



## For Veterans Back From War, Writing Proves to Be a Balm

By WENDY CARLSON  
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*The explosion directly in front of me made no sound. A cloud of smoke darker and thicker and bigger than I had ever seen bloomed like the life span of a giant oak tree condensed into a few milliseconds.*

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Wendy Carlson for The New York Times

**CREATIVITY** Anthony Swofford, center, the author of “Jarhead,” leads a workshop at Western Connecticut State. Attending was Dario DiBattista Jr., left.

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*Then, the earth shook and a sonic blast knocked me back a few steps. I stared at the cloud of smoke, mesmerized.*

From “Go Now, You Are Forgiven,” by Dario DiBattista Jr.

### DANBURY

WHEN Dario DiBattista Jr., now 25, enrolled at [Central Connecticut State University](#) three years ago, after two tours of duty in Iraq, he had no intention of writing a memoir about his experiences as a Marine reservist in Iraq.

“He was floundering, and writing gave him direction as well as vindication,” said Mary Collins, his writing professor. Mr. DiBattista said he found that writing was also a catharsis, a “way to put the past behind.” A senior, he has been accepted into [Johns Hopkins University’s graduate writing program](#) this fall, and has been blogging his memoir, “Go Now, You Are Forgiven.”

More returning soldiers, facing a weak job market and lured by a new, generous G.I. Bill, are enrolling in colleges and universities, and those institutions are seeking to expand their support services and establish veterans’ centers, according to Paul Susen, chief academic and student affairs officer for the state’s community college system. In the next two years, Dr. Susen said, the veteran enrollment is expected to double to 10 percent from 5 percent.

Universities and colleges are trying to meet their needs by setting up a variety of services for the veterans, many of whom face challenges making the transition from the combat zone to the classroom. At many colleges, officials are finding that writing programs have

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helped ease the transition. Some have started weekly writing seminars for veterans. Others have hosted writing conferences or focused on the war in writing projects.

Gregg Taylor, a former Army reservist majoring in history at [Western Connecticut State University](#) in Danbury, said that the hardest thing about going to war is coming home.

“One day you’re carrying a rifle over your shoulder, and the next day you’re sipping a Slurpee” with college classmates, he said. Mr. Taylor, 30, who lives off campus, said he suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, which had affected his grades. “I just hated school,” he said. After he started working with a writing specialist he found through the university, his grades began to improve, and so did his attitude.

“I had anxiety issues, a lot of pent-up aggression from my experience in [Afghanistan](#) that I learned to apply to my writing,” he said.

Western Connecticut State University recently held its first public writers conference for veterans, which featured Anthony Swofford, author of “Jarhead.” About a dozen of the university’s 100 or so enrolled veterans attended, said Elizabeth Cohen, a creative writing professor who organized the event, adding that she was encouraged by the quality of the work. There is such a “disconnect between veterans and the rest of the students,” she said, and providing a public forum for their writing may help bridge the gap.

[The Connecticut Review](#), a literary journal published twice a year by the state university system, is dedicating its next issue to veterans’ writing, according to Lisa Siedlarz, one of its editors.

“This issue is of particular importance to me because my youngest brother spent a year in Afghanistan,” said Ms. Siedlarz, a graduate student at [Eastern Connecticut State University](#) in Willimantic, who also wrote a collection of poems that address the affect of the war on families.

Returning soldiers are writing more, both in and out of college, said Andrew Carroll, founder of the [Legacy Project](#), a repository for American war letters in Washington, and editor of “Operation Homecoming,” an anthology of letters by soldiers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“There are no studies that I know of that compare different generations of veterans,” Mr. Carroll said. “But in looking at the last 30 years, it seems the generation of veterans coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan are writing more than any other since World War II.”

E-mail, blogging and social sites like [Facebook](#) have made a more palatable venue for some veterans to express themselves, he said.

Lisa Smith-Overton, 39, a graduate student at Western Connecticut State University, said the tough skin she developed in the Navy prepared her for a writing career. “To be honest, I had been writing since I was about 14 or 15 — I wanted to be the next S. E. Hinton,” Ms. Smith-Overton said. “But the discipline instilled in me during my enlistment, and the determination I discovered I had, toughened me up to venture into writing as a career.”

The Navy did not allow women to serve in combat when she enlisted. But Ms. Smith-Overton, who served as petty officer third class from 1989 to 1993, volunteered for temporary duty on a combat ship as part of a Navy test to see how men and women would work together. The experience became the basis of a short story, and later part of her master’s thesis.

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Darnell Carpenter, 33, a student at Western Connecticut State who served 16 years in the Army, including a year in Iraq, wants to write a book about PTSD. When a convoy he was in was struck by enemy fire, he suffered injuries including traumatic brain damage. Later, he developed PTSD.

“People can’t see it, so they think it doesn’t exist,” said Mr. Carpenter, who gets around campus using a cane.

Most students do not ask him about his war experience, but those that do “mostly ask if I killed anyone,” he said. “It shows you that to them the war’s not real.”

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