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By Joe Byerly

Walk into any organization in our Army and there is one thing I guarantee you will find on a desk or in a cargo pocket: a small, green, government-issued notebook. It doesn't matter whether a soldier is a sergeant or a general officer, odds are they will have one of these Army mainstays in their possession. Beyond their utility for taking notes, these notebooks also represent a greater ideal. They represent hard-won knowledge from intense training exercises. They represent ideas for improving our organizations and our warfighting capabilities. They represent our successes and our failures. They also represent the first step to leaving a legacy in our profession of arms.

Instead of keeping our ideas to ourselves in our green notebooks, we should share them. One way we can do this is to write for professional publications or military blogs.

Unfortunately, many in uniform are reluctant to share their ideas for fear of backlash from their chains of command and peers, or for fear of being viewed as telling others what to think, or they do not believe their writing is even publishable.

Writing has several benefits that I believe outweigh the negatives. First, writing for an audience other than ourselves helps us to better solidify our thoughts. Second, in publishing our ideas, we start important conversations that may lead to changes across the Army or may lead to even better ideas from others. Third, we may contribute to our legacy in the military with an idea that will outlast our own terms of service. Finally, there are plenty of resources available to help those who need writing support, so there should be no fear of sounding unintelligent.

One of my favorite quotes, attributed to E.M. Forster, is: “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?” This speaks to this idea of the importance of writing for an audience. I believe that when we write for others to read, we challenge ourselves to be even clearer in our thoughts and arguments. As I’ve put pen to paper for my own blog or for other outlets, I have found that I achieve a greater level of clarity in my ideas and convictions because I can see my thoughts written out on paper or a screen. Also, by thinking through subjects from the point of view of a person who might be unfamiliar with an idea, we aid our own level of understanding on the topic we write about.

Many professionals do not want to write because they feel by doing so they are telling people how to think or that no one will even care what the author, regardless of rank, thinks about a subject. What I have learned over the years is that published ideas, both good and bad, serve as a fuel for workplace conversations. And these conversations, which are a form of professional development, can have positive second and third order effects that the author never intended. For example, an article about improving performance counseling could lead to leaders reassessing and eventually changing their counseling programs in a unit on the other side of the globe. The changes may not be exactly in line with the article,

but it was the article that got that commander or first sergeant thinking and talking about counseling in the first place.

Published ideas can have major impacts across the formation. In a 1913 issue of the *Cavalry Journal*, then Lt. George S. Patton Jr. wrote a short piece on the need for the Army to adopt a new saber and change methods in which the institution trained swordsmanship. His article, along with other efforts, served as a catalyst for the Army to do exactly as he suggested. The new saber was even named the Patton Saber.

In more recent history, the articles and message board discussions at [Small Wars Journal](#) and the military blog [Abu Muqawama](#) influenced major changes in the ways in which the Army approached the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Now retired Gen. Stanley McChrystal eventually brought Andrew Exum, the editor of *Abu Muqawama*, onto his advisory team in Afghanistan. And finally, Benjamin Kohlmann's 2012 article, "[The Military Needs More Disruptive Thinkers](#)," eventually led to the creation of the nonprofit [Defense Entrepreneurs Forum](#), which has played a major role in military innovation in the United States and Australia.

Today's operating environment provides similar opportunities to military professionals. There are plenty of nascent concepts that could use some fresh thought from practitioners across the Army. Drone and swarm employment and information operations on social media are just two examples of ideas that should be discussed and debated in our professional journals.

Another reason we should publish our ideas is that it allows us to create a legacy that will continue to give back long after we are gone. Tony Burgess and Nate Allen wrote the book [Taking the Guidon: Exceptional Leadership at the Company Level](#) 16 years ago, and even though the authors have since retired, their lessons continue to contribute to the profession of arms by shaping company-level leaders today. Additionally, most of the professional

development sessions I have participated in over the years featured articles from ARMY magazine and other publications written decades ago. You never know how many times and in how many different venues an article you write today will be used to teach others who have not even entered the service yet.

Finally, because of the increase in the number of printed and online professional outlets, there are numerous places to share your thoughts. It has been my experience that most of these venues have excellent editorial staffs that will help clean up poor grammar and typos. The [Military Writers Guild](#), an international network built around the sharing of ideas in the national security space, continually helps others with editorial support and links writers with publications.

I have learned that the art of writing does not come naturally to most people and that the only way to get better at writing is to do it. I learn something every time a manuscript gets rejected or a peer or mentor sends me back an article with more corrections than I thought possible.

Taking a quickly written thought from our green notebooks, developing it and sharing it for all to read is nerve-racking, but the payoff is worth it. We improve ourselves as military professionals by seeking clarity in our thoughts. We start conversations in offices across the Army that can improve organizations. We set the stage for potential changes in our institution and improvements in our warfighting capabilities. And finally, we leave a legacy that will outlive any PowerPoint slide we design

If you have already taken the first step in writing some ideas down in your notebook, go ahead and take one more step and make our profession stronger.

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