this irrationality never happens anymore, I would argue that we have our own “sea monster

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phenomenon” in the military profession. Many of us never share an idea or thought outside of our circle of colleagues for fear of coming across dim-witted, coming across as a braggart, or the misguided fear that our careers will be negatively impacted by our professional thoughts. Our own personal sea monsters keep us from growing and innovating as a force, and it is about time we wipe them off the map.

Immediately following my company command, I fell victim to this phenomenon. I wanted to share thoughts on my experiences in combat, and lessons learned on leadership and self-study, through the written medium, with other military professionals, but my perceptions and fears held me back. At the time, my view was that combat arms officers kept their ideas to themselves in their Army-issued [green notebooks](#). I also believed that those who decided to “[nail their whispers to the wall](#)” would be shunned, sidelined, and the doors of opportunity would be slammed shut in their face. After almost two years of steady writing and publishing, I cannot emphasize enough how wrong I was! I have come to realize that the sea monsters were all in my mind, and instead of ridicule, I have been met with many great opportunities...all because I took a chance and [wrote](#).

What led me to take the leap? Fortunately for me, I stumbled across and connected with other professionals in the [Defense Entrepreneurs Forum](#) (DEF), who discovered long ago that no such creatures exist. They were from the Air Force, Marine Corps, Navy, and Army; they understood that a healthy profession requires healthy discourse, so many of them had dedicated considerable time to sharing their thoughts with outlets such as [U.S. Naval Institute](#) and [Small Wars Journal](#). Not only did they encourage me to write, but they also helped me with my writing. They took time to provide me with professional feedback, editorial help, and even shared my posts so that my ideas would reach a wider audience.

The members of the DEF community were not the first group of professionals to get over their fears of publishing. In recent years, there have been plenty of senior leaders, who grew up in their respective Services writing and sharing their ideas. Admiral Stavridis, Lt

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Gen Paul Van Riper, LTG James Dubik, GEN Don Starry, LTG Daniel Bolger, GEN Martin Dempsey, LTG H.R. McMaster, and LTG Robert Brown represent just a handful of officers who wrote in spite of “sea monsters,” and our services are better off thanks to their literary contributions.

If we want to foster an innovative culture in our profession, a greater number of military professionals will need to cross the proverbial ocean, and not hang back out of fear of repercussions. Junior officers provide us with fresh eyes. Field grade officers give us experience. Senior leaders offer a seasoned and expanded perspective. Most importantly, non-commissioned officers give us ground truth. The discourse from these groups help move our military forward and ultimately make us stronger.

Once we get over the fear of writing, the next beast we have to tackle is the writing process itself. Writing coherently is no easy task, and many of us haven’t written a paper since high school or college. Additionally, sometimes our writing style and emotions can distort the message we want to convey. To help military leaders combat poor writing skills, the same professionals who helped me get started (and many others) have come together and launched the [Defense Entrepreneurs Forum’s Blog Shop](#). The Blog Shop is a new endeavor that aims to assist military leaders with writing as well as help them decide the best place for publication. I encourage you to check it out and take advantage of the opportunity.

Today, more so than ever before, there are ample opportunities and outlets available online for leaders to share their ideas. The [Strategy Bridge](#) and [Center for International Maritime Security \(CIMSEC\)](#) both offer a platform for professionals to submit their thoughts on strategy, operations, and the military profession. The [Military Leader](#) provides a chance for leaders of all ranks to share their insights on leading organizations at the tactical level. The Army’s [Company Command](#) and [Platoon Leader](#) Forums now offer leaders the opportunity to share their stories with future and current company commanders and platoon leaders through their [new blog](#) on Medium. Additionally newer outlets like [War on the Rocks](#), [Task](#)

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[and Purpose](#), [Cicero Magazine](#), [The DEF White Board](#), and [War Council](#) also offer spaces for professional thought. And as always, [Tom Ricks](#) is willing to provide a stage for leaders of all ranks and backgrounds.

As members of the military, we cannot allow the fear of sea monsters to keep us from sharing experiences and ideas, best practices, and critiques of existing systems and beliefs. If we want our Services to continue to grow and innovate, we have to join the greater conversation. The opportunities exist, the blog shop is open, and the water is fine. C'mon on in!

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